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**BLURRING THE BINARY:
POSITIONING POSTFEMINIST TEXTS AND
CONTEXTS**

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Acknowledgements and Declaration

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I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all critical and other sources (literary and electronic) have been specifically and properly acknowledged, as and when they occur in the body of my text.

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Preface

This dissertation has grown out of the contested theoretical and popular debates surrounding postfeminism. The postfeminist phenomenon has confounded and split contemporary critics with its contradictory significations, its definitional ambiguity and its pluralistic outlook. Commentators have applied a number of preconceived frameworks and classifications in order to define and categorize postfeminism. They have claimed the term for various and even oppositional understandings and appropriations that range from a backlash rhetoric, Girl Power to poststructuralist feminism. As I intend to show, these interpretative schemes have often been upheld at the expense of postfeminism's paradoxical multiplicity. In the following, I contend that postfeminism cannot be discussed as an easily identifiable, singular and totalizing movement and, instead, it illustrates a methodological crisis that exceeds the logic of non-contradiction. In fact, I argue that postfeminism *blurs the binary* as it depicts the struggle between previously antagonistic stances and establishes a non-dualistic and ambiguous in-betweenness. My analysis seeks to counter the critical need for categorization and question the continued insistence upon an *either/or* structure. I will explore the gap between binary formulations as a locus of difficulty and a potentially productive space for a new understanding of postfeminist theory and practice.

The dissertation is divided in three parts that position, contextualize and textualize postfeminist discourses. The first part aims to provide an overview of the postfeminist landscape, introduce a new postfeminist strategy of theorization and depict the various manifestations of postfeminism. I suggest that postfeminism cannot be conceptualized

with recourse to simplistic definitions and epistemological foundations as it represents a 'shaky ground', a site of contest and revision that eschews monological thinking. I put forward the idea of a contextual definition of postfeminism that takes into account its thoroughly situated nature and its relation to other discourses and theories. Postfeminism exists both as a theoretical and popular movement, combining a range of viewpoints from conflicting sources. It is steeped in the language and principles of feminism, patriarchy, postmodernism and the media, creating a multi-dimensional postfeminist context that depolarizes and incorporates seemingly incompatible opposites. In this way, postfeminism exploits and expands the discursive junctures to posit its own pluralistic propositions. It effects a double movement whereby it manages to reinforce as much as subvert the presuppositions that inform its emergence. I assert that postfeminism is characterized by a paradoxical stance that intermingles complicity and critique by undercutting their mutual exclusivity. Postfeminism's *complicitous critique* always works within conventions in order to undermine them and, thus, it cannot be appropriated to a single and non-contradictory theoretical position. On the contrary, postfeminist theorizing walks a tightrope between subversion and conformity, whereby it relies on a process of resignification to re-contextualize and re-employ the norms of power/discourse.

Part two of the dissertation takes up the idea of postfeminist contexts to situate postfeminism in the intersections of feminism, postmodernism and popular culture. I examine the interactions between these discourses as well as their internal complexities in order to highlight the flexible and dynamic relationships that give rise to postfeminism. I argue that postfeminist meanings are context-specific and have to be reassessed continuously with regard to their discursive surroundings. At the same time, I insist that

postfeminism cannot be subsumed and arrogated into easily distinguishable categories of feminism, popular mainstream and postmodern theory. Postfeminism is located in the ongoing struggle between and within discourses and it cannot be reduced to a distinct unanimous position. Thus, I resist a static contextualization that seeks to immobilize and finalize postfeminist locations and I declare that the postfeminist landscape is a complex and paradoxical field of convergence where feminism, postmodernism and the media are brought into contact and conflict. Moreover, I maintain that these postfeminist 'origins' are themselves areas of contention and dispute rather than unified and coherent monoliths. Postfeminism emerges from the heterogeneous links and contradictions within and between discursive fields, emphasizing the diverse and multiple ways in which discourse is reproduced.

The dissertation's third section considers textual representations of postfeminism and in particular, it focuses on the figure of the 'postfeminist woman' who has variously been described as a backlash anti-feminist, a sexy 'do-me feminist', a Girlie feminist etc. I contend that the 'new woman' of postfeminism rearticulates the tensions between feminism, femininity and femaleness as she adopts a non-dichotomous and contradictory subject position that transcends dualities. She is characterized by a desire to 'have it all' as she refuses to compromise on her joint aspirations for public and private success, feminine and feminist values. I discuss diverse manifestations of the postfeminist woman, exemplified by the Singleton, the Cinderella and the Supergirl who blur binary distinctions in their quest for a pluralistic and utopian wholeness. I suggest that these postfeminist women seek to negotiate the conflicting demands of heterosexual romance and professional achievement, feminine embodiment and feminist agency, female

passivity and masculine activity. They inhabit an ambiguous space that holds together these varied and even antagonistic stances and they endeavor to reconcile their incongruous multiplicity. In fact, the postfeminist Singleton, Cinderella and Supergirl lack a harmonious inner balance and they are marked by struggle rather than resolution. Their attempts to cross the dualism and occupy an in-between space are presented as hazardous and perplexing, potentially alienating them from their social and emotional contexts. These postfeminist heroines epitomize postfeminism's frontier discourse that understands heterogeneity as an explosive and strenuous combination of contradictory beliefs, theories and practices.

1. Positioning Postfeminism

1.1 On Shaky Ground: Defining Postfeminism

So much has happened to sweep away all the ground rules that a consensus seems almost impossible. All those ideals that were once held as absolute truths [. . .] have been debunked or debased. [. . .] It becomes clear that the only certainty [. . .] is confusion.

Elle magazine 'The Age of Confusion' (November 1986)

'The defining feature of our era is that there is no defining feature', Suzanna Danuta Walters notes, identifying in this way the predicament of the 'post' age (Walters 1991: 104). Patrick Imbert expresses a similar sentiment in his description of the 'Post' as 'the capacity to go beyond the naivety of an epistemology trying to refer to stable entities, be they essence, or a Cartesian conception of the subject' (Imbert 1999: 25). In fact, the concept of truth and the very idea of a foundation for knowledge have been questioned and problematized by deconstructive critiques mounted by poststructuralist, postmodernist and multiculturalist theorists. While the nuances of the critique posited by these theorists fundamentally differ, and while each school in itself encompasses a wide range of viewpoints, together they constitute a powerful attack against foundationalist and epistemological thinking, unified conceptions of truth and essentialist definitions of subjectivity. In this *age of confusion*, the orderly dialectic has been replaced by ambiguity and uncertainty as knowledge and truth have been exposed as plural and situated in context. As Fernando de Toro explains, this relativization of the *grand narratives*, of the

metanarratives of Western history and enlightened modernity, does not imply that 'there is no truth, but that truth is constructed, and if we accept the constructedness of truth then we can only conclude that Truth as such does not exist' (de Toro 1999: 13). Instead, there is a plurality of perspectives and a multiplicity of truths or '*true*s' manifested in various discursive articulations (de Toro 1999: 13).

Accordingly, Ien Ang suggests that one of the most prominent features of living in this 'realm of uncertainty' or 'postmodern world' means 'living with a heightened sense of permanent and pervasive cultural contradiction' (Ang 1996: 162; 1). In the postmodern context, 'uncertainty is a built-in feature', 'a necessary and inevitable condition in contemporary culture' and any sense of order and security, of structure and progress, has to be recognized as provisional and circumstantial (Ang 1996: 163; 162). Thus, one has to relinquish the search for generalized absolutes or forms of knowledge, for a stable position from which a fixed and definitive truth can be established. Consequently, as Ang reveals, the 'intellectual challenge posed by the postmodern' consists of 'the need to come to terms with the emergence of a cultural space which is no longer circumscribed by fixed boundaries, hierarchies and identities and by universalist, modernist concepts of truth and knowledge' (Ang 1996: 3). In a similar manner, John Fekete notes that in this 'post' age, one has to 'get on without the Good-God-Gold standards' and learn to 'be at ease with limited warranties [. . .] without the false security of inherited guarantees' and the easy recourse to fixed categories of value (Fekete 1987: 17).

Distancing itself from the totalizing principles of universal reason, rationality and truth, postmodernity signals an awareness and recognition of the epistemological limits of

those beliefs, what Lyotard has called the loss of master narratives (Lyotard 1984). As a heuristic category, the postmodern casts doubt on these truth claims and insists that their generalizable and ubiquitous status has to be interrogated. In Judith Butler's words, 'what it's really about is opening up the possibility of questioning what our assumptions are and [. . .] encouraging us to live in the anxiety of that questioning without closing it down too quickly' (quoted in Olson and Worsham 2000: 736). In this way, the postmodern can be interpreted as 'not so much a concept' but 'as a problematic: "a complex of heterogeneous but interrelated questions which will not be silenced by any spuriously unitary answer"' (Hutcheon 1989a: 15). Its various deconstructive discourses are characterized by an open and flexible descriptive structure that highlights the ideological subtext of cultural practices and creates 'a set of problems and basic issues [. . .] that were not particularly problematic before but certainly are now' (Hutcheon 1988: 222; 224). The postmodern undermines any sense of closure and finality as it replaces foundationalist principles and concepts with a perpetual examination of supposedly indisputable and irrefutable givens.

This precariousness and provisionality are defining features of all 'post' movements or terms and they are encapsulated by the semantic indefiniteness of the prefix whose connotations may be complex if not contradictory. As Rostislav Kocourek points out in his discussion of the prefix 'post' in contemporary English terminology, 'an expression "post" + X can either be X or non-X, or both at the same time, which makes the derivative motivationally ambiguous' (Kocourek 1996: 106). This programmatic indeterminacy and interpretative openness are inherent in all 'post' terms that thereby become issues of debate about whether the prefix signifies an end of a particular type of

influence or a recognition of the fundamental importance of the latter. The 'post' prefix can be employed to point to a complete rupture with the term that follows the hyphen for, as Amelia Jones declares, 'what is post but the signification of a kind of termination - a temporal designation of whatever it prefaces as ended, done with, obsolete' (Jones 1990: 8). Diametrically opposed to this view is the idea that the prefix denotes a genealogy that entails revision or strong family resemblance. In this case, the 'post' signifies 'a dependence on, a continuity with, that which follows', leading some critics to conceptualize a 'post' movement as an intensification or a 'new face' of what preceded it (Best and Kellner 1991: 29).

More problematically, 'post' can also occupy an uneasy middle ground suggesting an infiltration and appropriation, a 'parasite riding on the back of the original movement which benefits from the ground it has won but uses this for its own means' (Kastelein 1994: 5). There is always a paradox at the heart of the 'post' as the "Post Position" signals its contradictory dependence on and independence from that which temporally preceded it and which literally made it possible' (Hutcheon 1988: 17). 'It marks neither a simple and radical break from it nor a straightforward continuity with it; it is both and neither' (Hutcheon 1988: 17). Thus, as Sarah Gamble reveals, 'the prefix "post" does not necessarily always direct us back the way we've come' (Gamble 2001: 44). Instead, its trajectory is bewilderingly uncertain which makes it ultimately impossible and redundant to offer a single definition of any 'post' expression as this reductive strategy narrows the critical potential, the instructive ambiguity and contradictoriness of the prefix.

On the semantic battleground of the prefix 'post', the supposedly latest newcomer, postfeminism, is no exception to the definitional struggle: it has variously been identified as a conservative and media-assisted backlash, power feminism, third wave feminism and postmodern or poststructuralist feminism.¹ The confusion about the meaning of 'post' gives rise to multiple and divergent understandings of postfeminism, definitions that extend beyond mere variation to opposition. As will be revealed, postfeminism cannot be reduced to a distinct, unanimous explanatory stance as it incorporates and combines elements of each of these positions. The postfeminist movement is testament to the complexity of its cultural moment and thus, it assembles seemingly disparate and even contradictory theories and ideas. In fact, postfeminism is context-specific and depends for its definition largely on the critical surroundings in which the term is employed. It is not a fixed conceptual category but an open and ever-changing problematic that takes on diverse meanings and signifies in a variety of conflicting ways, depending on the contexts of use. Postfeminism is not monolithic either in its theory or its practice, nor can a model of it be constructed that would even solicit a majority consensus among those who identify with the general classification. Moreover, its critical focus and political directionality are mutable and unstable as the 'post' movement engages with both patriarchy and earlier feminist analyses. In a similar inclusive manner, the postfeminist domain also reconciles academic and media frameworks, stretching into the realms of postmodern theory and popular culture.

In effect, as a result of its plurality of meaning and its contextual variability, postfeminism has been taken up and appropriated by a number of oppositional discourses and rival strains of thought. This has engendered a number of resigned critical comments

deploring that 'postfeminism remains a product of assumption' as 'exactly what it constitutes – even whether it exists at all as a valid phenomenon – is a matter for frequently impassioned debate' (Coppock 1995: 4; Gamble 2001: 43). Yet, at the same time, the crucial importance and vitality of the term have been stressed and it is seen to be denominating 'an age or time that we live in, a social and cultural climate' (Elsby: 3). As Amanda Lotz stresses, postfeminism can be 'an extremely valuable descriptor for recognizing and analyzing recent shifts in female representations and ideas about feminism' (Lotz 2001: 106). Exhibiting a plasticity that enables it to be employed in multiple and contradictory ways, postfeminism is 'a powerful, pervasive and versatile cultural concept' that 'is and can be so many different things' (Projansky 2001: 68).

Postfeminism is denounced by its critics for its elusiveness and slipperiness whereby the term refuses to adopt and be determined by a singular and definite meaning. As Lotz bemoans, 'we seem to have entered an alternate language universe where words can simultaneously connote a meaning and its opposite' (Lotz 2001: 105). This pluralistic evasiveness implies that postfeminism cannot be fixed to a stable definitional stance and it cannot be established as a locus of truth, a totalizing and unified foundation. Postfeminist advocates are adamant that 'the changeable life' of the term postfeminism 'does not preclude the possibility of its use' but means that it 'becomes questionable', requesting us 'to ask how it plays, what investments it bears, what aims it achieves, what alterations it undergoes' (Butler 1997a: 162). Postfeminism cannot be fully secured and mastered in advance but it always remains vulnerable to interrogation and doubt. Rather than lamenting postfeminism's disputability and instability as a sign of disunity, postfeminists argue that the term's contentious unpredictability should be embraced, so

that it can be 'released [. . .] into a future of multiple significations' (Butler 1992: 16). Accordingly, the postfeminist problematic can be discussed as a contested site of permanent openness and *resignifiability* that resists being totalized or summarized by a strict descriptive category. Postfeminism's mobility indicates that it cannot be normalized and paralyzed by a monological structure of meaning. Instead, the postfeminist movement signifies in a number of highly varied and even contradictory ways and directions, refusing to be settled and constrained by a rigid designation.

In this way, postfeminism represents and depicts a shaky ground, a shifting terrain that cannot be consolidated as it is in a process of perpetual replication and displacement. There is no *original* or *authentic* postfeminism that holds the key to its meaning and could be credited with *the* postfeminist agenda or outlook. Nor is there a stable and unified origin from which this genuine postfeminism could be fashioned. As a consequence, there is no secure and certain foundation that can determine and verify postfeminism's authenticity and legitimacy or set up a normative hierarchy that can distinguish the original from the counterfeit. Rather, there are postfeminist permutations that are constantly being reproduced and redefined by the discourses and theories that inform their emergence. Postfeminism is not grounded on a firm and indisputable base, a generalizable and uniform epistemology, but it is persistently being (re)constructed and (re)articulated. Thus, postfeminist significations are never complete as they are always subject to further *re*-significations and *re*-appropriations. In other words, the signifier 'postfeminism' does not have a fixed and stable referent but it is mobilized in the service of diverse and often incompatible productions. Configurations of the term differ in emphasis and meaning and they range from a nostalgic and pro-patriarchal stance to a

feminist embrace of difference and plurality. Moreover, in its most ambiguous and controversial representations, postfeminism depicts the struggle between dualities and it *blurs the binary* as it combines previously antagonistic stances in a contentious and contradictory postfeminist landscape.

In effect, postfeminism opens up the process of meaning construction by emphasizing that ‘signification is not a founding act’, a closed circuit that determines and fixes meaning once and for all (Butler 1990a: 145). Following the theorist Judith Butler, it can be identified as an enabling ‘site of contest and revision’, characterized by ‘strategic provisionality (rather than [. . .] strategic essentialism)’ (Butler 1993b: 312). Butler notes that all signification can be described as ‘a regulated process of repetition’, taking ‘place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat’ (Butler 1990a: 145). Consequently, meaning can never be fully secured while knowledge itself becomes an ongoing operation that can never reach an absolute certainty. As Butler puts it, there is an inherent instability, a ‘*deconstituting possibility in the very process of repetition*’ and it is ‘by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up [. . .] as that which escapes and exceeds the norm’ (Butler 1993a: 10). Within a Butlerian framework, ‘a variation on that repetition’ is seen to produce ‘the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment’, a transgressive resignification that constructs a new and unanticipated significative content (Butler 1990a: 145). Thus, subversion becomes possible only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying and it can be achieved by a ‘failure to repeat, a de-formity’ or ‘failed copy’ that deviates from the norm and ‘repeats against its origin’ (Butler 1990a: 141; 146; Butler 1997b: 94). For Butler, the reiterative nature of signification could potentially destabilize and de-sediment meaning to such an

extent that it is 'permanently unclear what precisely [a] sign signifies' (quoted in Seldon *et al* 1997: 257).

While the notion of reiterability is crucial to the understanding of the postfeminist movement as it points to the instability and lability of its constitution, I am also cautious to avoid what Barry Rutland designates 'an idealism of the signifier' (Rutland 1999: 77). In fact, the contingency of the signification process should not be interpreted as a complete breakdown of meaning that sets the signifier 'on the loose', free to refer to innumerable signifieds and displaced from materiality altogether. Butler circumvents the potentiality of anarchic signification by placing her concept of resignifiability within a complex matrix of power relations that 'can be neither withdrawn nor refused, but only redeployed' (Butler 1990a: 124). She resists the idea of free-floating meanings by holding on to a dynamic conception of power that limits random and erratic significations while simultaneously generating the possibilities for a transgressive repetition. In this way, the process of signification is regulated but not fully determined, preserving the prospect of a subversive resignification, a perpetual risk of catachresis.

In the following, I adopt a similar logic in my refutation of an indefinitely dispersed postfeminism and I stress the importance of foreclosure and delimitation while also redefining these binding structures as renewable and unstable. I agree with Butler's understanding of power as 'a constitutive constraint' that is regulatory and normative as well as productive and enabling (Butler 1993a: xi). For Butler, power's double-edged implications reside in its reiterability as 'there is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability' (Butler 1993a: 9). Rather than simply being an externally imposed force, power is compelled to repeat itself for 'if the

conditions of power are to persist, they must be reiterated' (Butler 1997b: 16). This repetition (re)establishes the existing laws but it also refashions the normative shackles by creating a domain of risk. In other words, the power structure's dependence on repetitious acts of renewal engenders its precariousness as it leaves open the possibility of change and diversity. Butler particularly stresses this destabilizing possibility in the process of reiteration, explaining that 'to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination. It offers the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation, but its displacement' (Butler 1990a: 30). However, Butler also emphasizes that this transgressive rearticulation is not a straightforward or 'pure opposition to power, only a recrafting of its terms from resources invariably impure' (quoted in Osborne and Segal 1994: 39). Thus, it is no longer viable to seek recourse to simple and paralyzing models of structural oppression as subversion is not in a direct, antithetical relationship of external opposition to power. Establishing what counts as a dissident repetition is not an easy task but rather, there is a 'subversive confusion' (Butler 1990a: 139). In Butler's words, it 'is not first an appropriation and then a subversion. Sometimes it is both at once; sometimes it remains caught in an irresolvable tension, and sometimes a fatally unsubversive appropriation takes place' (Butler 1993a: 128).

With regard to postfeminism, Butler's insights have to be rephrased as her theory of resignification appears to rely on a normative understanding and the existence of an 'original' whose meaning can be displaced and resignified. As Butler argues, the failure 'to repeat *loyally*' can amount to a subversive repetition and resignification that 'fails to reinstate the norm "in the right way"' (Butler 1993a: 124; 138; my emphasis). Moreover,

she explains that ‘the effects of catachresis [. . .] are possible only when terms that have traditionally signified in certain ways are misappropriated for other kinds of purposes’ (Butler 1997a: 144). The repetitive process of signification is ‘at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established’ (Butler 1990a: 140). In other words, Butler presupposes that signification has a ‘proper’ functioning and signs have standardized meanings and therefore, there is a hierarchy or criterion that separates loyal from disloyal copies, the original from the fake. As she reveals, ‘the resignification of norms is thus a function of their *inefficacy*, and so the question of subversion, of *working the weakness in the norm* becomes a matter of inhabiting the practices of its rearticulation’ (Butler 1993a: 237; emphasis in text). Butler retains the idea that foundations and conventions are indispensable, insisting that she is not an ‘anti-foundationalist’ (Butler 1995: 133). These epistemological grounds allow her to preserve the distinction between transgression and conformity, between a subversive/*abnormal* and a non-subversive/*normal* appropriation. However, paradoxically, Butler also undermines and deconstructs this notion of originality or normality by stating that it is a myth that is retroactively put into place, creating the illusion, ‘the *idea* of the natural and the original’ (Butler 1990a: 138; 31; emphasis in text). The original or ‘loyal’ copy is no more ‘real’ or authentic than its resignified counterfeit. Instead, the norm/original is a copy that has been construed and tenuously constituted in time whereas the failed and resignified copy ‘deviat[es] the citational chain toward a more possible future to expand’ previous meaning(s) (Butler 1993a: 22). Thus, Butler’s conception of resignifiability simultaneously uses and abolishes foundationalist assumptions as she both upholds and questions intelligible and hierarchizable norms.

In order to demystify this Butlerian paradox, it is important to realize that she considers her own normative foundations to be part of the signification process, rather than its authenticating and pre-existing suppositions. Butler's understanding relies on the idea of a non-totalizing universality that is an open-ended, contested site of persistent crisis. Accordingly, she does not discuss the deconstruction of universal conventions in terms of their negation or dismissal. On the contrary, she notes that 'to deconstruct [. . .] [is] to call into question, and perhaps most importantly, to open up a term [. . .] to a reuse or redeployment that previously has not been authorized' (Butler 1992: 15). In this way, deconstruction postulates a destabilization of meaning as it rejects a univalent signification in favor of a mutable construction. As Butler declares, 'to call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it; rather, it is to free it up from its metaphysical lodgings in order to occupy and to serve very different [. . .] aims' (Butler 1992: 17).

This conception of deconstruction as a questioning rather than an annihilating impulse implies that Butler can maintain and refer to the notion of an original and its failed copy, to norms and their subversion while also undercutting the epistemological grounding of these ideas. Her critique is not a complete repudiation of all philosophical prerequisites but rather a way of interrogating their construction as pre-given or foundationalist premises. Butler reveals that 'the point is not to level a prohibition against using ontological terms' but, on the contrary, one should 'use them more', 'exploit and restage them, subject them to abuse so that they can no longer do their usual work' (quoted in Meijer and Prins 1998: 279). Her critical stance is summarized by the claim that 'there are existing conventions that govern the scope of rights considered to be

universal' which, however, is 'not the same as to claim that the scope of universal rights has been decided once and for all' (Butler 1995: 130).²

Thus, Butler proposes a set of challenges that are historically provisional, but they are not for that reason any less necessary to engage. She offers a perception of normative delimitation as temporalized and mutable rather than fixed and determinate. In her view, conventions and constraints must be 'constituted again and again', implying that there is a possibility of reiteration and variation (Butler 1995: 135). By emphasizing the provisionality and constitutive instability of structure, Butler dislodges the antithesis between normality and abnormality, original and counterfeit, loyal and disloyal copy. These polarities exceed the logic of non-contradiction as they are no longer seen to be in an *either/or* relationship. In this way, the notion of an authentic original is not opposed to its unfaithful copy but rather, the original itself is a copy that has been materialized and put into place by a continuous repetition. Normativity is thus rethought as a changeable but nonetheless binding matrix that is '*neither* fully determined [. . .] *nor* fully determining (but significantly and partially both)' (Butler 1997b: 17).

In what follows, I argue that postfeminism's various articulations are contingent on a contextualized configuration that situates and provisionally constitutes the term's significations. I supplement Butler's notion of resignifiability with a model of positionality that constructs postfeminism as a relational term, definable only within a (constantly moving) context. Butler's terminology has to be adapted as postfeminism has no recourse to a distinct postfeminist norm or original, an idea which Butler simultaneously maintains and deconstructs. While postfeminism cannot be comprehended by referring to an authentic foundation, a firm and monological

epistemology, it can nevertheless be bounded and situated. In fact, postfeminism's *plurality of meaning* does not dissolve into a *meaningless plurality*, a free zone of its own making. Postfeminist significations do not eternally expand and multiply to the point where it may become pointless to determine any sense and purpose. Instead, postfeminism is defined by a particular position, 'a place from where meaning is constructed, rather than simply the place where a meaning can be discovered' (Alcoff 1987-88: 434). Thus, I introduce the notion of a contextual stabilization of meaning that sets up a positional definition, a mutable and localized delimitation of signification. I employ the Butlerian concept of reiterability to examine postfeminism's precarious construction and I contend that her idea of a productive constraint takes the form of a contextual positioning within a postfeminist framework.

Butler herself acknowledges the importance of context, 'where context is the effective historicity and spatiality of the sign' (Butler 1997b: 96). She stresses the possibility of opening up a gap between the originating context/intention by which a term is animated and the effects it produces. This citational slippage or disruption creates the possibility of new and unanticipated meanings, a 'reterritorialization' or 'expropriation for non-ordinary means' (Butler 1993a: 231; Butler 1997a: 160). As Butler notes, the contexts a term assumes must not be 'quite the same as the ones in which it originates' (Butler 1997a: 15). The force and meaning of an utterance are not 'exclusively determined by prior contexts or "positions"' as a term may gain its force precisely by virtue of a 'break with context' (Butler 1997a: 145). This decontextualization 'rattle[s] the otherwise firm sense of context that [. . .] a term invokes' and reinscribes the latter with a 'non-ordinary meaning' that contests 'what has become sedimented in and as the

ordinary' (Butler 1997a: 145). Resignification can thus be discussed as a 'deterritorializing' project that cites 'the norms of power in a radically new context' (Olson and Worsham 2000: 741). Butler establishes a causal connection between meaning and context whereby signification is a contextualized expression that can be displaced and reappropriated in unexpected ways and with unintended effects.

However, Butler has also been criticized on account of her theory's abstractness as it does not take sufficient notice of the intricate contextual entanglements that give rise to new significations. Suzanna Danuta Walters notes that 'too often, mere lip service is given to the specific historical, social, and political configurations' that make certain significations possible and others constrained (Walters 1996: 855). Moreover, Butler's theory 'often seems ahistorical and [. . .] uninterested in cultural specificity' in a way that 'can produce a flattening out of power relations' (Piggford 1999: 284; Harris 1999: 119). Butler's insights are seen to be universalistic as it is not enough to assert that all meaning is constituted within complex and specific regimes of power and domination. According to Walters, those regimes must be explicitly part of the analytical structure, 'rather than asides to be tossed around and then ignored' (Walters 1996: 856). This criticism is reinforced by Lois McNay who states that, within Butler's theories, there remains 'a tendency to valorize the act of resignification per se' as a generalized and structural potentiality at the expense of a more sustained consideration of the positional construction of meaning (McNay 1999: 187). Thus, 'the problem with the concept of resignification [. . .] is that its status as a symbolic mechanism is not sufficient' to analyse the unstable and ambiguous relations between resignificatory practices and the contextual structures that frame them (McNay 1999: 182-183). Ultimately, the weakness of 'Butler's

primarily symbolic concept of power is that it underestimates the extent to which there can be a systemic recuperation of seemingly radical practices' (McNay 1999: 182).

McNay's objections relate to Butler's emphasis on the potentially subversive aspects of resignification and her disregard for more conservative and hegemonic repetitions that do not break with their contexts and reinforce rather than transgress their original constraints.

Even though Butler's work centers on the exploration of recontextualized and denaturalized significations, I believe that McNay oversimplifies her position as an uncritical appraisal of resignificatory acts. In fact, 'there is less a problem with Butler's writing than there is with its reception and perception' (Harris 1999: 119). Butler's critics have seized upon her theories as representing a single and unimpeachable position that can be transferred into all areas of existence in a way that ignores the specificity of the terrain that Butler covers. Butler is well aware that resignification by itself is not a transgressive act but 'depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered' (Butler 1990a: 139). She understands the historicity and peculiarity of subversion, noting that 'there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of [. . .] repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony' (Butler 1990a: 139). However, Butler does not put forward this criterion of subversion, this unmistakable proof of transgression, but she advances a theory or proposal which points to the generalized potentiality of such a re-appropriation.

In this way, Butler stops short of a *politics of location* that explores subversion as a process of interpretation, open to contestation and contingent on a historical, material

and discursive position.³ She does not translate her theories into a blueprint for a practical politics as she tends to give preference to ‘the text over context’, ‘the linguistic over the social’, theory over practice (Harris 1999: 119). As she summarizes her theoretical task, ‘it seems that [. . .] repetition is inevitable, and that the strategic question remains, what best use is to be made of repetition?’ (Butler 1997a: 37). She focuses on those ‘forms of repetition that do not constitute a simple imitation, reproduction, and, hence, consolidation of the law’ (Butler 1990a: 31). Simultaneously, Butler acknowledges that this exercise of agency is bound to be an ambivalent struggle that cannot be achieved at a distance as it takes place within the constraints of compulsion. Thus, Butler’s work is not so much a misjudgment and dismissal of (re)significatory ambiguity but a critical examination of the subversive possibilities within a repetitive structure of signification.

In the following, I will build on Butler’s work and develop her, admittedly, unspecified notion of context in order to explore the genesis of postfeminism as a reiterated phenomenon that is simultaneously constructed and positioned by a process of ongoing and constant renewal. Rather than trying to define postfeminism through an eradication or dissolution of its conflicting elements, this study situates and locates the term in order to include and focus on its contradictions and controversy. I argue that postfeminism emerges and achieves its various significations by being contextualised and momentarily stabilized. However, this definitional fastening or fixation is not static and unalterable as postfeminism is not bound to a particular context and meaning. Instead, it is reiterable and can be repeated and resignified in ways that reverse and dislocate its previous significations. Thus, every contextualization always bears the risk of a *de*-contextualization or *de*-territorialization and a reinscription with an alternative meaning.

Using Judith Butler's formulation, postfeminism is constituted by its situation/context but it is not determined by it, where determination forecloses the potential for resignification (Butler 1990a: 142). Postfeminism's multiplicity and ambiguity of meaning derive precisely from the term's decontextualization, from its break with prior contexts and its capacity to assume new locations and denotations. The term postfeminism acquires a new meaning or connotation when it is displaced from the context in which it has previously been deployed. In this way, postfeminism is enabled by this permanent possibility of resignification that requires opening new contexts and de-sedimenting other postfeminist positions.

Postfeminism takes on divergent (and even contradictory) significant contents when it is inserted and *made to mean* in concrete contextual settings. Adopting Fabio Cleto's terminology, it can be identified as a 'nomadic category' 'operative with different ends at different times and for different groups' (Cleto 1999: 35; 15). In approaching such a polyvalent and multifarious term, it is necessary to localize its configuration and to explore the friction produced by its positionings. Postfeminism cannot be assessed and defined by a particular set of attributes or characteristics but has to be described dynamically, in the relationship and tension between its specific manifestations and its contexts. Instead of fixing and securing a singular and monolithic definition for postfeminism, I demarcate a fluid postfeminist landscape in which meaning is never a finality but always in process. Accordingly, postfeminist denotations and values are highly varied and plural as they are continuously being reconstructed and resignified by their contextual relations. At the same time, I insist that postfeminism's multiple significations do not imply, as Baudrillard provocatively declares, that 'meaning is only

an ambiguous and inconsequential accident' (Baudrillard 1983: 11). Postfeminist meanings do not 'implode as if sucked into a black hole', but they are always irreducibly context-bound, constructed in radically heterogeneous and shifting ways by complex power structures (Best and Kellner 1991: 121).

Consequently, I want to problematize the notion of postfeminist contexts by stressing that these positions represent conflictual negotiations within a network of power/discourse. I emphasize that the heterogeneity of postfeminism does not preclude disagreement but, on the contrary, it fosters it. Postfeminist contexts are not mutually exclusive but they are interlocking and interacting, superimposed upon one another. Postfeminism's localized expressions do not make up a finite totality, a unity of diverse meanings and identities as they actively engage with and contest one another, refusing to be contained in an orderly hierarchy. Importantly, in its most challenging and equivocal representations, postfeminism is situated *inter-contextually*, in the interaction between discourses, theories and frameworks. Postfeminism's contextuality does not take the form of a rigid and static site but can be discussed in terms of a mobile and unstable struggle, a crossing of epistemological, methodological and discursive perimeters and confines. As will be discussed, postfeminism emerges from and participates in the contentious intersections between feminism, postmodernism, patriarchy and popular culture. Postfeminism is not synonymous with any of these contextual settings but sits uneasily between these locations, reflecting their conflicts and tensions. In this way, the range and variety of postfeminist voices do not unite in harmony and they cannot be ranked or classified according to neatly sub-divided categories and contexts. Postfeminisms

overlap, contradict, reinforce and undermine each other, forming an ambiguous space that disregards hierarchical and dualistic logic.

In fact, postfeminism can be identified as an inter-(con)textual movement or transfer between discourses and theories, creating a multi-directional and equivocal junction that challenges closure and a centralized meaning. Postfeminism's inherent interdiscursivity 'inevitably takes the form of boundary-crossing', generating 'the deferral and rewriting of "parent" texts' (O'Donnell and Davis 1989: xiv).⁴ This unwillingness to adhere to and situate itself in a stable and unitary relation to its instituting discourses has brought about the charge of postfeminist parasitism. Postfeminism is criticized for 'feeding upon its hosts' and abusing the very (con)texts that make up the postfeminist landscape (Dentith 2000: 188). It is said to be a contaminating presence that dilutes the 'original' movements/theories and replaces them with a realm of impurity and ambiguity. Contrastingly, I mitigate the force of these critical perceptions by contending that there is no unsullied and unified point of origin that postfeminism attacks and neutralizes. I question the notions of originality/authenticity and the idea of an autonomous postfeminist 'text', with an immanent meaning. I argue that postfeminism cannot be understood reductively as a disuniting or disruptive presence that undermines and splinters previously coherent unities. Instead, postfeminism's assemblage of contradictory viewpoints and theories reflects rather than produces the disjointed nature of its (con)texts. These 'originals' are no more united than postfeminism and, in their most unequivocal representations, they are based on a 'temporary stability that is constantly destabilized because of the difference contained both within and without' them (Harris 1999: 183). In this way, postfeminism's discursive

and theoretical contexts can be discussed as areas of contention rather than easily identifiable, singular and transcultural phenomena. Postfeminism arises from and is emblematic of the disputes surrounding the encounters of a number of highly varied coalitions, loosely associated by the overall terms of feminism, postmodernism, patriarchy and popular culture. The postfeminist movement can be located in 'the clash between competing discourses, the contradictions within and between discursive fields and the diverse and multiple ways in which power is reproduced and reinstated' (Harris 1999: 173). Postfeminism does not offer a notion of synthesis or wholeness but it relies on a complex and multiple account of power/discourse. Its oscillatory movement cannot be described as a straightforward alliance of juxtapositions, a free-for-all ambiguity, but rather as a permanent struggle over meanings and an interplay of contradictions.

As a result of this dynamic and unstable positioning, postfeminist texts and contents do not abide to a simplistic categorization that classifies, tames and brings to intelligibility postfeminism's controversial and paradoxical plurality. Postfeminism's contextual ambiguity is mirrored on the level of signification as the postfeminist landscape brings together and unseats a string of antithetical qualities and positions on which 'bourgeois epistemic and ontological order arranges and perpetuates itself' (Cleto 1999: 15). As will be revealed, postfeminism questions and crosses the binary opposition between complicity and critique, feminism and femininity, subject and object, agency and passivity, signifier and signified. Postfeminism does not locate truth in any of these polarities and instead, sabotages and collapses the barrier between them. It effects a destabilization of and a movement *across* binaries in order to establish an ambiguous in-betweenness. As Fernando de Toro explains, 'post-theory' implies 'exploiting the in-

between spaces [. . .] a transitory space, a space other, a third space that is not here/there, but both' (de Toro 1999: 20). In this way, postfeminism's various (con)textual expressions share a defiance of an orderly and uniform structure as they undercut absolute oppositions and reject the *either/or* dichotomy of these antitheses. The postfeminist movement operates in the productive and contested middle space between binaries, exceeding their limits and undermining their mutual exclusivity. The hierarchized pair is unsettled and its relationality is altered in an attempt to appropriate its meaning and restructure its dynamic.

In other words, postfeminist theory and practice blur binary distinctions in their ambivalent conjunctions of hitherto incompatible and irreconcilable opposites. Accordingly, postfeminism's critical position is complicit and subversive at the same time, while the postfeminist self can be described as both an agent and a subject, displaying a feminist consciousness along with a feminine body. These binarisms are transcontextualized in an effort to re-describe and reconfigure their relations and values. As Barbara Kastelein points out, postfeminism 'appears to be no longer perturbed by [. . .] dualistic constraints' as it 'finds ways to declare the boundaries no longer relevant' (Kastelein 1994: 8). Thus, postfeminism works to reshape and transform the existing balance of *either/or* contrasts and re-assemble them in a non-dichotomous way. It employs the notion of resignifiability to reinscribe and relocate dualisms, reveal the porousness of their division and their overlapping features. The 'post' movement sets up a negotiating space between these extremes as it creates a contentious and controversial intersection that resignifies and redefines both sides of the binary. Within this postfeminist realm, meanings are constructed relationally, existing between (con)texts

and discourses. Hence, a postfeminist text can be characterized as an 'intertext', a dynamic site involving a perpetual play of referentiality between and within texts (Allen 2000: 1). The postfeminist landscape is an inter-(con)textual space that challenges closed systems of signification and permits the recognition of systematic limits while encouraging 'the intertextual dialogue that will dissolve and reconfigure those limits' (O'Donnell and Davies 1989: xiv; xv).

Postfeminism's intertextual strategy can be described as a form of recycling that seeks to dislocate, destabilize and finally alter the meaning of terms that have previously signified in another way. Postfeminist advocates insist that this 'expropriating' or deterritorializing process manufactures a 'critical distance from the ur-text' and thereby, effects a disruption in the relation between signifier and signified, opening up the possibility for a transgressive resignification and redeployment (Dentith 2000: 155; Butler 1993b: 314). Myra Macdonald refers to this rearticulation of the processes of signification as a 'reading against the grain' that searches for inconsistencies and gaps to produce a subversive reading (Macdonald 1995: 37). Significations are transvalued as they are distanced from their prior denotations and signifiatory boundaries and they are relocated in new contextual surroundings. This reappropriation exploits the power of familiar images and recontextualizes them in order to 'de-naturalize them, make visible the concealed mechanisms which work to make them seem transparent' (Hutcheon 1989a: 44). In Adrienne Rich's words, this is an act of 're-vision [. . .] of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction' (Rich 1979: 35). The 'old vessel' is invaded and 'filled with new wine' and the 'relation to the past' is unsettled, 'revealing the past as changing in response to the present and as capable of

transforming present and future as well' (Ostriker 1982: 72; Greene 1991: 292). This suggests 'a view of the past not as fixed and finished but as so vitally connected to the present that it takes on new meaning in response to present questions and needs' (Greene 1991: 305). In this way, postfeminism represents a comment on the present as much as on the past as it recalls and revises, invokes and undercuts those (con)texts that contribute to its emergence. The past evolves in confrontation with the present and it can be seen as an ever-changing construct that is open to reinterpretation and reconstruction. Within postfeminism, past and present interact, allowing 'a circling back over material that enables repetition with revision' (Greene 1991: 307).

I contend that this revisioning process cannot be conceptualized simplistically as one has to take into account the double-edged implications of the trope of recycling that preserves the texts it seeks to superimpose, incorporating the old into the new. In fact, recycling signifies transformation and change but, at the same time, the recycled object/text still carries traces of its prior uses and functions. According to Judith Butler, this logic of 'renewal through synthesis' is an inherent part of postmodernity for, 'if anything, the postmodern casts doubt upon the possibility of a "new" that is not in some way already implicated in the "old"' (Hutcheon 1985: 97; Butler 1992: 6). Within postfeminism, there is a paradoxical cultural recombination or 'intertextual echoing' that marks 'the difference from the past' but, simultaneously, also 'works to affirm [. . .] the connection with the past' (Gitlin 1989: 350; Hutcheon 1989b: 5). As Adrienne Rich asserts, this is 'a difficult and dangerous walking on the ice' as this 'revisionist' impulse has a double allegiance (Rich 1979: 35). This recycling project 'operates through the deployment of signs with already standardized meanings' and thus, 'recuperation is ever

a real possibility' (Lloyd 1999: 206). Myra Macdonald explains that this method of appropriation may only temporarily shift the balance of power as 'reading against the grain, after all, leaves the grain exactly where it was' (Macdonald 1995: 38). The reuse and rearrangement of signifiatory processes is characterized by an ambiguity of purpose and meaning as it cannot escape the inter-dependence of the old and the new, the dominant and the contestatory.

This doubleness implies that postfeminism is engaged in 'the intertextual "bouncing" [. . .] between complicity and distance' and therefore, it is liable to oscillate in and out of a critical attitude (Hutcheon 1985: 32). Postfeminism works the border between a subversive questioning and an unavoidable recuperation as the necessary semiotic gap that generates the problematic within which an old signification is manipulable constantly threatens to contract and collapse. The critical gap between signifier and signified can turn into a closeness or proximity that could be mistaken for an essentialist synonymy that veils the constructedness and changeability of meanings. In this way, there is no totalizing structure that guarantees in advance that a resignified repetition will not be recuperated and the norm reinforced, or indeed that any such improper or disloyal citation may simply be perceived as poor copies of the norm. Postfeminism epitomizes this double-voiced ambivalence whereby distance/difference is no longer opposed to nearness/sameness but these previously antithetical positions are combined in a paradoxical embrace.

In fact, I propose that postfeminism's ambiguous resignification or appropriation technique can be discussed as a parodic strategy that manages simultaneously to inscribe continuity while also permitting critical distance and change. I argue that parody

represents a polyvalent and pluralistic way of understanding postfeminism's inter-(con)textual relations and spectrum of meaning. Parody can be seen as 'a perfect mode of criticism' for postfeminism as it enshrines the past and questions it, paradoxically both incorporating and challenging that which it parodies (Hutcheon 1989b: 11; 6). As Linda Hutcheon declares, in parody 'we have found a new model for our signifying practices today', one that substitutes the notion of an 'original inscription' with the idea of a 'parallel script' (Hutcheon 1990: 132). It can be described as both 'a way to preserve continuity in discontinuity' and 'a repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity' (Hutcheon 1985: 97; Hutcheon 1988: 26). This bi-directionality is an inherent characteristic of parody that can be normative and unprogressive as well as provocative and revolutionary.⁵ Parody has a dual potential whereby 'it can subvert the accents of authority *and* police the boundaries of the sayable', it can be 'both conservative and transformative, both "mystificatory" and critical' (Dentith 2000: 27; Hutcheon 1985: 101). Thus, there are two generally opposed descriptions of parody, of which one 'plays the game' of the established order and constantly monitors 'the dangerous extremes' while the other parodic mode is 'broadly subversive of authority' and can effectively deconstruct the established order (Dentith 2000: 27; Weber 1995: 65).

In particular, Linda Hutcheon proposes a theory of postmodern parody as 'repetition with critical distance' in order to discuss the paradoxical idea of reiteration or citation as the basis for critique and subversion, of 'repetition as a source of freedom' (Hutcheon 1985: 6; 10). In Hutcheon's definition, parody is a form of imitation, but 'imitation characterized by ironic inversion' that offers a productive-creative approach to

tradition (Hutcheon 1985: 7; 6). It can be discussed as a manipulation of intertextual codes engaged in the unceasing struggle over meanings and values. According to this view, it is not a matter of nostalgic imitation of the past but rather a modern recoding, capable of transformative power in creating new syntheses. This parodic mode of postmodernity marks difference rather than similarity and it comes to be recognized as an ironic form of criticism that transgresses through appropriation and “de-doxifies” our assumptions about our representations of [the] past’ (Hutcheon 1989a: 98). Thus, postmodern parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging and contesting the history of representations, of ironically revising and revisiting the past.

Contrastingly, Fredric Jameson adopts a far less optimistic view in his description of postmodern parody as nostalgic escapism. Jameson asserts that, in postmodernism, ‘parody finds itself without a vocation’ and it has been replaced by pastiche, defined as ‘blank parody’, ‘without any of parody’s ulterior motives’ and ‘amputated of the satiric impulse’ (Jameson 1993: 73; 74). Pastiche can be distinguished from parody on the grounds that it takes no critical distance from the material it recycles. It is imitative rather than transformative in its relationship to other texts, operating by similarity and correspondence. Unlike Hutcheon, Jameson does not embrace postmodern parody as a ‘bitextual synthesis’ but he refers to it as a monotextual form, a ‘neutral practice of mimicry’ (Hutcheon 1985: 33; Jameson 1983: 114). Pastiche comes to be seen as characteristic of postmodernism, expressing ‘the cultural logic of late capitalism’ that prevents ‘the recourse to any discourse of nature or tradition [. . .] which could be used to measure or ironise the forms that are pastiched’ (Jameson 1993: 62; Dentith 2000: 184). As Jameson notes, pastiche lacks ‘that still latent feeling that there exists something

normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic' (Jameson 1983: 114).⁶ According to Jameson, postmodern parody is a sign of imprisonment in the past, an 'alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history' (Jameson 1983: 117). Pastiche does not allow a confrontation with the present and it is dismissed as a nostalgic recovery of past meanings, symptomatic of an inescapably intertextual history. The critical force carried by parody has been supplanted by a depthless and ahistorical nostalgia that equalizes all identities, styles and images as it privileges heterogeneity and random difference.⁷ Thus, Jameson offers a description of postmodern parody as a value-free, de-historicized quotation of the past, an empty realm of pastiche and an apt mode for a culture in which, as Baudrillard declares, 'all that are left are pieces. All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces. Playing with the pieces – that is postmodern' (Baudrillard 1984: 24).

For the purpose of this study, I suggest that postmodern/postfeminist parody crosses the distinction between Hutcheon's ironic repetition of the past and Jameson's nostalgic pastiche. I argue that postfeminism's parodic resignification or trans-contextualization is always fundamentally hybrid and double-voiced as the direction of its politics cannot be permanently defined. The intent of parody cannot be settled and fixed as its ideological status is ambiguous, both legitimizing and subverting that which it parodies. Parody has the paradoxical effect of preserving the form it attacks through a double process of installing and ironizing. This marks the central paradox of parody whereby its transgression is always authorized by the very norm it seeks to subvert, so that 'in imitating, even with critical difference, parody reinforces' (Hutcheon 1985: 26). Parody represents an authorized transgression, characterized by the dual drives of

conservative and revolutionary forces that stress difference as well as sameness and stasis. Any attempt to offer an essentializing or transhistorical definition of parody is bound to be unsuccessful and redundant as it is impossible and even undesirable to grant the parodic mode a single social or political direction and value.⁸ Parody's functions vary in intention and meaning, ranging from serious criticism to a playful mockery, to conservative nostalgia. Moreover, the two sides or 'hands' of parodic repetition are neither entirely separable nor simply opposable but rather ambivalently intertwined, 'each hand caressing and contaminating the other in a parasitic embrace' (Weber 1995: 68). Thus, one cannot establish two distinct parodic realms (one conservative and one subversive) but instead, one has to negotiate a fluctuating middle ground that refuses to come down on either side of the binary.

In effect, I maintain that within postfeminism, parody's ironic and nostalgic impulses can be combined in an ironic nostalgic stance that introduces the contradictory idea of reiteration that is complicitous and critical at the same time. I suggest that in postfeminist parody, edgy irony and sentimentalized nostalgia can coexist and may be conflated. Jameson's distinction between pastiche and parody becomes blurry as nostalgia is exploited and ironized. This paradoxical move invokes and simultaneously undercuts representations of the past, interrogating the norm that, according to Jameson, traditional parody assumes. Nostalgia is no longer described as an uncritical embrace of bygone values and certainties but it is problematized and gains an ironic distance to the past. As Linda Hutcheon explains, 'nostalgia [. . .] does not simply repeat or duplicate memory' but instead, creates a sense of the past through a 'complex projection' (Hutcheon 1998: 3).⁹ Nostalgia effects a construction and distortion of the past in

conjunction with the present and it operates through a 'historical inversion' whereby 'the ideal that is *not* being lived now is projected into the past' (Hutcheon 1998: 3). Nostalgia is not a simple recording of past issues but it always involves an act of fabrication and creation that redefines these issues. This process of construction opens up a gap for reflective thought about the present and the past while also permitting an ironizing of nostalgia that both reinforces and subverts the look backward for authenticity.

In the postfeminist landscape, the hybrid notion of an ironized nostalgia finds its expression in the reinscription and transvaluation of significations whereby, for instance, the adoption of a normative femininity is resignified as a feminist method of resistance and empowerment. As will be discussed, stereotypical feminine images are called up and employed in a postfeminist context in a way that is both ironic and/or nostalgic. Sarah Gamble encapsulates this ironic/nostalgic move in her provocative description of postfeminism as an age in which 'women dress like bimbos, yet claim male privileges and attitudes' (Gamble 2001: 43). An ironically nostalgic interpretation of this postfeminist appropriation emphasizes women's control of and distance from their own objectification, insisting that contemporary expressions of femininity, including the wearing of the old trappings of female exploitation, can be comprehended in terms of self-definition and self-gratification. Yet, at the same time, this recourse to femininity can never fully escape the charge of complicity and co-option that makes women collude with a patriarchal system in order to preserve stereotypical male and female roles. In this way, the ironic/nostalgic stance that constructs the feminine self/body as a means to female/feminist emancipation is always characterized by an ambiguous invocation of past and present. Postfeminist resignification operates in a contradictory field of citation that

repeats not just nostalgically, 'but with a critical recognition of the temptation to nostalgia' that creates an ironic distanciation (Robertson 1996: 5).

Thus, ironized nostalgia is caught in a changeable and dynamic relationship of both rupture and continuity, refusing to be characterized as *either* ironic critique *or* nostalgic creation and insisting that it can be both, at the same time. In ironized nostalgia, parody's nostalgic and ironic elements are merged in an ambivalent union that exhibits difference as well as continuum and importantly, does not offer a resolution of contradictions but foregrounds them. Accordingly, I resist Jean Baudrillard's appraisal of parody as 'the most serious crime' that 'makes obedience and transgression equivalent' and 'cancels out the difference upon which the law is based' (Baudrillard 1993: 198). On the contrary, I maintain that parody does not erase distance or difference in a neutralizing act; rather, it creates a paradoxical space in which continuity and discontinuity, transformation and stasis are no longer in a mutually exclusive relationship but are combined in a partly progressive and partly retrograde double movement.

In this way, parody is socially and politically multivalent and its workings can only be considered at particular historical moments and differing social situations. As Dentith declares,

we have to recognize [. . .] that parody's direction of attack cannot be decided upon in abstraction from the particular social and historical circumstances in which the parodic act is performed, and therefore that no single or political meaning can be attached to it. (Dentith 2000: 28)

Parody's context-dependent nature does not indicate that its uses are neutral but it implies that its social/political course cannot be deduced in advance as it requires a contextual understanding. Parody can be identified as 'one of the techniques of self-referentiality' that reveals an awareness of 'the importance to signification of the circumstances surrounding any utterance' (Hutcheon 1985: 85).¹⁰ In order to emphasize the parodic plurality and paradox, it can be discussed as a 'mode' in the spectrum of possible intertextual relations whose ethos should be labeled as '*unmarked*, with a number of possibilities for marking' (Hutcheon 1985: 60).

Ultimately, parody's doubly coded and context-specific status makes it a ready vehicle for the contradictions and ambiguities of postmodernism/postfeminism at large. It is 'the paradoxical postmodern way of coming to terms with the past', calling into question 'the temptation toward the monolithic in modern thinking' and marking the intersection of complicity and critique, creation and recreation (Hutcheon 1985: 116; 101; Hutcheon 1989b: 14). Postfeminism embraces this parodic mode in order to put forward its controversial critique that is simultaneously conservative and transgressive, obedient and subversive. Parody's bi-directionality and its political *unmarkedness* make it a perfect instrument to express postfeminism's contextual variability and multiplicity of meaning. The postfeminist parodic position is unashamedly paradoxical and it refuses to be defined by binary categories as either radical or reactionary, innovative or orthodox. In fact, postfeminism should not be considered as a blueprint for either feminist transgression or patriarchal containment but as a site of struggle and cultural negotiation that no longer adheres to a dichotomized conception and way of thinking. Instead, it

appropriates and trans-contextualizes these distinctions in order to offer its own parodic, contradictory interpretation of postmodernity.

1.2 Beyond the Binary or Theorizing on the Postfeminist Frontier

Something has happened. In the last two decades, before the end of this century, we have witnessed the emergence of the *Post*. This is a symptom of a society and a culture unable to name what is taking place in the very crux of its activity. The *Post*, then, comes to replace that which we know is there, but which we do not quite manage to signal.

Fernando de Toro, 'Explorations on Post-Theory: New Times' (1999)

'Western culture has entered a New Age, one which is still searching for its name', Fernando de Toro states in his 'Explorations on Post-Theory', emphasizing that 'we are at the very threshold, on the very liminal space of a new production, practice and thinking of *theory*' (de Toro 1999: 10; emphasis in text). These new times are defined as 'post-theoretical' in their introduction of a new strategy and a new awareness and in their 'search for a "beyond", a third theoretical space' (de Toro 1999: 9; 10). The notion of post-theory refers to the limits of theory as well as the surpassing of those limits, implying a work of reconstruction, 'a further effort of theorization that transcends theory's current horizon' (Rutland 1999: 72). Post-theory does not signify the end of theoretical activity or a renunciation of theory, a completion of the theorizing project whereby 'there is simply no further novelty to be squeezed from it' (Rutland 1999: 72). The post-theoretical stance works 'within, but perhaps also against, the parameters of theory', 'mov[ing] us from the exclusionary logic of either/or to the inclusionary logic of both/and' (Rutland 1999: 72; 74). This new mode of understanding disengages the dualistic frameworks of Platonism in order to affirm the positivity of difference and to account for change and changing contexts. In this way, 'the endless battle of two

competing elements through the vertical axis of hierarchy' has been replaced by and transformed into 'a horizontal and pluralistic model' that is *beyond the binary* in its rejection of polarized positions (Kastelein 1994: 216).

Postfeminism exemplifies and epitomizes this post-theoretical condition as it cannot be ascribed to a single and consistent theoretical, practical and definitional stance, but instead, it effects a double gesture, a 'philosophical positioning of "both at once"' (Harris 1999: 19). This two-sidedness is at the heart of the postfeminist debate and it is expressed in a number of ways and contexts. Areas of discussion encompass postfeminism's holding together of antitheses, its controversial positioning as a cultural and theoretical movement, its plurality of meaning and its focal ambiguity. In effect, postfeminism dissolves disciplinary, epistemological and signifiatory boundaries and it embraces a state of permanent transition. It stages a simultaneous and contradictory deployment of heterogeneous theoretical apparatuses, either in concert with one another or against one another. As will be discussed, the postfeminist movement blends and holds together theories from diverse fields and disciplines, including feminism, postmodernism and popular culture. In the process of these often problematical conjunctions, the underlying epistemologies are brought into contact and conflict, establishing a space for their deconstruction and redefinition. In this way, postfeminism represents the capacity to rewrite and 'the conscience that there is a constant slippage of meaning opening interstices in any systematic effort to control production' (Imbert 1999: 25).

Adopting Geraldine Harris's phrase, postfeminism is characterized by 'a politics of undecidability' that walks a tightrope between complicity and critique and 'acknowledges the impossibility of theoretical purity or perfectly politically correct

practices' (Harris 1999: 21; 186). The politics of undecidability does not depend on *a priori* laws, pre-existing assumptions, universal truths or appeals to absolute authorities. Instead, it promotes a double movement of exploitation and contestation, use and abuse, rupture and continuity. This bi-directionality depolarizes the postfeminist landscape and it is exhibited by ambivalent and pluralistic descriptions of power, critique, subjectivity and agency. This form of politics accepts the necessity of working within what already exists and forging a future from resources inevitably impure. As Harris notes, the politics of undecidability strives to discover a position between 'wild hope and total pessimism', in order to deal pragmatically with the fact that 'we are always within that which we would criticize without falling into passivity or relativism' (Harris 1999: 180). Similarly, Judith Butler designates 'a politics of discomfort' as a 'politics of both hope and anxiety', whose key terms are not fully secured in advance and whose futural form cannot be fully anticipated (Butler 1997a: 161). She forges the notion of 'living the political *in medias res*' in order to describe this 'reconfiguration of our "place" and our "ground"' (Butler 1995: 131). These variously named politics acknowledge that a transformation of the political is taking place and its outcome cannot be fully explained or decided upon from within the present without limiting the possibilities of this transformation. Consequently, foundationalist presuppositions and transcendental grounds have to be re-conceptualized as contingent and delimited rather than uncontested and necessary, as complex and temporary circumstances rather than inevitable constraints. This does not imply a politics of pure flux and ceaseless change but means that, ultimately, there are 'no rules for subversion or resistance, no guarantees of efficacy, only a process of [. . .] making

provisional decisions, which are always invested with power relations [. . .] always haunted by their own internal contradiction' (Harris 1999: 187).¹

Postfeminism is engaged in and constructed by this continuing process of provisionality whereby it is defined in contradictory ways that cannot be made to adhere and that render its meaning resignifiable. Postfeminism, then, is a questionable category that is temporarily stabilized by its locations and contextual surroundings but it is also subject to destabilization and decontextualization. In this way, the postfeminist movement expresses a number of situated, interdependent and provisional relationships in which polarities can never be fully and finally distinguished as they are not in an absolute, *either/or* opposition but perceptible only within and through each other. This study examines postfeminism's ambiguity of text and context by foregrounding notions of relationality, the interconnectedness of differences and the interplay of meanings within discursive formations. I explore the parallel lines as well as links between feminist and non-feminist strands of contemporary social, political and cultural theory that have led to the emergence of postfeminism. A clear distinction between the pressures from inside and outside feminism cannot be made as they overlap in areas of critique in conceptual and theoretical terms.

In fact, I dismiss a politics of purity that establishes a clear line demarcating the inside and outside of hegemonic culture or differentiating the 'oppressor' from the 'oppressed'. My research is influenced by the Althusserian insight that there is no outside of ideology, no way to step, untainted, out of the hegemonic. Within postfeminism, any opposition or critical move can only be made from the inside as it is already part of hegemonic constructions of reality. I agree with the theorist Martin-Barbero that 'we

need to recognize that the hegemonic does not dominate us from without but rather penetrates us' and therefore, 'it is not just against it but from *within* it that we are waging war' (Martin-Barbero 1988: 448; my emphasis). I believe that one of the lessons of the postmodern problematic is that one cannot take up an external position with regard to what one contests and that, consequently, one is always implicated in the value one chooses to challenge. In this way, I am wary of the Cartesian conception of an intrinsic and ontological resistance or critical capacity that opposes hegemonic forces in terms of a diametrical antagonism and mutual exteriority. Instead, I emphasize the interlacing and intermingling of opposition and complicity and I insist that there is no critical expression outside discursive and hegemonic constraints.

In the following, I will adopt Linda Hutcheon's notion of *complicitous critique* to highlight the paradoxical nature and political content of 'post' derivatives that always work within conventions in order to subvert them. According to Hutcheon,

this is a strange kind of critique, one bound up [. . .] with its own complicity with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyze and maybe even undermine.

(Hutcheon 1989a: 4)

This is the only form of contestation available to the postmodern/postfeminist subject who can no longer criticize, judge and find 'truth' from an autonomous and transcendent outside. The Enlightenment ideals of authorial originality and intentionality have been questioned by postmodern critique and they have been established as thoroughly

ideological, constructed by social and discursive forces. The postmodern subject cannot be seen as a positive entity in itself, a repository of bold independence, inner strength and creativity. Instead, postmodernism and postfeminism articulate a self that is always within power structures and inhabits a critical space that is complicitous and entangled with what it seeks to counter. Postfeminism exemplifies this paradoxical merger of conformity and resistance as it simultaneously uses and abuses, installs and impairs the very concepts and movements that contribute to its emergence and formulate its meaning(s). It can be described as a contradictory and problematical phenomenon whose wholesale commitment to plurality cannot be specified and pinned down to a distinct postfeminist criteria or stance. Postfeminism's complicitous critique ensures that it cannot employ and rely on starkly polarized, *either/or* categories and that, instead, it is unavoidably compromised and controversial.

In this way, I do not endeavor to settle the disagreement over postfeminism's directionality and its motivational ambiguity and instead, I maintain that it sits on the fence and literally becomes a point of interrogation. In other words, I resist binary formulations that seek to fix and define postfeminism's meaning and politics as either feminist or non-feminist, academic or popular, subversive or contained, neo-conservative or radically revolutionary. Within postfeminism, these distinctions operate and circulate in a fluid fashion and they cannot be explained by a dualistic logic that works to restrict the range of possible viewing positions. In what follows, I want to rethink the terms of the postfeminist debate by questioning the *either/or* structure that underlies many articulations of postfeminism. Adopting Linda Hutcheon's terminology, postfeminism can be described as 'much more resolutely dialogic or paradoxical' (Hutcheon 1990:

132). Its complicitous critique and constant double encoding, whereby it can act both as a legitimizing and a subversive force, cause some critics to reject it utterly while others acclaim it enthusiastically. The discrepancy of postfeminist interpretations is brought about by the fact that only one side of the contradiction is seen or valued and the ambivalent 'dialogism of encoding' is resolved into 'monologic decoding' (Hutcheon 1990: 132).

In my reading, postfeminism *blurs the binary* and it is an inherent part of the postmodern age of confusion, undermining the polarization of feminist and non-feminist, academic and popular, transgressive and conservative. It is precisely at the junctures of such binarisms that postfeminism posits its pluralistic propositions and exposes the multiple and often contradictory subject positions that are available in a postmodern era. In this way, postfeminism can be identified as a 'frontier discourse' that 'bring[s] us to the edge of what we know and encourage[s] us to go beyond' (Mann 1994: 223). The postfeminist frontier results from 'the gradual breakdown of [. . .] organizing structures that continue to exist only in various states of disarray' and it negotiates between and intersects with various contextual and discursive stances (Mann 1994: 226). As Ien Ang suggests, 'not order, but chaos is the starting point' for a discussion about 'the cultural contradictions of life in (post)modernity' (Ang 1996: 172; 9). Ang discusses the postmodern realm of uncertainty as a 'truly chaotic system' whereby chaos is acknowledged as a positive force, 'impossible to domesticate' (Ang 1996: 175).² Chaos is not defined negatively as a *lack* of order or a void signifying absence but it is transvalued as having 'primacy over order', doing away with 'any notion of an essence of social order' (Ang 1996: 175; 172).

Postfeminism's indeterminacy of meaning and 'chaotic' plurality can be interpreted as supplying an inexhaustible well of information that assembles the multivalent and conflicting voices of postfeminist subjects and texts. However, the existence of diversity should not be construed as a confirmation of a liberal pluralist paradise that is free from power and that celebrates difference for its own sake. Ang notes that this 'excessive romanticism' presupposes 'a space in which power is so evenly diffused that everybody is happily living ever after in a harmonious plurality of juxtaposed meanings and identities' (Ang 1996: 169). In fact, postfeminism does not seek to reconcile its often contradictory elements and resolve them into a pleasing and consonant whole but instead, it creates a site of struggle and a terrain of exchange between these ideas and contexts. On the postfeminist battlefield, heterogeneity has to be theorized as an explosive and strenuous combination of warring factions whose beliefs and principles sit together uneasily. The outcome of these intersections is not a uniform and consensual unity but an unstable coalition, always on the verge of disintegration. In this way, postfeminism can be seen as a powerhouse of conflicting ideas, in which tensions are deliberately left unresolved and contradictions deliberately left manifest.

Thus, indeterminacy and diversity do not mark a lack of power and cannot be divorced from the structures of domination. Postfeminism's embrace of pluralism cannot displace a concern with formations of power/discourse but has to be built on a complex understanding of the workings of power connections. Rather than being 'a privilege that one might possess', power should be deciphered 'in a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity' (Foucault 1977: 26). Power is not a homogeneous apparatus but a diverse and broadly based matrix, defining 'innumerable points of confrontation, focuses

of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles, and of an at least temporary inversion of the power relations' (Foucault 1977: 27). These *micro-physics of power* reveal that contention and dispute can be found throughout the power matrix that is fractured by fissures and cracks rather than being a unanimous and unified *bloc* of domination. As Geraldine Harris emphasizes,

“Authority”, or power, is not singular and is always being reinstated and reinterpreted in a multitude of different ways across and within different institutions and as such must always be disputed in its own terms, on its own groundless ground. (Harris 1999: 76)

Consequently, power should not be conceptualized negatively as a repressive instrument but has to be understood as a productive force that creates diversity, multiplicity and even resistance. As Foucault notes,

we must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes”, it “represses”, it “censors”, it “abstracts”, it “masks”, it “conceals”. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. (Foucault 1977: 194)

My understanding of postfeminism is influenced by this ‘optimistic’ description of power that focuses on its productivity and contingency and that consists in saying that ‘so many things can be changed, fragile as they are, bound up more with circumstances than

necessities, more arbitrary than self-evident' (Foucault 1988a: 156). In particular, my approach is informed by the Foucauldian insight that sees power and resistance as inescapably allied and insists that while 'power *is* "always already there"' and 'one is never "outside" it', 'this does not entail the necessity of accepting an inescapable form of domination or an absolute privilege on the side of the law' (Foucault 1980: 141).³ In fact, 'to say that one can never be "outside" power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what' (Foucault 1980: 141-142). The omnipresence of power should not be conflated with its omnipotence but it means that while power is everywhere, it is indissociable from contestation and struggle. In this way, resistance is 'the compatriot of power', it co-exists with and is an inherent part of power structures, creating a paradoxical situation where subordination to power becomes the very condition of agency and critique (Foucault 1980: 142). As Foucault notes, 'as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance' which is 'formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised' (Foucault 1988a: 123; Foucault 1980: 142).

In this oxymoronic formulation, power enables or breeds resistance and subjugation engenders the possibility for agential capabilities and subjectivity. Discursive construction and determinism are not in a diametrical opposition to agency but they are the premises of this subjective potential. Foucault's alliance of power and resistance involves a reconsideration of both concepts in terms of their heterogeneity and their irregular distribution. The structures of domination are unveiled as a network of relations in which no one holds absolute power or is absolutely powerless.⁴ The intersection of power and resistance entails the contingency and vulnerability of power relations and also implies that counteraction and antagonism towards power can never be established and

defined in a clear-cut and straightforward antithesis. On the contrary, resistance is always bound up with what it opposes, complicit with what it seeks to criticize and ultimately ambivalent in its *contra*- character and strategies. In this way,

there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case [. . .] by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or rebound, forming with respect to the basic domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat. (Foucault 1978: 95-96)

The key assumption behind these *micrological* strategies is that 'since power is decentred and plural, so in turn must be forms of political struggle' (Best and Kellner 1991: 56). The very idea of revolution is seen to be erroneous insofar as it relies on a large-scale social transformation radiating from a central point. In fact, agency and any revolutionary potential should not be judged by what Jonathan Dollimore refers to as 'impossible criteria: complete transformation of the social (i.e. revolution), or total personal liberation within, or escape from it (i.e. redemption)' (Dollimore 1991: 85). As Dollimore notes, this presupposes an 'agency of change too subjective and a criterion of success too total' to be realized in a world whose absolutes and universal principles have been questioned and undermined by postmodern deconstruction (Dollimore 1991: 85). Furthermore, to imply that subversion or resistance is always legible in the same way, everywhere and at any time, is to appropriate it to a single, pre-existing 'outside'

authority and to decide in advance on the terms and conditions of this contestation. Consequently, there is no *one* theory or strategy that can explain how subversion may be achieved in any given situation or sphere.

This pluralistic ambivalence has important political and critical implications as it relies on a model of postfeminist agency that does not relate to patriarchal/feminist/hegemonic structures in a straightforward, linear and/or oppositional manner but that formulates concepts of resistance and creativity within these boundaries. Postfeminism faces the impossibility of finding a totalizing model to resolve the postmodern contradiction of installing and subverting prevailing norms. Its politics of resistance and concept of agency are always articulated within constraints, making the postfeminist challenge politically ambivalent and ambidextrous. Postfeminist notions of critique cannot be based on a philosophical fantasy of transcendence and omnipotence that defines critical capacities as *a priori* ontological structures of subjectivity and proclaims that criticism itself can take the form of a radical revolution or overturn of hegemonic structures of dominance.

This study proposes that postfeminist theories of agency and critique can no longer be imported from the Cartesian conception of the self as a given, a *constituting* and autonomous individual. The postfeminist agent is a constructed and *constituted* subject, a product of discourse and power that does not exist in any pre-given sense. There is no "I" that predates its own discursive constitution, no internal truth or essence that transcends the workings of power. Instead, the self is positioned in and constructed by a network of power that s/he can never rise above. In fact, 'to be a subject is to be born into a world in which norms are already acting on you from the very beginning' (Olson

and Worsham 2000: 747). There is nothing outside the regime of power, no one independent of it. It follows that there is no structure of subjectivity that is not always already within matrices of power and there is no “‘ontologically intact reflexivity”, no reflexivity that is not itself culturally constructed’ (Fraser 1995: 66). The claustrophobia of this vision is apparent as it implies the loss of autonomy/selfhood and the destruction of the philosophical prerequisites to critical thinking and emancipatory politics. As Susan Hekman points out, the assumption is that ‘abandoning the constituting subject entails abandoning the possibility of agency and action, that is, the possibility of creating meaning’ (Hekman 1991: 58).

I argue that postfeminism does not adhere to the negativity of this conclusion and instead, formulates concepts of agency and resistance that understand foreclosure not as an end in itself but as a temporally renewable structure. Postfeminist resistance redefines the authorial “I” and explodes the dichotomy that opposes the *constituting* subject of enlightened modernity to the *constituted* self of constructivist postmodernity.⁵ This polarization itself is a product of a modernist, subject-centered epistemology that relies on an oppositional, hierarchical structure that sees the *constituting* self as omnipotent and autonomous and its *constituted* counterpart as wholly determined. Postfeminism rejects the dualism on which these two conceptions rest and it insists that the postfeminist self is both constructed and critical, an agent and a product of structural/discursive forces. Since s/he is never outside these confines, his/her agency can no longer be described as an innate and transcendental quality located in some inner space but it has to be reinterpreted in non-Cartesian terms and recast within the matrices of power/discourse. I propose that the subject’s discursive determination does not imply the end of critical analysis and the

impossibility of resistance but it means that agency always occurs within and is delimited by boundaries and, therefore, it cannot be found in a realm outside power. The postfeminist subject is 'free and yet bounded', inhabiting a contradictory space that is simultaneously constraining and liberating, productive and oppressive (Ang 1996: 165). S/he cannot be regarded as an oppressed and helpless victim, subjected to a totalizing power, but neither is s/he a free-willed and autonomous individual.⁶ This understanding of subjectivity combines agency and subjection, undermining the dichotomous perception that opposes a subject's will and autonomy to his/her subordination to power/discourse. Agency is no longer seen in antithesis to power as an autonomous psychic inside that actively battles against an external oppression.⁷ On the contrary, both terms are theorized in non-dualistic and non-exclusive ways, evoking the contradictory condition of *free-yet-boundedness*, characteristic of living in the postmodern realm of uncertainty.

The postfeminist stance does not simply replace the *constituting* subject with the *constituted* one, nor does it try to mediate between the two positions by incorporating and grafting key elements of the Cartesian transcendental constitutor onto the postmodern self. Instead, postfeminism displaces this dichotomy altogether and refuses to perpetuate the opposition between the rational, autonomous, *constituting* self and its antithesis found in the realm of the *constituted*. Importantly, the notions of intentionality, creativity and resistance no longer require recourse to an untainted inner world but they are produced by and within discursive constraints. This redefinition of the agential capacity entails that 'construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated' (Butler 1990a: 147). The simplistic equation of power

with imposition is dismissed in favor of a reformulation of power ‘as that which is not only pressed on a subject but forms a subject, that is, is pressed on a subject by its formation’ (Butler 1997b: 7). Paradoxically, a subject is formed by its very subordination and becomes a subject by virtue of being made subject (to). S/he only gains the potential to be and act as a result of his/her insertion in and subjection to the structures of power/discourse.

Drawing on a Foucauldian and Althusserian frame, Judith Butler considers the paradox of subject formation, explaining that “subjection” signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject’ (Butler 1997b: 2).⁸ Subjection is ‘neither simply the domination of a subject nor its production, but designates a certain kind of restriction *in* production, a restriction without which the production of the subject cannot take place’ (Butler 1997b: 84). Butler employs the term ‘subjectivation’ (a translation from the French *assujétissement*) to denote ‘both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection – one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency’ (Butler 1997b: 83). According to this rearticulation, subjection is understood not only as a subordination but also as ‘a securing and maintaining, a putting into place of a subject, a subjectivation’ (Butler 1997b: 90-91). This dialectic of subject formation describes a subject instituted through constraint and redefines power as constituting both the subject and the condition for his/her de-constitution.

Power is characterized by a double valence of subordination and production whereby it is ‘not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are’ (Butler

1997b: 2).⁹ Constraints and norms can simultaneously be described as restrictive and productive, inflicting a necessary violence onto the subject that confines as well as impels his/her critical capacity. This implies a rigorous reconsideration and reformulation of the concept of agency in non-Cartesian terms whereby it is no longer positioned in an antagonistic relation to construction/constitution but it is the product of discursive forces. This insider position indicates that postfeminist agency is bound to be ambivalent and complicitous as it is conditioned by limitations that it also seeks to alter in unexpected and potentially subversive ways. Paradoxically formulated, the constraints of power/discourse are characterized by a liberating determinism that confines as well as creates, oppresses as well as relieves. This productive restraint establishes 'an ambivalence at the site where the subject emerges' whereby s/he is brought into being by his/her subjection while his/her agency and resistance become 'a matter of escaping without leaving' (Butler 1997b: 7; Ang 1996: 179).

Judith Butler rephrases this idea when she notes that 'emancipation will never be the transcendence of power as such' as 'there is no opposition to power which is not itself part of the very workings of power'(Butler 1995: 137).¹⁰ Within a Butlerian framework, agency is derived from 'the very power regimes which constitute us, and which we oppose' and thus, it can be seen as the effect of these confines (Butler 1995: 136). As Butler notes, 'resistance appears [. . .] as a part of power, its self-subversion' (Butler 1997b: 93). The agential capacity is not a transcendental attribute, inferred from the structures of the self, but is constituted in and through power/discourse formations. According to Butler, the discursive matrix is the enabling structure that brings agency and resistance into being. As she notes,

critique [. . .] always takes place *immanent* to the regime of discourse/power whose claims it seeks to adjudicate, which is to say that the practice of “critique” is implicated in the very power-relations it seeks to adjudicate. (Butler 1995: 138)

Consequently, power should not be understood as an unbreakable deadlock as it harbors its own possibilities of being resignified or criticized from within. In this way, since there is no possibility of standing outside the discursive conventions that constitute the subject, the only possible form of critique implies a reworking of the very conventions by which s/he is enabled. Agency is redefined as a resignification and a ‘subversive citation from within’ that is to be found ‘precisely at such junctures where discourse is renewed’ (Butler 1995: 135).

I contend that this critical stance can be identified as a postfeminist politics of resistance, characterized by an internalized challenge that makes use of its insider position to infiltrate and subvert power structures. This postfeminist critique is willing to exploit its own implication in and complicity with the networks of power/discourse in order to question these confines from within. Consequently, resistance can effectively be described as a ‘turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power’ and establish ‘a kind of political contestation that is not a “pure” opposition, a transcendence of contemporary relations of power’ (Butler 1993a: 241).¹¹ Adopting Fernando de Toro’s terminology, this new critical position can be identified as ‘*inhabiting the*’, the resignification of totalizing and hegemonic discourses and their subversion from the inside (de Toro 1999: 14; emphasis in text). Following de Toro’s insight that ‘it is not possible to continue speaking from the margins’ and remain outside

of the very systems one attempts to dismantle, 'we have one solution: inhabit the Centre, appropriate its discourses only to subvert them' (de Toro 1999: 16; 19). Thus, 'the Post-Modern condition' has opened up a concrete space in which counter-discourses can locate themselves '*inside* and not *outside*' in order to effect 'an appropriation of the centre's logos, so that it can be deconstructed from within' (de Toro 1999: 14; 19; emphasis in text). In the decentered space of postmodernism, there is no inside or outside of hegemony, no binary structure or dichotomous thinking that would make it possible to distinguish the center from the margins, the oppressor from the oppressed. De Toro notes that these terms cannot continue to be interpreted dualistically but rather, 'they must be problematized if we are ever to move forward and construct [the] third space of the in-between' (de Toro 1999: 15). In other words, any counter discourse (if such a term can still be employed) is always located within hegemonic structures and any form of critique can only be made from the inside. As de Toro notes, 'it is paramount to get within the master discourses; not to emulate them in a servile manner [. . .] but to deconstruct them, and in their cracks inscribe a new and changing dynamic discursivity' (de Toro 1999: 16).¹²

In particular, as I will demonstrate, postfeminism takes up and develops this deconstructive stance of appropriation by suggesting that women can use this strategy to resignify and reinterpret patriarchal representations. As Barbara Kastelein points out, 'this model of defiance' is a 'refusal to be fixed by men's definitions or reified by the male gaze' (Kastelein 1994: 30).¹³ In fact, it is only through the reworking of a dominant discourse that 'her own heteroglossia may be freed, that she may, in other words, be freed to speak' (quoted in Kastelein 1994: 169). Ultimately, this postfeminist position can

amount to a paradoxical stand entitled 'femmenism' that, in an ironic reversal of Audre Lorde's *bon mot*, insists on 'using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house' (Delombart 1995: 22). This is an attempt to 'de-doxify' the givens that 'go without saying', hollow them out from inside and deconstruct their processes of signification (Hutcheon 1989a: 119). The novelist Julie Burchill provides a pertinent description of this postfeminist manifesto in her request to her readers: 'let us not sermonize and sulk; let us not miserabilise and moan. Let us instead read between the lines, and decode their [. . .] minds' (Burchill 1992: 42-43).¹⁴

This critique from within engages and works with the female subject's discursive/social constitution and positioning within a complex grid of disciplinary, normalizing, panoptic powers that survey and judge her every move. Her agency is redefined as an appropriation of these constraints as she makes use of the language, attitudes and hierarchical structures that have previously been described as oppressive and she refashions them as weapons of attack and subversion. This deconstructive and resignificatory critique breaks through the epistemology of the Cartesian subject and adopts a poststructuralist/constructionist account of subjectivity. Controversially, the subject's determined status and her confinement within hegemonic/patriarchal power structures do not entail the loss of critical capacities and politics. On the contrary, agency occurs within the context of these restrictions and it is to be found in the potentialities of resignification, in the contingent possibility opened up by the constituting relations.

De Toro emphasizes that 'it is here where deconstruction becomes a political discourse' as 'any substantial change in power relations will only be able to take place from inside' (de Toro 1999: 16).¹⁵ The task of any critical and/or political endeavor is

not to establish a viewpoint outside of constructed identities but it is to locate subversive strategies that are enabled by those constructions. At the same time, a contemporary criticism/politics has to be aware of the double binds inherent in these appropriative strategies as the denaturalized resignifications can be re-appropriated into the dominant ideology. As Jon Erickson rightly asserts, 'transgression through appropriation can be a martyr to its own effects' (quoted in Thompson 1997: 363). In this way, new and alternative methodologies have to be constructed that do not rely on a binary logic or an essentializing model of agency and that take into account this ambivalent form of critique that reinforces as much as it subverts. This implies relinquishing the fantasy of an unbiased perspective and formulating a critical theory/practice in the midst of a ubiquitous and panoptic power matrix.

In locating and contextualizing postfeminism, I seek to articulate a politics of complexity that accounts for ambiguity and gives equal importance to the different critical stances that inform its emergence. As Teresa de Lauretis notes, 'to live the contradiction [. . .] is the condition of feminism here and now' and consequently, there is no right or wrong way to understand postfeminism, no privileged critical agenda that could resolve its plurality (de Lauretis 1987: 26). This study is concerned from the outset not to pre-empt any characterization of postfeminism and to accept its flexibility or doubleness whereby it incorporates, for example, misogyny and anti-feminism as well as resilience and pro-feminism. I do not intend to determine the 'meaning' of postfeminism and immobilize the term in a number of polarized positions, nor do I seek to settle the transgression/containment debate and establish a definite and final answer to the questions regarding postfeminism's feminist/anti-feminist, empowering/disempowering

elements. My analysis is an extrapolation of the various manifestations of postfeminism, the differing contexts that locate and construct postfeminist meanings. As will be shown, a singular and distinct definition of postfeminism cannot (and should not) be achieved as the interactions of 'post' and 'feminism', the intersections of prefix and root, are highly varied and conflicting. A criticism that insists on the necessity of binary distinctions will be doomed to conclude with unsatisfactory generalizations and simplifications, instead of recognizing that postfeminism is a composite filled with subversive and conservative, feminist and non-feminist contents, whose meaning and orientation are relative to its contexts.

1.3 Modern Janus or the Different Faces of Postfeminism

Currently, feminism seems to be a term without any clear significance. The 'anything goes' approach to the definition of the word has rendered it practically meaningless.

bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984)

'The question [. . .] becomes, how can we make sense of the "post" in "postfeminism"', Misha Kavka observes in her analysis of 'the situation of feminism within time' (Kavka 2002: 31; 30). As I have suggested in the previous chapters, postfeminism's multiplicity of meaning stems from the definitional indeterminacy of the prefix 'post'. Additionally, as this section will reveal, the notion of a postfeminist theory and identity is problematized by the fact that the root of postfeminism, feminism itself, is far from having a universally agreed agenda and definition.¹ As Sarah Gamble emphasizes, feminism 'has always been a dynamic and multifaceted movement' that 'is nothing if not paradoxical' (Gamble 2001: xiii; Cott 1986: 49). It has never had 'a single, clearly defined, common ideology' or been constituted around 'a political party or a central organization or leaders or an agreed policy or manifesto, or even been based upon an agreed principle of collective action' (Harris 1999: 9). Lacking a single and totalizing definition, feminism is engaged in a non-linear history of multiple significations that are determined and circumscribed by the contexts in which the term is used (and abused). The movement's meanings are always relative to particular constructions for, as Lynne Alice notes, 'feminism has only working definitions since it is dynamic, constantly

changing ideology with many aspects including the personal, the political and the philosophical' (Alice 1995: 12). The feminist movement exists on both local and abstract levels, dealing with specific issues and consisting of diverse individuals while promoting a universal politics of equality for women. Feminists are simultaneously united by their investment in a general concept of justice and fractured by the multiple goals and personal practices that delineate the particular conceptualization of justice to which they aspire. Thus, 'to read feminism's history [. . .] is to uncover records of debates, schisms, and differing viewpoints', and from this perspective, the postfeminist debate merely dramatizes a situation which has always held true for feminism (Gamble 2001: xiii).

In fact, some critics suggest that postfeminism may constitute nothing more than 'feminism's "coming of age"' and 'the latest divergence in the constantly shifting parameters of feminist thought' (Brooks 1997: 1; Gamble 2001: xiii). In the following, I argue that postfeminism's appropriation of its feminist origins is more complex and insidious than a simple rewriting or modernization and it can even harbor antifeminist potential. In its various manifestations, postfeminism exhibits a number of relations to feminism ranging from complacency to hostility, admiration to repudiation. In its most denunciatory expressions, postfeminism misreads and classifies feminism as a monolithic movement that is archaic, binaristic and unproductive for the experiences of contemporary women. In order to position themselves in opposition to a supposedly unified and old-fashioned feminist entity, postfeminists try to define and categorize their roots and they often end up distorting and reducing feminism's diversity. At the same time, feminism's definitional plurality survives and is reinforced by each descriptive and sectionalizing attempt as the proposed explanations vary and even contradict one another.

This exemplifies the postfeminist paradox, indicating both an attempt to announce the end of or an inherent change in feminism while also creating a site for feminist politics, a platform for new feminist debate. Thus, postfeminism provides 'a focal point for articulating the meaning [. . .] and constituencies of feminism today', debating the usage, appropriation, or rejection of the term (Kavka 2002: 29; 32).

In this way, postfeminism's multidimensionality is ensured by its prefix and its root as both terms encompass a wide range of descriptions. In this section, I will give a summary and delineation of postfeminisms prevalent in theoretical and cultural fields of reference that situate themselves differently with regard to the root feminism. Each postfeminist articulation is by itself a definitional act that (re)constructs the notion of a feminist movement and its own relation to it. In order to demystify and unravel the interpretive openness and the multifaceted nature of postfeminism, the interconnections between 'post' and 'feminism', prefix and root, have to be examined. The relationship between feminist and postfeminist discourses is highly unstable and fluid, problematizing and pluralizing the conceptualizations of both terms. Confusion rules as postfeminism is variously identified and defined as anti-feminist backlash, pro-feminist Third Wave, Girl Power dismissive of feminist politics, trendy me-first power feminism and academic poststructuralist feminism. There seems to be a simultaneous denial, use and misuse of feminism, an unscrupulous embrace of contradiction and ambiguity that negotiates areas of tension that, as I intend to show, can be used productively within postfeminist practice and theory.

As Barbara Kastelein notes, postfeminism is not required to be theoretically consistent because it is not a grounded politics nor answerable to a social movement but

'more of a cultural tendency, amorphous and contradictory' (Kastelein 1994: 32; Silverton Rosenfelt 1991: 272). She reveals that postfeminism is 'beyond feminism although feminism is part of it and strategically post-feminists need to have it both ways' (Kastelein 1994: 32). Postfeminism's inherent two-sidedness means that there is a co-occurrence of critique and stereotyping while incorporating some feminist insights and theories. Judith Stacey neatly encapsulates this controversy in her description of postfeminism as 'the simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticisation of many of the central goals of second wave feminism' (Stacey 1987: 8). Similarly, Janice Winship declares that, 'if it means anything useful', the term 'postfeminist' refers to the way in which the 'boundaries between feminists and non-feminists have become fuzzy' (Winship 1987: 149). The *either/or* structure that distinguishes feminist ideals and models from their non-feminist counterparts has been replaced by a composite postfeminist space marked by ambivalence and complexity. According to Winship, this blurring of the binary is to a large extent due to the fact that 'some feminist ideas no longer have an oppositional charge but have become part of many people's, not just a minority's, common sense' (Winship 1987: 149). The implication is not that feminism is a movement of the past, nor does it indicate that all feminist demands have been met and that, therefore, feminism is now redundant. On the contrary, it suggests that 'feminism no longer has a simple coherence around a set of easily defined principles' and instead, it is characterized by 'a much richer, more diverse and contradictory mix than it ever was in the 1970s' (Winship 1987: 149).

Approached in this way, the prefix 'post' does not indicate the eradication of the women's movement or the dismissal of feminism *tout court* but can be viewed as

analogous to 'postrevolutionary' or 'post second-wave' (Stacey 1987: 8; Hollows 2000: 198). As Julie Ewington points out, 'it is not feminism that we are "post" but one historical phase of feminist politics' (Ewington 1994: 119). Postfeminism encourages feminism to develop an understanding of its own historicity, 'an account of its own temporality that does not simply mimic the modernist grand narrative of progress' (Elam 1997: 67). It attributes a historical specificity to second-wave feminism, for, as Charlotte Brunson asks, 'why should 1970s feminism have a copyright on feminism?' (Brunson 1997: 101). In this way, the term 'postfeminism' is employed to describe a critical position in relation to the feminism of women's liberation, signifying both the achievements of and challenges for modern feminist politics.

On the one hand, postfeminism's interrogative stance can be interpreted as a healthy rewriting of feminism, a sign that the women's movement is continuously in process, transforming and changing itself. Accordingly, the adoption of a postfeminist position does not imply abandoning the feminist project but it means jettisoning a certain kind of politically correct feminist identity.² Yet, at the same time, one can argue that this definition of postfeminism as a self-critical, evaluative mode is simply too optimistic as 'in the end postfeminism is always more than a criticism of feminism and a caricaturing of individual feminists' (Alice 1995: 25). The 'inflammatory myth of new beginnings and revisionings' disguises the fact that postfeminism 'operates like a chimera, or perhaps even a conceit', misrepresenting and undermining feminist politics and reducing all feminisms, and their long (and far from unified) histories to a caricatured version of 1970s feminism (Alice 1995: 26). The mythologizing of feminism into a fictionalized

second wave is criticized as an invasion of the feminist body and a vicious attempt to debilitate and sabotage the women's movement.

While I do not underestimate postfeminism's distortional elements, I maintain that the 'post' movement cannot be defined simplistically as anti-feminism and blatant sexism. The relation to earlier feminist waves is far more complicated than a straightforward dichotomy as postfeminist discourses use and are consciously informed by feminism's egalitarianism, its notions of empowerment and agency. I insist that feminism remains an inevitable and multivalent component of postfeminism investing it with a productive plurality. Postfeminism and feminism are entangled with each other and, as a debating couple, they should not be viewed reductively in opposition. Instead, my understanding of the (post)feminist coupling sees feminist and postfeminist stances as allied and entwined, creating a dynamic and multi-faceted context that is made up of diverse standpoints and theories.³ In fact, the illusion of a feminist monolith has to be discarded from the start as feminism has never enjoyed a blissful state of unity or exhibited a universally agreed agenda. As Nancy F. Cott notes, 'feminism is nothing if not paradoxical' as

[it] asks for sexual equality that includes sexual difference. It aims for individual freedoms by mobilizing sex solidarity. It posits that women recognize their unity while it stands for diversity among women. It requires gender consciousness for its basis yet calls for the elimination of prescribed gender roles. (Cott 1986: 49; Cott 1987: 5)

These paradoxes are rooted in the actual situation of women and they have always been the subject of feminist debate and controversy.⁴ In this way, a strict conceptualization of feminism cannot be upheld and should be replaced by the notion of feminist contexts, made up of differing views and strategies on how the plight of women can be advanced.

One can argue that postfeminism's definitional plurality derives directly from its feminist roots and is a result of feminism's inherent diversity and disunion. Yet, both terms' multidimensionality has been suppressed from outside and within feminism in an attempt to establish two different and coherent positions. The interconnections between postfeminism and feminism are fraught with conceptual and epistemological dilemmas as both camps try to immobilize one another in strict definitional straitjackets. Much pro- and contra- postfeminist rhetoric relies on a reductive binary structure in order to conjure up a pole of negativity against which postfeminism can define itself and lay bare the faults of feminist orthodoxy or, alternatively, reminisce nostalgically about a mythical feminist past characterized by a homogeneous and unified women's movement. As Jane Kalbfleisch points out in her discussion of the feminism-postfeminism coupling, the potential for overlap, the ambiguity between the two groups and the possibility of conflict within each one, are rendered abstract, almost nonexistent (Kalbfleisch 1997). She distinguishes two rhetorical positions that, although very different in nature, both eradicate the contradictions within (post)feminism. On the one hand, this occurs through a polarization of feminism and postfeminism that Kalbfleisch aptly names 'the rhetoric of opposition' whereby division is given presence through the assumption that feminism and postfeminism are fully distinguishable and distinct. In this sense, the term 'postfeminist' describes a non-feminist stance and it can be read as an active term of negation that

attempts to move beyond a feminist era and its theoretical and cultural practices. 'The prefix "post", in this prescriptive sense, signifies an active rupture (*coupure*) with what preceded it' (Best and Kellner 1991: 29). This rupture can be interpreted positively as a liberation from old, constraining and oppressive conditions and as an affirmation of new developments. At the same time, the new 'post' term can carry negative connotations and be understood as a 'deplorable regression, as a loss of traditional values, certainties and stabilities' (Best and Kellner 1991: 29). Thus, the tendency to construct a dichotomy and present the relationship between feminism and postfeminism in binary terms, can take the form of anti- and pro-postfeminism. Postfeminism is either embraced whole-heartedly, thereby denouncing earlier feminist movements, or it is rejected as an opportunistic move on the part of patriarchy, 'the introduction of a particular vigorous and invasive weed into the otherwise healthy garden of feminism' (Elam 1997: 55).

On the pro-postfeminist side of the debate, one finds a generation of young women who appear to speak from somewhere outside and above the body of feminist theory. In this instance, the term 'postfeminism' is used to suggest that the project of feminism has ended, either because it has been completed or because it has failed and is no longer valid. As Rebecca Walker notes in her introduction to the anthology To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism (1995):

Young women coming of age today wrestle with the term [feminist] because we have a very different vantage point on the world than that of our foremothers. [. . .] For many of us it seems that to be a feminist *in the way that we have seen and understood feminism* is to conform to an identity and way of living that

doesn't allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories. We fear that the identity will dictate and regulate our lives, instantaneously pitting us against someone, forcing us to choose inflexible and unchanging sides, female against male, black against white, oppressed against oppressor, good against bad. (Walker 1995: xxxiii; my emphasis)

A critical as well as temporal or generational distance is established between the new postfeminists and the old second wavers who hold on to a dated, old guard and rigid feminism. Postfeminism poses as 'the new and improved mind of feminism', a feminism fit for the new millennium, whereas the women's liberation movement is described as 'embarrassingly out of touch', 'no longer moving, no longer valid, no longer relevant' (Cacoullos 2001: 80).

The mass media is partially responsible for this premature burial of feminism and it is in the popular press that the most clear-cut and dualistic representations of feminism and postfeminism appear. As Dow asserts, the media has always had a hard time understanding the complexity of feminist ideology and it 'has found this story an easy one to write, casting it as a battle between the rigid, irrational ideologues of victim feminism and the rational, commonsensical approach of their detractors' (Dow 1996: 207). In this context, postfeminism tends to be used as indicative of a joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement. Claudia Wallis in the Time cover story of 4th December 1989 confirms the sensibleness of the supposed rejection of feminism by asserting that, after all, 'hairy legs haunt the feminist movement; as do images of being strident and lesbian' (quoted in Jones 1994: 19). The

postfeminist on the other hand is 'fun, indifferent to, or even critical of "politics", cheerfully apathetic, sexy and independent. She has no need for liberation or solidarity with other women' (Elsby: 2).

These media-assisted versions of postfeminism assume that the changes wrought by the women's movement in the 1970s were beneficial and that the political demands of first and second wave feminism have now been met (enfranchisement, equal pay, sexual liberation etc.).⁵ In this popular sense, postfeminism encapsulates the belief that 'the seventies struggle for "women's rights" has achieved all that was reasonable to achieve, and the excess of such feminist lobbying has been "exposed" as a passé anti-male fad' (Alice 1995: 7). It assumes that the women's movement took care of oppressive institutions and that now it is up to individual women to make personal choices that simply reinforce those fundamental societal changes. As Vicki Coppock emphasizes, 'if the claim to a "post-feminist" society is underpinned by any one principle it is that women have "made it", or they have the opportunity to "make it"' (Coppock 1995: 4).⁶ It is argued that 'all ha[s] been achieved, in fact over-achieved' to the extent that 'feminism has [. . .] become irrelevant to the lives of young women today' (Coppock 1995: 3; Sonnet 1999: 170). In this case, the 'post' signifies a 'going beyond' or moving on from feminism, with the implicit assumption that its critiques and demands have been accommodated and absorbed enough to permit a withdrawal from feminist politics and coalition.

Accordingly, postfeminism's advocate Rene Denfeld starts her book The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order (1995) with the observation that:

For women of my generation, feminism is our birthright. [. . .] We know what it is to live without excessive confinement. We are the first generation to grow up expecting equal opportunity and equal education, as well as the freedom to express our sexuality. [. . .] This belief may translate into the pursuit of a career or it may mean demanding respect for raising children – women of my generation believe in the right to choose. (Denfeld 1995: 2)

For Denfeld, old-style feminism ‘has become as confining as what it pretends to combat’ and it is totalitarian and inflexible in its upholding of views that are reminiscent of those of an earlier age (Denfeld 1995: 5). In fact, she defines feminism as the ‘New Victorianism’ that creates ‘the very same morally pure yet helplessly martyred role that women suffered from a century ago’ (Denfeld 1995: 10). Denfeld’s postfeminist mantra of “choice” depends on an illusion of freedom and opportunity as it denies the continued need for a collective feminist politics. In this new age of free choice, feminism is shorn of its political program and the heralded postfeminist choice is ‘freed of the necessity of thinking about the political and social ramifications of the act of choosing’ (Probyn 1990: 156). Denfeld’s attitude towards earlier feminist generations is influenced by a dangerously simplistic and dualistic view that constructs feminism as monolithic and dead whereas postfeminism is diverse and alive. She bases her critique on a binary structure that categorizes the relationship between feminism and postfeminism in terms of mutual exteriority and negates the possibility of interaction. Denfeld relies on a fictional and distorted account of a demonized feminism to satisfy a progressive narrative

structure that, as Deborah L. Siegel notes, might be summarized as 'Down with the "bad" feminism and up with the good!' (Siegel 1997b: 67).

A similar 'rhetoric of opposition' is employed by the anti-postfeminist proponents who preserve a myth of feminist linear progress by locating postfeminism with a sexist patriarchy as the latest version of 'the same old thing'. According to this view, with the advent of postfeminism, sexism has not been eradicated but its nature has been transformed into a more indirect and insidious form. Postfeminism has emerged as 'a hegemonic negotiation of second-wave ideals', 'working with "patriarchal" theory' and employing feminist notions of equality and agency for non-feminist goals (Dow 1996: 88; de Toro 1999: 16). In particular, the popular media has co-opted and appropriated the language of choice and empowerment in order to 'sell back to us our status as patriarchy's slaves' (Woodlock: 2). The media Trojan horse pretends to advance feminism and retains the idea of equality for women while harboring antifeminist weaponry and gutting the underlying principles of the feminist movement. Postfeminism is the selling point in the creation of an illusion of progress and it is packaged as a less radical and patriarchal-friendly version of feminism requiring 'the least ideological adjustment from men and from culture at large (and concomitantly, the most adjustment from women themselves)' (Dow 1996: 88). Thus, postfeminism is defined by its opponents as a conservative and reactionary phenomenon, lacking an inherent opposition to patriarchal culture and male-dominated institutions. It is no threat to the status quo as it remains confined within male-defined parameters and uses the rhetoric of the women's liberation to incorporate feminism into a project that could not be identified as feminist.

This negative reading of postfeminism inserts a hyphen between 'post' and 'feminism', implying that feminism has been sabotaged by its new, trendy prefix to the extent that 'texts [...] in proclaiming [...] the advent of postfeminism, are actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism, in effect, delivering us back into a prefeminist world' (Modleski 1991: 3). The most influential definition of postfeminism through reference to a rhetoric of relapse is Susan Faludi's, who in Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women (1992) portrays postfeminism as a devastating reaction against the ground gained by the second wave. The term 'backlash' implies a rejection of feminist goals, an attempt to demonize the women's liberation movement and return them to the subordinate roles of a bygone era. As Faludi explains, 'the last decade has seen a powerful counter-assault on women's rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women' (Faludi 1992: 12). For Faludi, postfeminism *is* the backlash and, rather than being an overtly hostile response to the second wave, its persuasiveness lies in its ability to define itself as an ironic, pseudo-intellectual critique of the feminist movement. Thus, 'the backlash is at once sophisticated and banal, deceptively "progressive" and proudly backward' (Faludi 1992: 12). In order to unmask this wolf in sheep's clothing, women are advised to 'act' and revive the feminist movement for 'no one can ever take from women the justness of their cause' (Faludi 1991: 498). While Faludi is extremely convincing about the breadth and depth of the backlash, her definition of postfeminism *as* backlash oversimplifies and diminishes the definitional ambiguity and heterogeneity of the 'post' movement. Postfeminist and backlash discourses certainly coincide in a number of ways but postfeminism is far more

problematic and contradictory than a wholesale rejection of the women's movement. In this way, Faludi's anti-postfeminism and Denfeld's pro-postfeminism alike represent the relationship between feminism and postfeminism as mutually exclusive and incompatible. The *either/or* formulation of the binary couple implies that only one term can subsist by obliterating the other. Thus, postfeminism can only exist to the exclusion of feminism, and feminism can only exist to the exclusion of postfeminism. Insisting on the necessity of dichotomous distinctions, the pro-/anti-postfeminist proponents refuse to envisage a site of struggle and exchange between feminism and postfeminism, an ambiguous (post)feminist space that is beyond the binary and that blends complicity and critique, difference and similarity.

Rather than situating feminism and postfeminism antithetically, the second rhetorical position that Kalbfleisch identifies, 'the rhetoric of inclusion', relies on a polarization of a different kind to eradicate the overlap between feminism and postfeminism. In this case, (post)feminism is pitted against some 'Other' (for instance, postmodernism and poststructuralism) which, although creating presence for the presumed commonalities among feminists and postfeminists, effectively erases their potential differences (Kalbfleisch 1997: 258). In other words, the rhetoric of inclusion contests the dualistic logic of exclusion manifested by the rhetoric of opposition and displaces polarizations from within (post)feminism to the relationship of (post)feminism and some Other. The critical tension between feminism and postfeminism is defused in this way as the two terms are conflated into one and incorporated into another discursive project. The radical potential of the coupling is neutralized and the confrontational voices within (post)feminism are silenced as a result of this appropriation.

The 'Other' discourses that (post)feminism is harnessed to, are exemplified by the differently inflected deconstructive critiques mounted by postmodernist, poststructuralist and multiculturalist theorists. As Keith Green and Jill LeBihan note, the category of postfeminism can be interpreted with regard to 'the involvement of feminism with other "post" discourses' and it addresses 'one of the most pressing current concerns for academic feminism', 'the question of what to do' with these 'post' movements (Green and LeBihan 1996: 253-254). Academic circles have stressed the inherently theoretical nature of postfeminism which, in this context, is identified as 'a pluralistic epistemology dedicated to disrupting universalising patterns of thought, and thus, capable of being aligned with postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism' (Gamble 2001: 50). Within the feminist academic community, postfeminism is defined as the outcome of feminism's intersection with these anti-foundationalist movements/theories and it has come to denote postmodern or poststructuralist feminism. In this case, the prefix 'post' characterizes a shift in feminist thinking and particularly, in the way in which 'woman' as the subject of feminism is conceptualized. Postfeminism is employed as a theoretical or philosophical term that implies the problematic search for a unifying cause of and common solution to women's subordination and a rejection of the assumption that feminism is based on a unified subjectivity, a universal sisterhood.

There is no shortage of debate on the nature of poststructuralist/postmodern feminism and, admittedly, the interaction of feminism with postmodernism and poststructuralism is fraught with fundamental discrepancies, with the problem of subjectivity as the point of contention and division.⁷ There is concern that feminists cannot afford the luxury of rejoicing in 'the death of the subject' for 'if woman is a

fiction [. . .] then the very issue of women's oppression would appear to be obsolete and feminism itself would have no reason to exist' (de Lauretis 1993: 83). According to this view, feminism is pulled in two opposing directions: in order to be effective as an emancipatory and political movement designed to increase women's access to equality in a male-dominated culture, it is said to rely on an essentialist definition of woman.⁸ On the other hand, feminist theory cannot deny the importance of anti-foundationalist discourses that dismiss and decenter the concept of the autonomous subject. In this way, at the moment when 'postmodernism is forging its identity through articulating the exhaustion of the existential belief in self-presence and self-fulfillment and through the dispersal of the universal subject of liberalism', feminism is ostensibly engaged in assembling its cultural identity in what appears to be the opposite direction (Waugh 1989: 6). The tension between 'the critical negativity of [feminism's] theory' and 'the affirmative positivity of its politics' has been interpreted as a conceptual and epistemological dilemma that forces feminists to choose sides and adopt their respective positions (de Lauretis 1993: 88). According to this logic, the notion of the postmodern 'subject in process' cannot be embraced whole-heartedly by feminism as it implies the loss of political agency and action. As Linda Nicholson asks, 'does not the adoption of postmodernism really entail the destruction of feminism, since does not feminism itself depend on a relatively unified notion of the social subject "woman", a notion postmodernism would attack?' (Nicholson 1990: 7).⁹

Postfeminism, broadly defined within the academic context as poststructuralist/postmodern feminism, is the battlefield on which these debates are fought out as it attempts to negotiate between the discursive destabilization of the humanist notion of *a*

feminist self and the historic mobilization of a politically engaged feminist *we*. Critics deplore that postfeminism is ‘hampered by the need to meet the dual demands of theoretical consistency within the terms of poststructuralism and the wider feminist project’ (Kastelein 1994: 27). As I intend to show, the explosive combination of feminism and postmodernism does not have to be conceptualized as a problem as it relies on a fallible dualistic view of an apolitical postmodernism and an essentialist feminism. In my view, ‘the mission of feminism within the postmodern’ is not as McLennan argues ‘to politicize it, conceding that postmodernism can in turn assist feminism in the process of de-essentializing it’ (quoted in Brooks 1997: 37). Rather, one has to heighten the complexity and intricacies of both terms in order not to rule out the possibilities of a political postmodernism and an anti-essentialist feminism. This implies abandoning a model of a transcendent and autonomous political agency and comprehending that ‘there is no Kantian “view from nowhere”, no conceptual space not already implicated in that which it seeks to contest’ (Waugh 1992: 5). As I will discuss, postfeminism intersects with both postmodern and feminist discourses and it locates the notions of agency and resistance within hegemonic culture. The postfeminist terrain modifies the epistemological limits that would restrict feminism to an essentialist politics while confining postmodernism to an apolitical and nihilistic deconstruction. Consequently, postfeminism situates itself in an ambivalent and politically ambidextrous space, constructing its criticism without recourse to a philosophical realm of transcendence, autonomy and rationality. Instead, postfeminist critique is complicitous and compromised, building its theory and practice on the political potentialities of postmodernism and the anti-essentialist and multiculturalist dimensions of feminism.

While I do not deny the vital importance of these 'Other' discourses for the development of the postfeminist project, I am concerned that the absorption of the term into these theoretical debates will focus the critical attention on the postmodern/(post)feminist coupling, thereby simplifying the contradictory and strained relationship between feminism and postfeminism. As Amelia Jones notes, 'the incorporation of one particular kind of feminism into a broadly conceived [. . .] project of postmodernist cultural critique tends to entail the suppression of other kinds of feminist practices and theories' (Jones 1994: 22). In my view, a definition of postfeminism *as* postmodernist or poststructuralist feminism cannot be maintained, although there are many overlaps. The conflation of postfeminism and academic poststructuralist feminism reduces the critical potential of the feminism/postfeminism coupling and, additionally, it firmly situates the term within theoretical boundaries. By transforming postfeminism into another academic movement, one runs the risk of repressing its important place in the public debate on feminism and the modern woman. Postfeminism can be portrayed *both* as a descriptive popular category *and* an academic theoretical tendency. Even within these situated contexts, it does not aim for coherence but patently and unapologetically wants to have it both ways when it comes up against stumbling blocks.

Ultimately, postfeminism's inherent contradictions cannot be explained by a rhetoric of inclusion, nor by a rhetoric of opposition. As Kalbfleisch concludes, neither rhetorical practice allows for feminist pluralism and, therefore, they should be replaced by an alternative position, the 'rhetoric of anxiety' that would 'foreground the conflict, contradiction and ambiguity both between and within us' (Kalbfleisch 1997: 259).

Kalbfleisch urges her readers to resist any simple opposition between feminism and some

monolithic enemy lurking outside its confines – be it postfeminism, patriarchy or postmodernism – and instead reinscribe and reexperience the relationship between feminism and postfeminism through a rhetoric of anxiety which would ‘allow our differences to function as “forces of change”’ (Kalbfleisch 1997: 259). The simultaneous confidence and uncertainty about what constitutes postfeminism does not have to be interpreted as a ‘problem’ but instead, ‘the condition of ambiguity is understood as a natural consequence of the proliferation of feminisms’ (Siegel 1997a: 53).¹⁰

Thus, one has to take uncertainty on board as ‘the state of the world today’ and replace the logical order of the Enlightenment with contingency and heterogeneity (Ang 1996: 162). The transformative potential of plurality has been embraced by a contemporary postfeminist movement designated *the third wave* that seeks to combine supposedly conflicting elements of popular postfeminism, academic poststructuralist postfeminism and earlier feminist waves. According to the third wave agenda, ‘there is no one right way to be: no role, no model’ (Reed 1997: 124). In fact, ‘contradiction [. . .] marks the desires and strategies of third wave feminists’ who ‘have trouble formulating and perpetuating theories that compartmentalize and divide according to race and gender and all the other signifiers’ (Heywood and Drake 1997: 2; Walker 1995: xxxiii). The third wave subject is always in process, accommodating ambiguity and multiple positionalities, ‘including more than excluding, exploring more than defining, searching more than arriving’ (Walker 1995: xxxiii). Third wave feminism seeks to make room for ‘the differences and conflicts *between* people as well as *within* them’ and ‘to figure out how to use [these] differences dynamically’ (Reed 1997: 124).

The movement is clearly informed by postmodern theorizing as well as a multiculturalist sensibility and it argues for the political possibilities the postmodern present makes available. The third wave welcomes pluralism and contradiction and, defining itself as a post-identity movement, it engages with the anxiety created by a poststructuralist challenge to a unified subjectivity. As Rebecca Walker suggests in an interview entitled 'Feminism Only Seems to Be Fading: It's Changing', 'the next phase in feminism's evolution will entail a politics of ambiguity, not identity' (quoted in Siegel 1997a: 53-54). The third wave refuses a singular liberal-humanist subjectivity and it addresses the subject's experience of having fragmented and conflicting selves that do not constitute a seamless and coherent whole. In this way, 'with no utopic vision of the perfectly egalitarian society or the fully realized individual', third wave feminists 'work with the fragmentation of existing identities and institutions', creating a new subjective space that 'complicates female identity rather than defining it' (Reed 1997: 124).

Simultaneously, the third wave is committed to political action, asserting that 'breaking free of identity politics has not resulted in political apathy' but rather, has provided 'an awareness of the complexity and ambiguity of the world we have inherited' (Senna 1995: 20). In fact, third wave theory and practice consider anti-essentialism and political engagement as indispensably allied.¹¹ The third wave does not dispute the postmodern subject's lack of transcendence but it works within the confines of power/discourse to posit its own anti-essentialist and pluralistic politics. The movement sees itself as 'a political stance and a critical practice', thriving on the contradictions that ensue from engagement with challenges to the monolithic subject of feminism and the unified self of enlightened modernity (Siegel 1997a: 54; 59). Based on the assumptions

that ‘discourse is reality’ and ‘we know we can’t escape it’, the third wavers play with ‘the notion of constructedness, taking whatever we choose from the bits and pieces at our disposal’ (Fenton 2001: 114). There are always ‘multiple discourses to choose from’ and in this way, the individual comes to be seen as ‘a self-made jigsaw of bits and pieces’ (Fenton 2001: 115).

Further to being a theoretically informed movement, the third wave also situates itself within popular culture and understands a critical engagement with the latter as the key to political struggle. As Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake proclaim, ‘it is this edge, where critique and participation meet, that third wave activists must work to further contentious public dialogue’ (Heywood and Drake 1997: 52). The third wave contests a politics of purity that separates political activism from cultural production, ‘ask[ing] us [. . .] to re-imagine the disparate spaces constructed as “inside” and “outside” the academy [. . .] as mutually informing and intersecting spheres of theory and practice’ (Siegel 1997a: 70). Heywood and Drake acknowledge the tension between criticism and consumption and they pointedly reveal that, as ‘pop-culture babies’, they ‘want some pleasure with [their] critical analysis’ (Heywood and Drake 1997: 51). Feminism’s third wave faces the contradiction of ‘an often unconscious knowledge of the ways in which we are compelled and constructed by the very things that undermine us’ (Heywood and Drake 1997: 11). Thus, third wave critique positions itself as part of the hegemonic realm and admits that it is always implicated in what it seeks to contest and transgress.

While the third wave subject is formed within a relentlessly consumer-orientated culture, it also informed by the second wave’s critique of consumption. The very invocation of ‘third wave feminism’ and the mobilization of the adjective ‘third’ can be

interpreted as an act of strategic defiance against scripts that assume that the gains forged by the second wave have so completely invaded all tiers of social existence that feminism itself has become obsolete. As Deborah L. Siegel notes, one should think of the third wave as ‘overlapping both temporally and spatially with the waves that preceded it’ (Siegel 1997a: 60).¹² The notion of a third wave becomes a stance of resistance to popular pronouncements of a moratorium on feminism and feminists, ‘a sound bite to counter the now infamous refrain “I’m not a feminist, but”’ (Siegel 1997a: 52).¹³ This insistence on a continuation of the feminist movement signals a rejection of beliefs perpetuated in the mass media that consider the women’s movement no longer relevant. As the third wavers Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake make explicit, ‘to us the second and third waves of feminism are neither incompatible nor opposed’ (Heywood and Drake 1997: 3). Mimicking the nomenclature of its predecessors, third wave feminism acknowledges that it stands on the shoulders of other, earlier, feminist movements. Yet, at the same time, its agenda does not mirror the preceding waves’ theories straightforwardly and unquestioningly. Rather, it ‘makes things “messier” by embracing second wave critique as a central definitional thread while emphasizing ways that ‘desires and pleasures subject to critique can be used to rethink and enliven activist work’ (Heywood and Drake 1997: 7). The third wave wants to bridge the gap between theory and practice and be simultaneously an academic discourse and a popular movement, firmly located within hegemonic culture while also providing a challenging theoretical perspective and a coalition politics that takes account of the multiple subject positions of its members. In this way, the twin imperatives of continuity and change are neatly entwined, making the third wave a seemingly deserving child of 1970s feminism.

Thus, the third wave seems to combine the theoretical maturity of academic poststructuralism, a dedication to a feminist agenda with an awareness of the importance of consumption. Kalbfleisch's desire for a 'rhetoric of anxiety' seems to have been fulfilled with the advent of the third wave but this seemingly all-inclusive stance has been achieved at a price, a simplistic construction and definition of the term 'postfeminism'. In order to achieve a critical distance from and position themselves in antithesis to the 'post' movement, the third wave relies on a falsely dualistic and polarized view that opposes the supposedly reductive views of postfeminism to the pluralistic agenda of the third wave. Heywood and Drake emphasize that, within the context of the third wave, "postfeminist" characterizes a group of young, conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave' (Heywood 1997: 1).¹⁴ According to this binary logic, postfeminism is conceptualized in opposition to second and third wave feminisms as a conservative/patriarchal ploy to undermine the women's movement. Its plurality is denied and neutralized through a rhetoric of antagonism that polarizes postfeminism and the third wave. Even though its terminology and epistemology are based on an embrace of ambiguity, the third wave ultimately eradicates the conceptual anxiety and multiplicity within (post)feminism. Self-defined as a movement that is at ease with contradiction and that depends on a coalition-politics activism, the third wave still feels the need to differentiate and separate itself from postfeminism and its ambivalent, even anti-feminist and conservative connotations. It characterizes itself as the lawful heir, the 'good daughters' of the second wave, while postfeminism is interpreted as diametrically opposed to earlier feminist movements.

Ultimately, I contend that the term 'postfeminism' cannot be defined by relating it to a number of oppositional stances that reduce and distort the 'post' movement's radical potential and ambiguity. In the following section, I will situate and locate postfeminism contextually in order to avoid the pitfalls of reductive strategies of definition. Rather than trying to establish and fix a definitive articulation of postfeminism, this study acknowledges the ongoing struggle over its meaning. I agree with Ien Ang that 'critical research' cannot be built around a 'fixed, universal yardstick' and should not 'allow itself to rest easily on pre-existent epistemological foundations' (Ang 1996: 37). Consequently, I reject an immutable and absolutist understanding of the postfeminist movement and, instead, I propose a contextualized analysis that constructs contingent or positioned truths. I adopt an open and contextual definition that has to be reassessed continuously with regard to postfeminism's interdiscursive surroundings. At the same time, I insist that a contextual and discourse-specific reading of postfeminism cannot dissolve into a liberal pluralist view that sees its varying conceptions coexisting in a happy plurality of meaning. Contrastingly, in my analysis, postfeminist manifestations contradict and compete with each other, constituting a terrain of exchange and competition, an ongoing battle of signification.

2. The Landscape of Postfeminism: Feminism's Intersection with Postmodernism and Popular Culture

2.1 Situating the context

“Post-feminism” happened without warning. It seemed to arrive from nowhere’, Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon and Ingrid Richter assert in their treatise The Illusions of ‘Post-Feminism’ (1995) and in this way, they emphasize the highly elusive nature of the postfeminist phenomenon (Coppock 1995: 3). In fact, postfeminism has ‘rarely been defined’ and remains ‘a product of assumption’, invested with ‘a different meaning depending on the site of its invocation’ (Coppock 1995: 3; 4; Siegel 1997a: 52). Rather than trying to offer a precise and specific definition of postfeminism, this section will locate the term contextually in order to circumscribe and delimit a postfeminist landscape. Following Sara Mills, ‘the essence of post-feminist theory’ is to be found in an ‘awareness of the complexity and context-specific nature of the meaning of words within texts’ (Mills 1998: 10; 1). Even though Mills’ focus on the postfeminist debate stems from a linguistic point of view, her conviction that ‘a new form of feminist text analysis’ has to be ‘able to see that there are, within the parameters of the textual and discursive constraints, multiple interpretations of terms and discourses as a whole’, can fruitfully be employed for the purpose of this study (Mills 1998: 1; 5). In this way,

a post-feminist text analysis is one which recognizes that the context in which texts are produced and interpreted has been profoundly changed by the impact of

feminism and any form of analysis developed must be aware of the context of words rather than analyzing words out of context. (Mills 1998: 5)

Applying Mills' analytical method, the term 'postfeminist' only makes sense and acquires a meaning when it is situated and interpreted contextually. In the following, the postfeminist context will be discussed as a complex and often contradictory field of convergence of feminist practice and theory with a number of intellectual and cultural debates emerging from both academia and popular culture. Postfeminism is located in the intersection of feminism with different dimensions of cultural theory, broadly summarized under the headings of postmodernism and the media. While I am aware that postfeminism's definitional plurality may not be fully encompassed and exhausted by this positioning, the prevalence given to these critical surroundings is based on a widely shared belief that "postfeminism" has emerged both as a descriptive popular category and as a tentative theoretical movement loosely associated with the postmodern and poststructuralist challenge to "identity politics" (Walters 1991: 105). Some critics argue that there are two distinct and easily distinguishable strands of postfeminist discourse, the popular, mainstream backlash one and the one associated with academic poststructuralism and postmodernism. As Deborah L. Siegel and Ann R. Cacoullos note, 'when invoked by the popular press, "postfeminism" smugly refers to an era in which feminist movement is no longer necessary' whereas in the context of academic feminist writing, 'it refers to the challenging ways poststructuralist, postmodernist and multiculturalist modes of analysis have informed feminist theory and practice' (Siegel 1997a: 53; Cacoullos 2001: 80). Postfeminism is condensed and defined as either popular

feminism or postmodern/poststructuralist feminism respectively and it is suggested that these two postfeminist contexts should be kept apart and considered separately.

Accordingly, Ann Brooks points out in her theoretical exploration Postfeminisms (1997) that 'popular "post-feminism's" conceptual repertoire provides a useful point of distinction from the way postfeminism is framed within the feminist academic community' and she centers her discussion on the 'conceptual equivalence in postmodern feminism and postfeminism' (Brooks 1997: 4; 6). Amelia Jones, on the other hand, focuses on the widespread popular conception of postfeminism as a result of the term's appropriation by the media, noting that 'the popular deployment of [. . .] postfeminism [. . .] involves invidiously redefining femininity, feminism and even masculinity' (Jones 1994: 21).

While this study will be concerned at a later stage with the complexities and intricacies of postmodern feminism and popular feminism, I want to stress at this point that the distinction and opposition between theoretical/postmodern and popular varieties of postfeminism cannot be upheld as there are significant points of overlap. I argue against an oversimplifying establishment of two separate postfeminist versions and locations (academia and the media) and I want to distance myself from such an antithetical and polarized positioning. This dualistic conception relies on the assumption that postmodern postfeminism is non-hegemonic and inclusive whereas media postfeminism represents a hegemonic negotiation of second-wave ideals. In Brooks' theoretical account of postfeminism as postmodern/poststructuralist feminism, the 'post' movement is theorized as 'a position [that] resists closure of definition', a 'non-hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and post-colonial

feminisms' (Brooks 1997: 5; 4). Conversely, Fernando de Toro and Bonnie Dow define postfeminism as 'the feminism which [. . .] work[s] with "patriarchal" theory', absorbing and appropriating feminist rhetoric and events and misrepresenting them in media discourse for public consumption (de Toro 1999: 16; Dow 1996: xvi).

Thus, it is suggested that feminism's interaction with popular culture has to be distinguished from and even opposed to the differently inflected alliance of feminist theory with postmodernism/academia.¹ The media postfeminist stance is interpreted as an abatement and depoliticization of the feminist movement, implying that women have now achieved sufficient independence to dispense with feminism. Feminism's entry into the popular and the ensuing postfeminist position are represented as damaging attempts to manage and contain the revolutionary potential of the feminist enterprise. In this process of co-option, feminism has supposedly been made safe while its more attractive elements and terminology of liberation and emancipation have been preserved and accommodated. Contrastingly, postmodern postfeminism acts as a movement of feminist pluralization whereby it makes room in its own ranks for a more diverse 'we'. It engages with the postmodern notion of the dispersed unstable subject and it opens up the feminist realm for the articulation of 'other' voices. From this perspective, postfeminism 'is fundamentally about, not a depoliticisation of feminism, but a political shift in feminism's conceptual and theoretical agenda [. . .] from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference' (Brooks 1997: 4).

In the following, I resist dichotomous and simplistic definitions of popular postfeminism as a retrograde backlash and postmodern postfeminism as a pluralistic, non-hegemonic feminism and I insist that the postfeminist landscape is made up of

conflicting elements that inform one another. Rather than polarizing specific types of postfeminism, I retain the idea of a range of postfeminist positions in order to emphasize and underline postfeminism's multiplicity. I contend that postfeminism constantly negotiates between a number of discourses and it is assigned to a critical position within hegemony, a critique from the inside. Moreover, I maintain that postfeminism occupies a contradictory frontier location that cannot be arrogated into postmodern and media frameworks. While there are important conceptual parallels between postfeminism and postmodern/popular feminisms, the 'post' term cannot be interpreted reductively as a synonym of either of these movements or theories. These definitional attempts undermine and constrict the multidimensionality of the postfeminist phenomenon and furthermore, they rely on an erroneous dichotomy that opposes academia to popular media. I argue against the separation of an academic 'outside' and the popular realm of representation and I assert that postfeminism's heterogeneous stance incorporates and blends elements taken from both postmodern academic and popular contexts. In this way, I identify the theoretical postmodern debate and the popular cultural realm as two privileged (but, by no means, sole and mutually exclusive) sites of occurrence of postfeminism and I examine how feminist roots are appropriated and redefined within these surroundings.

In fact, appropriation or 'the play of inversions' can be discussed as 'a constant feature of post-feminism' and a 'postfeminist survival strategy' whereby 'post-feminism draws a premise from feminism [. . .] and then provides the post-feminist twist or punch line' (Kastelein 1994: 138, 140; Stacey 1987: 13). In this process of postfeminist resignification, meaning is dislocated, destabilized and finally altered in an attempt to integrate feminist ideas and rhetoric into other discourses and contexts. The reworking of

feminism is facilitated by the fact that, like its 'post' offspring, feminism is textually mediated and context-specific. Mills' contextual strategy also holds true for feminism as 'the ways in which we position ourselves in relation to feminism and the identity "feminist" will depend on the knowledge we have about feminism' (Hollows 2000: 201).

Feminism has to be recognized as part of the realm of representation, both drawing on and being drawn upon by other discursive formations. Its multifaceted plurality has been undermined and misrepresented by the critical settings in which the term has been evoked and used. Its positioning in relation to other discourses (including postfeminism, postmodernism and the media) has often been damaging as it has been defined simplistically within these boundaries as a unanimous and monolithic whole. In this way, any evocation of the term 'feminist' is never impartial or neutral and any definition of postfeminism is intrinsically linked to the view of feminism that one adopts. Postmodern deconstructive theory and the media are both engaged in a rewriting of feminism and consequently, the ensuing interpretations of postfeminism draw upon and reflect a limited and strategic conceptualization of the feminist movement. As Lynne Alice notes, 'what is interesting in this popular criticism and the rather differently located academic response is the implication that "postfeminism" in both sites operates as an imperative towards defining and containing feminist thinking' (Alice 1995: 7). The intersection of media and academic/postmodern manifestations of the postfeminist phenomenon seems to be located in one particular spot as both postfeminist locations share a revisionist history of feminism. Postmodern and popular postfeminist contexts coincide and 'albeit with different intentions, contribute to the dissolution of feminism as theory and practice' (Walters 1991: 105).

In particular, postfeminism is said to effect a de-collectivization of the feminist movement as it translates feminist social goals and political ideas into a matter of individual choice or lifestyle. This personalized outlook is at the basis of the postfeminist problematic as it allows for a contradictory and pluralistic postfeminist spectrum that is not bound by a single and unified set of ideas, politics and practice. The emphasis on the postfeminist individual offers competing notions of contemporary womanhood and creates areas of contention between and within feminism, postfeminism, postmodernism and popular culture. Feminist critics take a unanimously negative view of postfeminism's individualistic stance, arguing that 'the political is personal' as 'the distinction between feminist politics and feminist identity is in danger of completely disappearing' (Dow 1996: 210; 209). This ironic reversal of the well-known feminist adage illustrates postfeminism's individualistic agenda and it problematizes notions of a collective feminist identity or sisterhood.² In this postfeminist age, 'feminist politics become feminist identity' as feminism's political theory and practice are transformed into a set of personal attitudes and any emphasis on organized intervention is regarded as misguided (Dow 1996: 209). The implicit assumption is that feminism has become anachronistic and, therefore, it should be rejected in its state of collectivity. The reasons for this dismissal are highly varied, ranging from a theoretical questioning of the concepts of unity and coherence, to the argument voiced in popular media that equality has been achieved and that, hence, women can relax in their organized struggle and concentrate on the real work ahead – individual goals.

The popular press provides the most explicit portrayal of the postfeminist utopia in which women can do whatever they please, provided they have sufficient will and

enthusiasm. According to this optimistic formulation, women *choose* the life they want and they inhabit a world centered in, what Elspeth Probyn refers to as, *choiceoisie*, that envisions all major life decisions as individual options rather than culturally determined or directed necessities (Probyth 1990). This postfeminist version of the American dream (with its celebration of individualism) is seen to be entirely available to those who work hard enough and, therefore, it is the justified and well-deserved recompense for individual efforts rather than the political outcome of communal activism. 'Being empowered' is translated as being synonymous with 'making the most of oneself' and 'pleasing oneself' and, in this way, the second wave's challenging collective program of equal opportunity is transformed into atomized acts and matters of personal choice. As Susan J. Douglas notes, 'women's liberation metamorphosed into female narcissism unchained as political concepts and goals like liberation and equality were collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires' (Douglas 1995: 246). This narcissism as liberation equates women's emancipation with their ability to do whatever they want, whenever they want, no matter what the expense. This individualist postfeminist strain propagates the comforting message that women's collective victimization has ended and/or is exaggerated by feminist orthodoxy whose emphasis on women's subordinated status is viewed as disempowering and even oppressive. Instead, women are presented as having freedom of choice actively to pursue their ambitions and take up the opportunities that a postfeminist choiceoisie puts at their disposal. Popular postfeminism eschews an acknowledgment of women's collective problems and maintains that their choices are free from constraints and unobstructed by a patriarchal order.

Tellingly, in the best-selling Fire With Fire: The New Female Power And How It Will Change the 21st Century (1993), Naomi Wolf urges her postfeminist reader 'to claim her individual voice rather than merging her voice in a collective identity', reminding her that 'making social change does not contradict the principle that girls just want to have fun' (Wolf 1993: 136; 138). Wolf adopts a feminist surface terminology but discards and rejects the political agenda and the more radical aspects of the second wave centered in sexual politics and a profound awareness of power differences between the sexes at all levels and in all arenas. Feminist commentators deplore that this personalized stance results in a postfeminist movement that can 'embrace everyone, since it has no overt political tenets' (hooks 1994: 98). This feminism turns the movement away from politics back to a version of individual self-help, revealing 'the true limitations of identity politics' that do not involve a critique of power imbalance (Senna 1995: 16). The resort to individualism produces outstanding models of personal accomplishment but it cannot engender a program for change in the position of women as a group.³

Critics argue that the postfeminist notion of 'narcissism as liberation is liberation repackaged, deferred and denied' as the most basic and revolutionary principles of feminism are distorted and undermined (Douglas 1995: 265). As Nancy F. Cott notes, as much as feminism asserts the female individual, 'pure individualism negates feminism because it removes the basis for women's collective self-understanding or action' (Cott 1987: 6). The threatening outcome of this popular postfeminist emphasis on personal choice is an excessively individualist feminism that obliterates the political. The danger lies not in postfeminism's celebration of the personal struggles and triumphs of women but rather, in mistaking these often quite satisfying images 'for something more than the

selective, partial images that they are' (Dow 1996: 214). In favoring individual effort rather than group struggle, a token is held up 'not as exception but as proof that egalitarianism (the fully functioning American Dream) was present all along' (Helford 2000: 292).⁴ This rhetoric of tokenism redefines oppression and structural disadvantage as personal suffering while reframing success as an individual accomplishment, faith and determination. The ideology of individualism takes the feminist standpoint that 'women's freedoms and opportunities should be no less than men's', but offers 'no way to achieve the goal except acting as though it had already been obtained' (Cott 1987: 281). The implication is that choiceoisie has supposedly always been there, it has always been in reach for the right woman who knows how to work *within* the system for personal improvement. In this way, the postfeminist *she* has always been free from structural and economic barriers and she only has herself to blame for failure to thrive.

According to this viewpoint, postfeminism is driven by representational concerns for a more attractive and easily sellable image and it is no longer on the defensive as its individualistic credo domesticates feminism's critical stance. Postfeminism is willing to sacrifice political objectives and, therefore, it offers little hope of making a material difference in the lives of all women. While focusing on the strong individual's will, the tokenism inherent in postfeminism displaces the importance of the group nature of the adversity as it obscures the collective nature of oppression and the need for organized action to remedy social injustice. Moreover, postfeminist individualism and choiceoisie can be identified as privileged, distinctly middle-class perspectives, appealing to 'young women professionals imbued with confidence, an ethic of self-reliance and the headstart of a good education' (Kaminer 1995: 23). However, this brand of feminism does not

ensure that all women should receive ample opportunities and choices and, in so doing, it guarantees that a power and privilege imbalance persists to exist among them.

Postfeminism's individualist discourse is 'a luxury the majority of women can't afford' and the postfeminist woman, 'if there is one, is rich' and 'she can afford to consume clichés' (Lee 1988: 172).

Ultimately, it is argued that 'postfeminism takes the sting out of feminism', 'confusing lifestyle, attitudinal feminism with the hard political and intellectual work that feminists have done and continue to do' (Macdonald 1995: 100; Dow 1996: 214). Abandoning the structural analysis of patriarchal power, it masks the larger forces that continue to oppress many women's lives and reinscribes their marginality by undercutting the possible strategic weight of feminist collectivities for change. Assuming rather than questioning equal opportunity for women, postfeminist individualism depoliticizes feminism and undermines the collective nature of women's liberation while directing them to personal goals. The notion of a postfeminist choiceoisie is 'at base, a rhetorical fiction' under whose guise the term feminism, as well as the patriarchy it tries to combat, become anachronistic, and are 'indeed scorned nowadays as reductive' (Dow 1996: 194; Thompson 1997: 360). However, this scorn for a perceived anachronism may enable the patriarchal order to operate all the more smoothly within postfeminist discourse. Thus, Helford concludes that 'postfeminism leaves patriarchy in place, denouncing the idea that women are oppressed as a group and that the "personal is political"' in an attempt to avoid all forms of direct struggle against male domination' (Helford 2000: 293).

While I do not deny that patriarchal ideology is a component of the postfeminist landscape, I object to the critical suggestion that postfeminism is an integral part and creation of patriarchy. In my analysis of postfeminist texts, I will problematize the notion of an apolitical and reactionary tokenism that underlies the above formulations of postfeminism. I assert that postfeminism cannot be defined simplistically as a patriarchal scheme that offers gratification on the micro-societal level while perpetuating wider social inequalities. The postfeminist token cannot be classified as a secret agent of patriarchy as she is equally informed by feminist principles and she endeavors to combine these previously antagonistic positions. Instead of conceiving postfeminism merely in terms of an exclusionist and exclusive viewpoint, I contend that its individualism highlights the plurality and contradictions of contemporary female experience. In effect, what postfeminism does is making the theoretical and political agenda of the second wave palatable for a postmodern age that has discredited and discarded the *grands narratives* and replaced them with the *petits récits* of sectional interest. The ideas and beliefs conglomerated under the heading of postfeminism are characterized by an anti-universalist stance that betrays an awareness of the false unity of master narratives and the limitations of identity politics. Postfeminism can be situated within a postmodern framework that takes into account 'the instability of contemporary times, in which the viability of "real" stable meanings is called into question, all judgments are relativized, and notions of transcendent truth are dismissed' (Dow 1996: 171). The deconstructive tendency inherent in postfeminism takes the appearance of individualism in popular postfeminism and of anti-essentialism in academic versions of the same phenomenon. In this way, third wave feminism heralds the 'return to the

personal' whereas Wolf's power feminism and Girl Power embrace a 'theory of self-worth' and a vision of self-help (Siegel 1997a: 51; hooks 1996: 63). In a similar manner, backlash feminism reduces feminist struggles and gains to the issue of personal choices while poststructuralist feminism rejects the category of 'woman' altogether by challenging and deconstructing the humanist subject who is no longer defined as a fixed entity, a manifestation of essence, but as a subject in process, never unitary nor complete.

Viewed as a whole, the different facets of postfeminism question the possibility for a singular female/feminist identity, a common ground from which to construct a collective politics and criticism. Postfeminism's anti-essentialist theory and individualist practice declare 'women' to be an indeterminate and open category that cannot be bounded by oppressive generalizations. Popular postfeminism's return to the "I" and academic postfeminism's deconstruction of the universal subject undermine the *a priori* assumption that there is a continuous field of experience shared by all women. As Geraldine Harris points out, 'Woman' can be treated as a 'questionable category (no graven image) that can never be fully described or defined' (Harris 1999: 183). It cannot be discussed as an immutable fact but, instead, it has to be understood as an inescapably indeterminate, multiple and ever-shifting classification.⁵ Postfeminism foregrounds the differences between women and offers a continuing and paradoxical enquiry into what it means to 'be a woman' in both theory and practice. It does not aim for a totalizing definition of 'woman' but, rather, submits the term to a double movement of invocation and critique in order to recreate it as a permanent site of contest.

Postfeminism can be discussed in relation to deconstructive theories that undermine the concept of an essential female identity from two critical directions. In fact,

the postmodern deconstruction of the subject category is reinforced by anti-essentialist feminists for whom 'woman' as a monolithic term is unable to address the complexity of gender in relation to other aspects of identity, including race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and age. Accordingly, Deborah L. Siegel identifies 'two very different modes of deconstructive feminist theorizing', 'two different taxonomies [. . .] oversimplified as "multiculturalist" (to signify critiques of the representative subject on the grounds of material exclusions) and "postmodernist" (to signify the destabilization of a humanist conception of self)' (Siegel 1997a: 60). While the complexities of a postmodern feminism will be addressed shortly, the question of power within feminism is of equal importance and becomes increasingly crucial as feminism is challenged from the inside by previously unheard voices of marginalized, colonized and indigenous women who object to feminist theories that fail to address their needs. As a social and political movement that claims to embrace women's interests beneath the umbrella term of 'sisterhood', feminism is criticized for developing a methodology that uses as its paradigm white, heterosexual and middle-class female experience. Imelda Whelehan recognizes a dominant feminist stream of 'white, heterosexual and bourgeois thought' that embodies the possible meanings and definitions ascribed to feminism, accompanied by a marked reluctance on the part of such 'feminists to address the degrees of social acceptance and privilege that they' enjoy 'at the expense of others' (Whelehan 1995: 107; 108).⁶ This "'mainstream" feminist analysis of female oppression' is denounced as 'flawed and narrow in its focus' as it does not take into account that 'a patriarchal ideology also supports a racist and heterosexist one' (Whelehan 1995: 110; 120). Black and lesbian feminists actively counter and reject these methodological boundaries of

feminist discourse, refusing to be silenced by a “hegemonic” feminism with its roots clearly located in the Anglo-American influences so powerful in the conceptualization of second wave feminism’ (Brooks 1997: 4). Their critique of the racist, ethnocentric and heterosexist assumptions of a largely white, middle-class and heterosexual feminism is seen to result in a breakdown of feminist consensus, a collapse from the inside, and its replacement by a pluralistic postfeminist stance.

In this way, historically speaking, the postfeminist movement can be interpreted as a product of the interventions of women of color and lesbian theorists into the feminist debate as it takes into account the demands of marginalized and colonized cultures for a non-ethnocentric and non-heterosexist feminism. Postfeminism addresses the notion of power within feminism and insists that one has to ‘rethink the feminist project in ways that do not oversimplify either the nature of power in general, or questions of power relations among women and among feminists’ (Elam 1997: 67; 58). Claims of victimization are problematized as concepts such as ‘oppression’, ‘patriarchy’, ‘identity’ and ‘difference’ as used by white middle-class feminists are challenged by black and lesbian feminists, fighting for visibility within mainstream feminism. Their demands for a diversification of the feminist movement are epitomized and illustrated by Michelene Wandor’s insistence that ‘the political – and personal – struggle now needs a larger, more diverse “we”, who will combine in resistance to all the overlapping oppressions’ (quoted in Thornham 2001: 42). In place of a reductive identity politics of feminist solidarity against male oppressors, this heterogeneous and pluralistic postfeminist stance puts forward the idea of multiple oppressed subjectivities rather than privileging any one site of oppression.

In fact, one cannot pose a clear distinction between the pressures from inside and outside feminism as postmodernism/poststructuralism are embraced by non-mainstream feminists as adequate frames to theorize the multivalent, contradictory and conflicting voices and demands of contemporary women.⁷ These marginalized feminist voices reinforce the postmodern belief that no singular explanation for relations of power will suffice and that no monolithic interpretation or alteration of praxis will in itself effect social change. As Linda Nicholson points out, postmodernism ‘provides a basis for avoiding the tendency to construct theory that generalizes from the experiences of Western, white, middle-class women’ and it ‘offers feminism some useful ideas about method, particularly a wariness toward generalizations which transcend the boundaries of culture and region’ (Nicholson 1990: 5). Postmodern theory explores and undermines the foundations that secure the idea of a single womanhood and, in so doing, it points to who is excluded. Feminist thought can be brought into a potentially fruitful alliance with postmodernism as the prospect of a postmodern feminism ‘insists that we listen to the voices of those who dispute the terms of representation and who say “this is not us”’ (McRobbie 1994: 7). Postmodern feminism allows for women’s multiple identities and it challenges a unified conception of the feminist movement. Following the collapse of a totalizing analysis of gendered power structures, the center of feminist analysis does not hold and falls apart as the myth of unity is dissolved and replaced by partiality and imperfection.

According to Judith Butler, what is needed is feminist self-criticism which bears in mind that ‘the effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of

terms' (Butler 1990a: 13). Butler takes into account feminism's own potentially dominating and oppressive tendencies and she attacks feminist analyses that adopt monolithic notions of male power and control of women. In her view, 'feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism' (Butler 1990a: 13). Feminism has to occupy a 'similar "critical" position in regard to earlier feminist frameworks at the same time as critically engaging with patriarchal and imperialist discourses' (Brooks 1997: 2). Its battle cannot purely be fought against an easily definable and ubiquitous patriarchy but should encompass its own hegemonic assumptions and universalizing positions.⁸ Feminism has to question the processes of power and domination between and within the two sexes, including the dualistic notions of a patriarchal/male oppressor and a feminist/female oppressed. Butler notes that the feminist movement has strategically upheld the claim of a universal patriarchy in order to produce an oppositional and unified feminist identity and misrepresent the complex network of power connections. Thus, 'the urgency of feminism to establish a universal status for patriarchy' is closely related to the desire 'to strengthen the appearance of feminism's own claims to be representative' and, indeed, it has also 'occasionally motivated the shortcut to a categorial or fictive universality of the structure of domination, held to produce women's common subjugated experience' (Butler 1990a: 3-4).

In this way, the feminist movement has to acknowledge the limits of binary thinking and dispute the universality and homogeneity of both patriarchy and feminism alike. It has to resist and discard the politically effective, stabilizing and unifying fictions

of a common oppressor and oppressed and, in so doing, cast doubt on its own foundational discourses. Feminism must remain skeptical about its own achievements and adopt an interrogative, evaluative mode whereby it accepts the inadequacy of one feminist interpretation to account for the complex relations of dominance and gender in the modern world. Feminist criticism has to display an awareness of the necessity to let 'other' women speak and, therefore, it has to problematize its own authoritative position and political discourse whereby it claims to represent the silent majority of women. In effect, feminism has to relinquish the notion of a politically correct feminist identity that does not allow for difference among women/feminists and seeks to construct 'other' feminine identities as somehow "invalid" (Brunsdon 1991: 379). As Ian Ang states, 'feminism has generally postulated an ideal of the feminist subject, fully committed to the cause of social change and "women's liberation"' (Ang 1996: 114). However, as Angela McRobbie notes, feminism cannot presume to possess the universal truth about women as 'to make such a claim is to uncritically overload the potential of the women's movement and to underestimate the resources and capacities of "ordinary women" [. . .] to participate in their own struggles as women but quite autonomously' (McRobbie 1982: 52). The feminist movement has to be an open site that embraces ambiguity and multiplicity and acknowledges partiality and imperfection as vital components of women's lives. This implies abandoning the idea of an infallible and separate feminist self and it also means that the notion of a generally shared conception of 'women', the corollary to such a framework, has to be displaced.⁹

Judith Butler provides a useful theoretical model to conceptualize the fragmentations within feminism as she proposes a feminist movement that no longer

relies on the construction of the category of women as a coherent and stable subject. Her views expand and theorize the historically specific and focused critical efforts of marginalized feminist strands as she calls for a genealogy that might 'free feminist theory from the necessity of having to construct a single or abiding ground' (Butler 1990a: 5). She disputes the foundationalist assumption that feminist politics must be organized around the notion of an essential and unified subjectivity. For Butler, the feminist 'we' is a 'phantasmatic construction' that denies 'internal complexity and indeterminacy' and 'constitutes itself only through the exclusion of some part of the constituency that it simultaneously seeks to represent' (Butler 1990a: 142). She wants to redefine feminism without having recourse to the compulsory expectation that feminist actions must be instituted from some stable, unified, and agreed upon identity and she employs the term 'postfeminist' to refer to 'this juncture of cultural politics' that demands a reflection 'from within a feminist perspective on the injunction to construct a subject for feminism' (Butler 1990a: 15; 5). Postfeminism attempts to address diverse and contradictory female experiences and bridge the 'paradoxical opposition to feminism from "women" whom feminism claims to represent' (Butler 1990a: 4). The postfeminist movement rejects essentialist and monolithic concepts of 'woman' and espouses the postmodern deconstruction of the unified subject along with the notions of difference and plurality.

At the same time as acknowledging the importance of the multiculturalist and anti-essentialist views underlying Butler's theoretical rethinking of the ontological constructions of identity, I also want to problematize the notion of a feminist hegemony upon which such critical efforts rest. In these accounts, feminism is constructed as a monolithic, homogeneous, dogmatic and sometimes tyrannical discourse, one of the

flawed metanarratives of modernity, characterized by a foundationalist and racist epistemology. Postfeminism on the other hand is seen to denote feminism's 'maturity into a confident body of theory and politics, representing pluralism and difference and reflecting on its position in relation to other philosophical and political movements similarly demanding change' (Brooks 1997: 1). The 'post' movement is alienated from its diverse feminist roots and brought into contact with cultural and theoretical developments 'outside' feminism that challenge the basis and establishment of a feminist epistemology. Postfeminism is likened to postmodernism/poststructuralism and it is distinguished from a hegemonic feminism limited by its own political agenda and modernist inclinations. Described as a dynamic and anti-foundationalist movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks, postfeminism moves beyond the feminist microcosm and critically reflects upon earlier feminist concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other movements.

The paradigm shift from feminism to postfeminism is conceptualized as an opening up of the feminist realm, what Michèle Barrett calls feminism's *turn to culture* or its intersection with different dimensions of cultural theory (Barrett 1990). As Barrett suggests, 'there has been an increasing tendency in feminism to think about politics through the medium of cultural debate' and this move towards a cultural arena 'has come at a time when there is quite rightly much less confidence than there once was in the standing and methodology of the traditional critical disciplines' (Barrett 1990: 22; 23). Barrett argues that this turn to culture has created a more critical and reflexive feminism whose initial 'consensus and confidence around issues of "patriarchy", distinctions along

sex/gender lines, as well as issues of “subject” positioning and sexuality’ are undermined by the emphasis on deconstruction and difference (Brooks 1997: 38).

While I welcome Barrett’s convergence of culture and politics for a better understanding of feminism and while I agree with her that ‘cultural politics are crucial to feminism’, I object to the suggestion that *the* feminist stance pre-dating the so-called shift towards culture is consensual, naively unaware of its own positioning and, therefore, in need of being replaced by postfeminism (Barrett 1990: 23). I maintain that feminism cannot be conceptualized reductively as a coherent monolith or a unified collectivity, diametrically opposed to a knowing postfeminist stance. The dualistic view of a hegemonic feminism and a pluralistic postfeminism is too clear-cut and undermines the movements’ interactions and overlap. Moreover, feminism is denied an active and dynamic role in the discursive exchange as it is immobilized in a static position that refuses to enter into a dialogue with other discourses. In the following chapters, I will address the intersections of feminism with postmodernism and the media and I will discuss the complexities of these convergences and the entailing views and constructions of postfeminism.

2.2 Postfeminist Locations: Feminism and Postmodernism

One of the most pressing current concerns for academic feminism is the question of what to do with 'post' discourses.

Keith Green and Jill LeBihan, *Critical Theory & Practice: A Coursebook* (1996)

'The most important question [. . .] is whether [. . .] feminism is co-opted by being harnessed to other discourses which neutralize its radical potential', Amelia Jones notes, identifying in this way feminism's precarious nature, its tendency to be invaded and absorbed by the critical surroundings in which the term is evoked (Jones 1990: 7). In fact, the ideas of co-option and appropriation have surfaced in the course of this study and they describe the down-side of feminism's entry into dialogue with other contexts and movements. Feminism's conjunction with both postmodern theory and the media has hardly ever been interpreted as a mutually beneficial exchange of ideas, values and theories and, instead, it is conceptualized as a takeover or subsumption whereby feminism loses its autonomous status and is incorporated into a popular mainstream or into postmodernism. While feminism's dealings with popular culture will be considered in the next section, in the following I will focus on the theoretical postmodern debate and I will investigate the complex juncture of feminism and postmodernism and the resulting views of postmodern feminism and/or postfeminism. As Ann Brooks declares, 'there is concern among some feminists that the intersection of feminism and postmodernism might result in feminism [. . .] losing its distinctive character as a body of critical theory

and practice' (Brooks 1997: 36).¹ The feminist enterprise is said to be undermined by its trans-contextualized locations as it is in danger of being deprived of its specific theoretical, practical and political agenda. As Mascia-Less deplures, 'feminism los[es] its separate, if illusory, singular identity [. . .] making it both difficult, and often, undesirable to distinguish it from endeavors with close affinities: poststructuralism, cultural studies, critical theory, and postcolonial or subaltern studies' (Mascia-Lees 2000: 3).

Postfeminism is heralded as the end result of these discursive encounters whereby it denotes 'a context in which the feminism of the 1970s is problematized, splintered, and considered suspect, one in which it is no longer easy, fun, empowering, or even possible, to take a feminist position' (Mascia-Lees 2000: 3). The postfeminist stance facilitates a broad-based, pluralistic conception of feminism as it rejects the ideas of a unified feminist monolith and an essential female self. Postfeminism is situated at the point of feminism's intersection with other movements and theories and thus, it works and moves between discourses, converging a diversity of viewpoints, voices and strategies. The postfeminist movement is seen to be 'the result of feminist theory confronting challenges from quite different sources' and, particularly, its pluralistic theoretical outlook 'owes much to the integration of postmodern and poststructuralist thoughts' (Koenen 1999: 132). This section addresses the contentions surrounding the problematic meeting of feminism and postmodernism and explores the theoretical and practical implications of a postmodern feminism. As will be demonstrated, such a conjunctive relationship is fraught with complexities as 'it is clear to anyone engaged in these enterprises that neither feminism nor postmodernism operates as one big happy family' (Singer 1992: 471). There is no unified postmodern theory, or even a coherent set of positions, just as there is

no one feminist outlook or critical perspective. Instead, one is struck by the plurality of postmodern and feminist positions and the diverse theories lumped together under these headings. There is a variety of different links between feminist and postmodern theory, with the proposals of conjunction ranging from a strategic corporate merger, to the suggestion of various postmodern and feminist versions varying in strength, to the downright rejection of a postmodern feminism. These calls for (non-) alliance often draw upon a reductive conceptualization and simplification of the two entities and they propose a facile distinction between feminism's political engagement and postmodernism's theoretical self-absorption. In the following, I resist such dualistic accounts that do not account for the wide range of relationships between feminist and postmodern enterprises and I maintain that there is no shorthand way to characterize the differences between these two multifaceted discourses or movements.

Postfeminism's definitional uncertainty and inherent doubleness epitomize the varied and even conflicting calls for juncture and thus, provide the fitting backdrop or battleground on which the postmodern/feminist disputes are fought out. There is a significant conceptual overlap between postmodern feminism and postfeminism and, in the following, I will explore postfeminism's dependence on and convergence with postmodern and poststructuralist dimensions of cultural theory. Replacing dualism with pluralism and consensus with variety, postfeminism clearly participates in the discourse of postmodernism as it discredits and eschews the ideas of discursive homogeneity and a unified subjectivity. It understands that postmodernism's fracturing of the universal subject pertains to feminism's own identity and it rejects the concept of the essential and coherent sovereign self in favor of a selfhood that is contradictory and disjunctive.

Postfeminism embraces a complexity of vision and gives vent to the multivalent, inharmonious and conflicting voices of contemporary women, including the 'other' voices of feminists themselves. The postfeminist movement insists that feminism has to be viewed pluralistically and in this way, it 'establish[es] a dynamic and vigorous area of intellectual debate, shaping the issues and intellectual climate that has characterized the move from modernity to postmodernity in the contemporary world' (Brooks 1997: 210).

Following postmodern/postfeminist advocates, feminism has to abandon the claims of consensus and coherence with regard to its representative subject and its own discursive identity. The understanding of postfeminism as feminist pluralism highlights the fact that, with the advent of the postmodern era, any illusions of a feminist unity or sisterhood have to be questioned and ultimately discarded.² It is argued that feminism can no longer rely on the notion of an authentic and unanimous feminist realm or 'outside' from which hegemonic culture can be judged and criticized. Instead, the feminist movement is seen to be an inherent part of the ideological constructions of reality and, therefore, it has to renounce the elitist idea of a detached and untainted feminist identity that is beyond the hegemonic.³ In Foucauldian terms, there are no 'spaces of primal liberty' in society as power is diffused throughout the social field and it 'is "always already there"', so that 'one is never "outside" it' and 'there are no margins for those who break with the system to gambol in' (Foucault 1980: 141; 142). Postmodernism articulates a self that is always within power structures and subjected to multiple discursive formations and, therefore, it cannot be understood as an autonomous agent according to the standards of enlightened modernity. The concept of the *constituting* subject of the Cartesian tradition, along with the notions of agency, creativity and

resistance, are problematized by poststructuralist and postmodern thought that stresses the discursive construction and the *constituted* nature of the individual. Following Fredric Jameson, this deconstructive attack on the Cartesian ego can be referred to as ‘the death of the subject’ or ‘the end of the autonomous bourgeois *monad*’ whereby the spontaneous and rational self developed by Enlightenment thinkers is radically decentered and dismissed (Jameson 1993: 71-72). As Patricia Waugh notes,

postmodernism situates itself epistemologically at the point where the epistemic subject characterized in terms of historical experience, interiority, and consciousness has given way to the “decentred” subject identified through the public, impersonal signifying practices of other similarly “decentred” subjects. (Waugh 1989: 7)

The postmodern dispersal of the subject has been reinforced by feminist scholars as this deconstructive notion seems to further their attempts to open up the subjective category to women. The contemporary feminist movement is informed by postmodernism’s questioning of the major tenets of the subject-centered epistemology of modernity as it realizes its potential to advance a cultural politics of diversity. Feminists reject the philosophical notion of a transcendent subject, a self thematized as universal and free from any contingencies of difference. The feminist critique is based on a distrust of modern theory and politics that, it is argued, have devalued their own subject positions and neglected their vital concerns. As Best and Kellner maintain, feminists ‘have quite rightly been suspicious of modernity [. . .] because the oppression of women has been

sustained and legitimated through the philosophical underpinnings of modern theory and its essentialism, foundationalism and universalism' (Best and Kellner 1991: 206). The principal thrust of the feminist argument is that the subject has been conceived as inherently masculine and, thus, it has been a significant factor in maintaining the inferior status of women. In its gendered conceptualization of the subjective category, the humanist discourse of 'Man' covertly supports and justifies male domination of women as it constructs a binary opposition between the sexes, exemplified by two antithetical sets of characteristics that position Man as the voice of reason and objectivity while enslaving Woman in domestic activities and excluding her from public life. Accordingly, as Susan Hekman points out, 'efforts to open up, reform, or reconstitute the masculine subject have been a central aspect of the feminist movement for several decades' and she notes that, unless the subject is reconstructed, 'the subjection of women that it fosters will necessarily continue' (Hekman 1991: 45).

In this way, there are profound similarities and affinities between postmodern and feminist attacks on universalism, foundationalism and dichotomous thinking and 'on this level', postmodern theory is 'of use to feminism and other social movements, providing new philosophical support and ammunition for feminist critique and programmes' (Best and Kellner 1991: 207). As Best and Kellner point out,

the postmodern emphasis on plurality, difference and heterogeneity has had immense appeal to those who have found themselves marginalized and excluded from the voice of Reason, Truth and Objectivity. (Best and Kellner 1991: 207)

As critiques of modernity, feminism and postmodernism are suspicious of the imperial claims of Enlightenment philosophy revolving around concepts of knowledge, subjectivity and forms of social domination. In fact, 'feminism encourages postmodern theory to articulate the critique of the humanist universal "Man" as a discourse of male domination', thereby producing a more differentiated analysis of the production of subjects in terms of gender identities (Best and Kellner 1991: 207). Postmodernism and poststructuralism have assisted feminist debates by providing a conceptual repertoire centered on deconstruction, difference and identity.

Consequently, postmodern theory has been embraced by minority feminists who demand a diversification of the feminist movement in order to account for the determinants of race, class or sexual preference. Postmodernism's deconstructive and anti-essentialist critique highlights feminism's own foundational discourses bounded by the concept of 'Woman' and its epistemological entailments. According to postmodern logic, the idea of a collective feminist self and single womanhood is perceived as totalitarian as it does not allow for hybridity, complexity and individuality. In its attempts to posit a unified identity as its foundation, feminism is compelled to exclude fragmented or multiple identities from its ranks and, therefore, it has to be opened up for the articulation of non-schematic, Other voices. Postmodernism calls on feminists to relinquish their foundational goals and focus on the differences between women. For feminist theorists, the attraction of the postmodern/poststructuralist critique of subjectivity can be found in the promise of an increased freedom for women and 'the "free play" of a plurality of differences unhampered by any predetermined gender identity' as formulated by either patriarchy or feminism itself (Alcoff 1987-88: 418). The

feminist movement faces the challenge to situate itself and its critical social theory in this decentered and fragmented realm of the postmodern, defined by Umberto Eco as ‘the orientation of anyone who has learned the lesson of Foucault, i.e., that power is not something unitary that exists outside us’ (quoted in Hutcheon 1989a: 3). Feminism has to account for its own positioning within a complex network of power structures and to integrate diverse female experiences and identities, without losing the impetus that derives from an organized movement for social change. Thus, feminists require a new understanding of the meaning of feminism and feminist theory and such an understanding needs to ‘embrace the challenge of moving feminism, as a political movement *without the fixity of a single feminist agenda* in view, into the next millennium’ (Siegel 1997a: 57; 56; my emphasis).

In the following, I will discuss the implications of this wide-ranging and pluralistic account of feminism and I will argue that neither postfeminism nor postmodern feminism can adopt such a stance unproblematically. The postmodern/postfeminist politics of complexity harbor a threat of political disablement and depoliticization for the feminist movement as, in the attempt to do justice to heterogeneity, postmodern feminism and postfeminism are in danger of becoming trapped in ‘the endless dance of non-commitment’ (Brooks 1997: 155). As Brooks reveals, feminism’s alliance with the postmodern context involves ‘the abandonment of feminism’s ability to retain its status as a theoretical enterprise motivated by critique’ (Brooks 1997: 155).⁴ It is argued that ‘just as post-modernism depoliticises political activity, so post-feminism depoliticises feminism’ (Davies 1996: 6). The ‘post’ movements are criticized for their ontological uncertainty and abstract invocation of

plurality whereby the notions of a critical politics and activism become inconceivable. I investigate this pessimistic view of the postmodern condition of fragmentation and difference and I suggest that the prospect of a postmodern feminism does not have to be conceptualized as the end of critical production and politics. In this way, I put forward the idea of a political postmodernism/postfeminism whose pluralistic and paradoxical critique does not eschew the possibilities of change and resistance.

Postfeminism seems to answer and fulfill the desire for a 'new feminism' that does not aim for theoretical, subjective and discursive purity and instead celebrates heterogeneity and pluralism. It is located within a postmodern framework that has abandoned the search for unity and coherence and it replaces the notion of a single center with a radically decentered space. Postfeminism embraces a politics of multiplicity whereby it can combine previously antagonistic positions and draw close connections with other discourses. Particularly, as has been discussed in the previous chapter, the postfeminist landscape seeks to integrate diverse feminist theories/practices, a critical engagement with popular culture and an awareness of academic postmodernism. Postfeminism can be discussed as an inherent part of a post-theoretical movement that articulates 'the deconstruction of current hegemonic systems, as well as the new knowledge being generated from the margins, or rather, from different centres' (de Toro 1999: 16). Following Nelly Richard, the postmodern critique of unidimensional structures of understanding entails a dismantling of the distinction between center and periphery, and in so doing, nullifies its significance. As she notes, 'the centre itself has become the periphery, since it has become fragmented into dissident micro-territories which fracture it into constellations of voices and a plurality of meaning' (Richard 1993: 468). This

central disintegration implies the deconstruction of the tenets of dominant culture along with an attack on universalist, essentialist and foundationalist thinking. The destabilization of totalizing and homogenizing systems can be interpreted as a democratization of opinion as ‘the epistemological space has been pried open, dissected, dismembered’ and all privileged points of view have become obsolete, along with the dominant position which allowed the establishment of hierarchies of interpretation (de Toro 1999: 12). It is ‘precisely, the de-centring of the West that has made it possible to integrate within one simultaneous space apparently diverging epistemologies’ (de Toro 1999: 12). As Fernando de Toro explains, this is a ‘post-theoretical’ condition characterized by ‘a new way to conceptualize culture and its objects of knowledge’ (de Toro 1999: 10). According to de Toro,

“Post-theory” entails a simultaneous convergence of theories emanating from diverse epistemological fields and disciplines with the goal to analyze given cultural objects from a plurality of perspectives. (de Toro 1999: 10)

The post-theoretical state is defined by the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries and the synchronous elaboration of theory from conflicting epistemologies. The permeation of disciplines is heralded and welcomed as ‘experimentation in the combinatory mode’, exceeding the limits and rigidity of binaristic models and frameworks (Rutland 1999: 74). As de Toro notes, what becomes important and significant ‘is not so much *what* divergent theories say, but *what* we can do with them’ (de Toro 1999: 12; emphasis in text).

Similarly, Christine di Stefano identifies ‘a postfeminist tendency’ that can be defined as ‘an inclination fostered by a refusal to systematically document or privilege any particular form of difference or identity against the hegemonic mainstream’ (di Stefano 1990: 73).⁵ However, rather than rejoicing in the plurality of differences made possible by this post-theoretical condition, di Stefano is uncertain about the benefits of deconstructive critique and a postmodern skepticism regarding generalizable and universal claims of any sort. In fact, post-theory’s embrace of diverging perspectives is suspected to harbor potential anti-political and anti-feminist implications. As Craig Owens notes, ‘pluralism [. . .] reduces us to being an other among others; it is not a recognition but a reduction to difference to absolute indifference, equivalence, interchangeability’ (Owens 1983: 88). Critics are concerned that an abstract celebration of difference might encourage cultural relativism and political passivity. It is argued that the elimination of all totalizing and essentialist discourses and the ensuing post-theoretical positions cause a perplexing multitude of differences, none of which can be theoretically or politically privileged over the other. As a result of this multiperspectival stance, the post-theoretical subject is seen to be stranded in a decentered realm of detachment and apathy in which taking a position becomes an almost impossible task.

Post-theory is criticized for its ambiguous ambidextrousness whereby it adopts the epistemological ‘fantasy of *capturing* [. . .] heterogeneity in [its] “readings” by continually seeking difference for its own sake’ (Bordo 1993: 39). In particular, postmodernism is understood as a theoretical invocation of diversity, far removed from practical contexts and pragmatic considerations of how this pluralistic theory can be transformed into an effectual and critical politics of change. According to Susan Bordo,

the postmodern enactment of plurality and fragmentation is animated by the 'dream of everywhere', the ideal of 'attaining an epistemological perspective free of the locatedness and limitations of embodied existence' (Bordo 1993: 217). As Bordo explains, this 'new, postmodern configuration of detachment', this 'new imagination of disembodiment' slips into 'a fantasy of escape from human locatedness', a retreat from an embodied point of view (Bordo 1993: 227; 226). The postmodern theorist 'dreams of being everywhere' and assumes that s/he 'can become wholly protean, adopting endlessly shifting, seemingly inexhaustible vantage points' (Bordo 1993: 226).

The problem with these supposedly theoretically pure, postmodern readings is that 'they often present themselves as having it any way they want' as they 'refuse to assume a shape for which they must take responsibility' (Bordo 1993: 228). The postmodern deconstructive stance is seen to result in a nominalist ontology that is interpreted as the end of organized social criticism and active politics. It is suggested that, in its abandonment of all generalizable and universalist patterns of thought, postmodernism displays a political naivety and ultimately, is ineffectual as it does not posit theoretical stopping points nor does it reserve practical spaces for a generalized critique and for attention to nuance.⁶ Critics argue that, despite its anti-foundational claims, postmodernism is motivated by 'the philosopher's fantasy of transcendence' but replaces 'the historical specifics of the modernist, Cartesian version' with its own 'dream of being everywhere' (Bordo 1993: 227). As di Stefano declares, 'it is as if postmodernism has returned us to the falsely innocent indifference of the very humanism to which it stands opposed' (di Stefano 1990: 77).

While I welcome the post-theoretical/postmodern positions that reject the ideas of epistemological purity in favor of a pluralistic conception of theory, I also contend that such a mixing of disciplines and evocation of difference cannot be adopted unquestioningly. According to the advocates of post-theory, the amalgamation of different epistemologies can be imagined as a mutually beneficial coalition, proceeding from a recognition of the diversity of the two entities to be combined and without the expectation and safeguard of some unifying principle. In this optimistic formulation, 'the prospect of a merger [. . .] is undertaken as a way of intensifying and enhancing the value of each entity taken separately' (Singer 1992: 472). Contrastingly, I maintain that the intersection of feminism and postmodernism cannot be conceptualized as a romantic and uncomplicated communion and blending of diverse epistemological fields but has to be described as an open and intense confrontation of two multifaceted and contradictory contexts. Feminism and postmodernism operate as forms for social production and exchange and, in both contexts, there is little agreement amongst practitioners with regard to that which they may be said to have in common. These internal specificities further complicate the question of articulating a proposal of convergence that does justice to the diversity of feminist and postmodern viewpoints.

I argue that post-theory's seemingly unproblematic alliance of postmodernism and feminism threatens to elide both movements' inherent complexities. Rather than embracing epistemological plurality for its own sake, one has to interrogate the nature of the linkage and analyze the conceptual use and strategic function of the post-theoretical 'and'. I will consider various theoretical and practical attempts to define a postmodern feminism and/or postfeminism and I assert that a large number of these calls for

conjunction rely on a binary structure whereby postmodernism's ontological uncertainty is opposed to a feminist politics and working model which depend on a Cartesian notion of subjectivity, agency and creativity. The critical juncture of feminism and postmodernism has been theorized employing a falsely dualistic formulation whereby feminism is based on the notion of an autonomous and self-reflexive female subject whereas postmodernism is defined as a theoretical/philosophical perspective, debilitating for feminist agency and politics. Following these conceptualizations, postmodern theory is seen to undermine women's sense of selfhood and their capacity for criticism and resistance. Postmodernism is interpreted as a political threat for feminism as its primary motivation is philosophical while feminism's primary motivation is political. I will investigate these critical claims and I maintain that the intersections of feminism and postmodernism cannot be conceived as a harmonious union, nor can it be mapped onto a simplistic dualism that opposes feminist practice to postmodern theory. Instead, postmodernism and feminism are engaged in a multivalent and contradictory dialogue, forging a postmodern feminism and/or postfeminism that exceeds binary logic.

In fact, the rift between postmodernism and feminism is seen to be the result of two tendencies proceeding from opposite directions toward the same objective: to debunk traditional/patriarchal philosophy. Postmodernists and feminists both criticize Western concepts of Man, history and metaphysics but their criticisms do not necessarily converge. As Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson state,

postmodernists have focused primarily on the philosophical side of the problem.

They have begun by elaborating antifoundational and metaphilosophical

perspectives and from there have drawn conclusions about the shape and character of social criticism. For feminists, on the other hand, the question of philosophy has always been subordinated to the interest in social criticism. [. . .] Postmodernists offer sophisticated and persuasive criticisms of foundationalism and essentialism, but their conceptions of social criticism tend to be anemic. Feminists offer robust conceptions of social criticism, but they tend at times to lapse into foundationalism and essentialism. (Fraser and Nicholson 1990: 19-20)

In this way, feminism is described as ‘a call to action’ that ‘can never be simply a belief system’ as ‘without action, feminism is merely empty rhetoric which cancels itself out’ (Alice 1995: 12). Diametrically opposed to this active stance, the postmodern discourse is characterized by an inherent relativism and declares itself concerned not with the question of establishing meanings, but with the challenging of any monological or univalent structure and concept. As Nancy Hartsock deplures, ‘postmodernism [. . .] at best manages to criticize these theories [of enlightened modernity] without putting anything in their place’, concluding that ‘for those of us who want to understand the world systematically in order to change it, postmodern theories at their best give little guidance’ (Hartsock 1990: 159).⁷

According to these views, the effect of postmodernism/poststructuralism has been a limitation of political and critical intervention as its introspective and deconstructive sensitivity turns into tongue-tying anxiety and quietism. Postmodernism’s rejection of the autonomous and rational agent of the Enlightenment has been a point of contention and the focus of debate whereby the postmodern position is seen to lack an adequate theory of

an active creative self capable of authorial intention. Within postmodernism, the category of intention is seen to be overdetermined by social forces, so that subjectivity is little more than a construct grounded on discourse, beyond individual control. Myra Macdonald reveals that women in particular are questioning whether 'we have the right to offer criticism as "women", when "women" may be an essentialist, patriarchal category that denies difference within it' (Macdonald 1995: 38). Applied to feminism's own identity as representing the interests of women, postmodernism's fracturing of the subject and its undermining of the critical position pose a potential threat to feminist theory and politics as they foreclose the possibility of a sovereign feminist selfhood. Postmodernism represents a political liability for feminism, insofar as it challenges a unified conception of the feminist movement. The encounter of feminism and postmodernism is fraught with conceptual and practical dilemmas for, as Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson ask, 'how can we combine a postmodernist incredulity toward metanarratives with the social-critical power of feminism?' (Fraser and Nicholson 1990: 34).

The central questions raised by feminist critics revolve around the issues of agency and subjectivity and they are concerned with the specific nature of the political action that feminists can design and pursue in the absence of a systematic, general and theoretical account of the condition of women. Thus, Delmar is skeptical about a postmodern/feminist synthesis, noting that to deconstruct the subject 'woman' raises doubts about the feminist project at a very fundamental level as 'to question whether "woman" is a coherent identity is also to imply the question of whether "woman" is a coherent political identity' (Delmar 1986: 28). Feminist critics maintain that postmodern/

poststructuralist deconstructionism gives little sense of how to justify generalizations about women and ultimately, it dissolves the foundations of the feminist movement.⁸ Consequently, fears mount up that the postmodern critique 'may not only eliminate the specificity of feminist theory but place in question the very emancipatory ideals of the women's movement' (Benhabib 1997: 78). As Moi asserts, 'the price for giving in to [this] powerful discourse is nothing less than the depoliticisation of feminism [as] it will be quite impossible to argue that women under patriarchy constitute an oppressed group, let alone develop a theory of their liberation' (Moi 1985: 95). It is suggested that, for feminism, postmodernism's invocation of difference and its dismissal of the *constituting* agent of modernity translate into a self-destructive pluralism and an ontology of abstract individualism. Diversified beyond the possibility of union, the feminist movement is fractured and fragmented to such an extent that it cannot be said to represent and politically advance the interests of women, as a structurally disadvantaged category relative to men. The outcome is a depoliticized and personalized feminism that makes individuation of its members a principal goal but cannot be employed as a politics of resistance or a program for change.

In fact, thought through to its logical conclusion, postmodern/poststructuralist theory may even result in a nihilistic stance that dismantles and dismisses the subject category altogether as a fiction or construct. Fredric Jameson suggests that postmodernism's most radical insight is the view that the bourgeois individual self is not only a thing of the past but also a myth. Jameson reveals that the subject has never been endowed with the Enlightenment ideal of personal autonomy and, therefore, it should be seen as 'merely a philosophical and cultural mystification which sought to persuade

people that they “had” individual subjects and possessed this unique personal identity’ (quoted in Waugh 1992: 193). As Patricia Waugh notes,

[postmodernism] may even situate itself at a point where there is no “subject” and no history in the old sense at all. [. . .] “Identity” is simply the illusion produced through the manipulation of irreconcilable and contradictory language games.

(Waugh 1989: 7)

This view is encapsulated by Jean Baudrillard’s pessimistic position that assumes that ‘the postmodern world is devoid of meaning; it is a universe of nihilism where theories float in a void, unanchored in any secure harbour’ (Best and Kellner 1991: 127).⁹

According to Baudrillard,

[the postmodern is] characteristic of a universe where there are no more definitions possible. [. . .] It has all been done. The extreme limit of these possibilities has been reached. It has destroyed itself. It has deconstructed its entire universe. (Baudrillard 1984: 24)

Postmodernists’ theoretical deconstructionism can turn into stagnation and quietism as they refuse to offer any declarations of faith or meaning. By deconstructing subjectivity, postmodernism is seen to abolish those ideals of autonomy and accountability that are necessary to the idea of historical change. Seyla Benhabib voices her concerns that a complete rejection of the concepts of selfhood and agency debilitates

the possibility of critical theory. Benhabib notes that postmodern/poststructuralist views of subjectivity are incompatible with feminist politics as they ‘undermine the very possibility of feminism as the theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women’ (Benhabib 1995: 29). Postmodernism has produced a “‘retreat from utopia” within feminism’ that has taken the form of ‘debunking as essentialist any attempt to formulate a feminist ethic, a feminist politics, a feminist concept of autonomy, and even a feminist aesthetic’ (Benhabib 1995: 29; 30). Benhabib is adamant that such utopian thinking is ‘a practical-moral imperative’ as ‘without such a regulative principle of hope, not only morality but also radical transformation is unthinkable’ (Benhabib 1995: 29). According to Benhabib, feminism’s theoretical and political stance requires distinctively philosophical presuppositions that are negated by many formulations of postmodernism. As she notes,

social criticism without some form of philosophy is not possible, and without social criticism the project of a feminist theory which is at once committed to knowledge and to the emancipatory interests of women is inconceivable.
(Benhabib 1994: 90)

Consequently, in conjunction with postmodern theory, feminism is in danger of being transformed from an emancipatory global movement to a philosophical specialism that legitimates a political pluralism leading to fragmentation. Following poststructuralist/postmodern theorists, feminist efforts must be directed toward dismantling all totalizing and essentialist patterns of thought, including its own unifying

myths and grounding assumptions.¹⁰ The category 'Woman' can no longer be embraced as a collective identity whereby women can bond and express their relative lack of power vis-à-vis men in society. The feminist movement has to interrogate its own foundation, forged as an inclusive, women-centered basis for social thought and political action. In this way, 'nominalism threatens to wipe out feminism itself' for 'if the concept of woman is a fiction, then the very concept of women's oppression is obsolete and feminism's *raison d'être* disappears' (Alcoff 1987-88: 419; Brooks 1997: 23). The dilemma facing feminist theorists is that their very self-definition is grounded in a concept that they must also de-essentialize in all of its aspects, which ultimately leads to the 'nagging question [of] whether the uncertain promise of a political linkage between feminism and postmodernism is worth the attendant potential risks' (di Stefano 1990: 77).

In the most pessimistic formulations of the postmodern/feminist synthesis, feminism is absorbed by postmodern theory and its specificity and politics are negated. Postmodernism is denounced for its assimilating strategy whereby it 'defends itself against the destabilizing threat of the "other" by integrating it back into a framework which absorbs all differences and contradictions' (Richard 1993: 468). Paradoxically, while the decentered space of the postmodern is adorned with ciphers of heterogeneity and perspectival multiplicity, it can also be seen as a neutralizing realm, subsuming differences into the metacategory of the 'undifferentiated' where all singularities become indistinguishable and interchangeable in a new economy of 'sameness'. As Nancy Hartsock notes, despite postmodernists' 'desire to avoid universal claims and despite their stated opposition to these claims, some universalistic assumptions creep back into their work' (Hartsock 1990: 159). Postmodernism is criticized for harboring an

alternative foundationalism whereby it incorporates other discursive formations and epistemologies in a supposedly genderless and universalist postmodernist project.

Feminist theorists have been wary of this gesture of inclusion that arrogates feminism into postmodernism, suggesting that the postmodern condition should not be mistaken for a structural *fait accompli*, a homogenized and one-dimensional phenomenon that impacts upon everyone in the same way. As Ien Ang reveals, such totalizing accounts assume that there is ‘a linear, universal and radical historical transformation of the world from “modernity” to “postmodernity”’ (Ang 1996: 2). Ang asserts that one has to go beyond the many sweeping generalizations and platitudes enunciated about postmodernism and concentrate on its signification as a break with modernity, ‘the very dispersal of taken for granted universalist and progressivist assumptions of the modern’ (Ang 1996: 2). The postmodern does not signal a wholesale supersession and negation of the modern era by an alternative set of beliefs but rather, it offers an awareness and recognition of the epistemological limits of those principles. The underlying thread of these remarks is that postmodernism must question its own globalizing narratives and reject a description of itself as embodying a set of timeless ideals. As Nicholson points out, postmodernism ‘must insist on being recognized as a set of viewpoints of a time, justifiable only within its own time’ (Nicholson 1990: 11). Postmodern theorizing and its invocation of difference must be historical, following from the demands of specific contexts and attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and periods.

In particular, the crisis of the postmodern subject should not be interpreted as ubiquitous and universal, but rather, it is the bourgeois white male subject whose illusion of authority, control and unity is deconstructed. Feminist theorists raise the possibility

that since men have had their Enlightenment, they can embrace a postmodern/poststructuralist stance of interrogation that questions their conceptions of subjectivity, truth and knowledge. On the other hand, women cannot yet afford a decentered sense of self and a humbleness regarding the coherence and truth of their claims.¹¹ As Patricia Waugh notes, women can only 'begin to problematize and to deconstruct the socially constructed subject positions available to them', once they have 'experienced themselves as "subjects"' (Waugh 1989: 25). Starting from the position of fragmented subjectivity, women's 'dreams of becoming "whole"' cannot be dismissed and rejected as 'the reactionary move it might constitute in the writings of a representative of hegemony', since they are 'far less likely to mistake themselves for the universal "man" anyway' (Koenen 1999: 134).

While feminist and postmodern theories are both committed to the project of deconstructing the subject and the master narratives of history, feminism's and postmodernism's stances to modernity proceed from different assumptions and with different intentions in view. Feminism has provided its own critique of essentialist and foundationalist assumptions that is not interchangeable or synonymous with the postmodern deconstructive position. Postmodernism is criticized for its gender-blindness whereby it assumes or even rejects relationships that women have never experienced as subjects in their own right. Furthermore, even if women were to adopt a postmodern deconstructionism, 'the luxury of female anti-essentialism' could still only be accorded to the privileged as 'non-white, non-heterosexual, non-bourgeois women are still finding political impetus in summoning up womanhood as identity and femininity as a construct which excludes and punishes them most painfully of all' (Whelehan 1995: 211). The

majority of women are not in a position to make choices and reject the politically enabling category of Woman and thus, they are not willing to yield the ground on which to make a stand against their oppression.

Consequently, suspicions arise in some feminist circles that postmodernism is a 'remasculinizing' strategy and an antifeminist appropriative scheme whereby feminism is subsumed 'into the postmodernist critique of "the tyranny of the signifier"' and it is reduced to 'simply another of the "voices of the conquered" [. . .] that challenge the West's desire for ever-greater domination and control' (Jones 1990: 9; 14). According to this view, feminism is negated and its political theory is appropriated and defused as merely one postmodernist strategy among many to criticize modernist ideologues. As Nancy Hartsock asks,

why is it just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? (Hartsock 1990: 163)

Postmodernism's questioning of subjectivity and its skepticism regarding the possibilities of a general theory are interpreted as patriarchal ploys to silence the confrontational voices of feminism and to divert feminists from 'tasks more pressing than deciding about the appropriateness of the label "feminist"' (Modleski 1991: 6). In this way, feminism is arrogated into 'the larger (masculine) projects of "universal" humanism or critical postmodernism' and it is argued that 'it is this incorporation that has facilitated the

declaration of the end of feminism with “postfeminism” rising from its ashes’ (Jones 1990: 8; 15). In this context, postfeminism appears as a Trojan horse pretending to expand the feminist debate but in effect, allowing male critics to enter and take over feminism.

Tania Modleski is one of the key proponents of this pessimistic and defensive appraisal of the postmodern/feminist synthesis whereby ‘men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it’ (Modleski 1991: 7). She entitles her book Feminism Without Women (1991) and she employs this *tourneure* to suggest either the triumph of a male feminist perspective that excludes women or of a feminist anti-essentialism so radical that every use of the term ‘woman’, however provisional, is disallowed. As Modleski reveals,

the once exhilarating proposition that there is no “essential” female nature has been elaborated to the point where it is now often used to scare “women” away from making any generalizations about or political claims on behalf of a group called “women”. (Modleski 1991: 15)

She is concerned that, in its extreme interpretations, anti-essentialism has inaugurated a postfeminist stance that is not only without ‘woman’ but also without the possibility of ‘women’. Modleski concludes that the postmodern and postfeminist ‘play with gender in which differences are elided can easily lead us back into our “pregendered” past where there was only the universal subject – man’ (Modleski 1991: 163).

Accordingly, it is suggested that 'if feminism can learn from postmodernism it has finally to resist the logic of its arguments' and reject 'its more extreme nihilistic' implications (Waugh 1992: 189; 190). By deconstructing and undermining the idea of a controlling and autonomous agent, poststructuralism and postmodernism are said to come dangerously close to deriding logic and rationality. It is argued that feminism must posit some belief in 'the notion of effective human agency, the necessity for historical continuity in formulating identity and a belief in historical progress' (Waugh 1992: 195). The feminist movement has to uphold the idea of a thinking agent or author who has intentions, purposes and goals and who is not reducible to a position in language. The underlying assumption is that feminism has to articulate a core belief in a self that, despite being produced through discursive and ideological formations, nevertheless has a material existence and history in human relationships. This view presupposes that, no matter how constituted by discourse, the subject retains a certain ability and agency as without such a regulative ideal, the very project of female emancipation becomes unimaginable. As Macdonald asserts, 'if we want to argue for changing, rather than deconstructing' the inadequacies of current constructions of femaleness, 'we need to admit to holding a rational position from which to argue this' (Macdonald 1995: 39).¹² Feminist critics are adamant that, in order to be effective as a politics of liberation, the feminist movement must maintain a distance and autonomy from postmodern theories that valorize free play of meaning, even as it sees the potential that these theoretical positions offer in disrupting hierarchies of power once taken for granted.

In other words, feminist politics and action can only be formulated if they maintain the modern idea of a creative and autonomous self. Feminism has to take into

account its own epistemological anchorage in the theories and ideas of enlightened modernity. The very discourse of emancipation is 'a modern discourse' as 'modern categories such as human rights, equality, and democratic freedoms and power are used by feminists to criticize and fight against gender domination' (Best and Kellner 1991: 208). Feminist theorists employ and mobilize categories of the Enlightenment in their political struggles and their theories 'clearly arise out of and are made possible by those of [. . .] modernity and its models of reason, justice and autonomous subjectivity as universal categories' (Waugh 1992: 189). Consequently, Patricia Waugh argues that 'feminism cannot sustain itself as an emancipatory movement unless it acknowledges its foundations in the discourses of modernity' (Waugh 1992: 190).¹³ Moreover, feminist critics maintain that, even if feminism draws upon postmodern forms of disruption, it cannot repudiate entirely the framework of enlightened modernity without perhaps fatally undermining itself as an emancipatory politics.

Yet, as I have already discussed, feminists are also involved in a critical project designed to attack the totalizing claims of modern philosophy, to expose its limitations and highlight their own exclusion from the humanist discourse of Man. In this sense at least, feminism can be seen to be an intrinsically 'postmodern' discourse. In this way, I contend that feminism has to be cognizant regarding its own ambiguous positioning between modernity and postmodernity as it tries to advance the idea of a self that eschews the sexism of the Cartesian subject while simultaneously retaining the notion of agency and autonomy. The feminist movement cannot embrace an unreconstructed modern subject nor postmodernism's decentered self as it is engaged in a struggle to reconcile context-specific difference with universal political claims. Feminism has to

negotiate its position in the problem space between essentialism and anti-essentialism in which neither interminable deconstruction nor uncritical reification of the category “women” is adequate to its demands. Thus, I maintain that the feminist movement has to recognize a central contradiction in its attempt to define an epistemological base as women seek equality and recognition of a gendered identity that has been constructed by cultural formations that feminism simultaneously seeks to challenge and dismantle. By conjuring up the category ‘woman’ as their common, political denominator, feminists are in danger of reproducing the essential constructions of gender that they have set out to contest. Feminism is suspended between its desire to posit an autonomous female/feminist self and the necessity of having to deconstruct the modern discourse of subjectivity. The feminist movement is torn between its politics of emancipation and its anti-humanist theory that rejects the notion of a natural self outside, or prior to, the social.

The feminist debate over subjectivity is structured by the strained relation between the *constituting* self of the humanist/modern tradition and the *constituted* subject of postmodernity. As Susan Hekman points out, there is a sharp opposition between these two conceptions as the dichotomy between *constituting* and *constituted* is clear-cut. The constituting subject is ‘transcendent, rational, and autonomous’ whereas ‘that which is constituted (which cannot be labeled a “subject” at all) is determined and unfree – a social dupe’ (Hekman 1991: 47). Rooted in the modern as well as in the postmodern, feminism’s critical position cannot be translated into a simple replacement of the constituting subject with the constituted self of social constructivism. Feminists’ critiques of the Cartesian self cannot be limited to a postmodern *deconstructionist* stance as their attempts to open up the subjective category for women also have to involve an effort to

reconstruct and reconstitute it. Feminist theorists have to reformulate the postmodern dismissal and decentering of subjectivity and articulate a new approach to the subject. They have to alter the parameters of the controversy surrounding the concept of subjectivity and redefine the relationship between the constituted and constituting selves. Specifically, they need to pose the question of how agency can be defined and attributed to a non-Cartesian subject and how resistance can be posited for this subject.¹⁴

Various critical attempts have been made to reconcile feminism's modern and postmodern, essentialist and anti-essentialist components as feminist theorists are engaged in the process of forging a postmodern feminism that integrates both contexts' 'respective strengths while eliminating their respective weaknesses' (Fraser and Nicholson 1990: 20). This 'postmodern, unbounded feminism' unifies 'coalitionally rather than foundationally' in such a way that postmodernism and feminism operate like 'those fictive entities known as corporations, under whose auspices a wide range of enterprises are organized and collected' without assuming any essential relationship between them (Schwichtenberg 1993: 132; Singer 1992: 472). As Linda Singer suggests, the postmodern/feminist meeting should be interpreted as a 'corporate merger' that is not undertaken as 'a romantic project of desire nor out of the need for some form of mystical communion' but as a strategic union 'born out of an interest in consolidating competition, diversifying one's assets, or operating from a greater position of strength and viability' (Singer 1992: 472). This model of conjunction assumes and proceeds from a recognition of the diversity and difference of the two entities to be combined without the expectation of unification or resolution.

Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson provide a description of this postmodern/feminist synthesis that recognizes women's diversity without capitulating to a complete deconstruction of the self. They reconcile their political (feminist) commitments with their theoretical (postmodern) sympathies by substituting pragmatism for the hyper-theoretical claims of postmodernism. In this way,

postmodern-feminist theory would be pragmatic and fallibilistic. It would tailor its methods and categories to the specific task at hand, using multiple categories when appropriate and forswearing the metaphysical comfort of a single feminist method of feminist epistemology. In short, this theory would look more like a tapestry composed of threads of many different hues than one woven in a single color. [. . .] One might best speak of it in the plural as the practice of feminisms. (Fraser and Nicholson 1990: 35)

In order to mediate between philosophical adequacy and political efficacy, feminism has to adopt a pragmatic approach that does not shift concerns about difference to theoretical questions but remains focused on practical considerations. Feminist critics argue that 'we need to be pragmatic, not theoretically pure' if we want to preserve the possibility of 'project[ing] utopian hopes, envision[ing] emancipatory alternatives, and infus[ing] all our work with a normative critique of domination and injustice' (Bordo 1993: 242; Fraser 1995: 159).

Seyla Benhabib provides an example of this pragmatic union of feminism and postmodernism in her conceptualization of a postmodern scale that offers variously

intense versions of postmodern theses that are distinguished in terms of their compatibility with feminism. Benhabib notes that the complex interaction between postmodern and feminist contexts around the notions of identity ‘cannot be captured by bombastic proclamations of the “Death of the Subject”’ (Benhabib 1994: 83). She suggests a way out of the subject-centered dilemma by advocating a ‘weak’ version of this theory that situates the subject in relation to social, cultural, and discursive surroundings. Contrastingly, a ‘strong’ version of the same thesis undermines all concepts of intentionality, accountability, self-reflexivity and autonomy. Benhabib maintains that only the ‘weak’ version is compatible with feminism as it stresses variability and diversity while the strong/radical version is counterproductive for feminist theory, politics and practice, reducing the subject to an endless state of flux.¹⁵ Any attempt to link feminism with a ‘strong’ postmodernism can only engender incoherence and self-contradictoriness, undermining all efforts at effective theorizing and leading feminism to a passive stance from which it is reticent to formulate a feminist concept of autonomy for fear of lapsing into essentialism.

Benhabib’s proposition relies on a rejection of an extreme postmodern theory that provides no basis for a politics of alliance as it is one-sided, excessively prohibitive and politically disabling. Instead, she draws on a weak postmodernism as a method of feminist pluralization and a strategy of disruption that ‘can teach us the theoretical and political traps of why utopias and foundational thinking can go wrong’ (Benhabib 1995: 30). In this mediating attempt, ‘pure’ postmodern theory is injected with a dose of feminism’s political concreteness while feminism is diversified in its exchange with postmodern anti-essentialism. Benhabib endeavors to criticize ‘the metaphysical

presuppositions of identity politics' and challenge 'the supremacy of heterosexist positions in the women's movement', without completely debunking the notions of selfhood and agency (Benhabib 1994: 81). I argue that this delineation of the postmodern/feminist junction retains the idea of a modern agent who drives towards autonomy in order to avoid a conception of the subject as wholly determined. Benhabib does not ascribe to a complete deconstruction of the Cartesian self, but rather, she seeks to incorporate some of its key elements. Her analysis rests on a modern definition of agency imported from the Cartesian subject and is rooted in a dichotomized understanding of the *constituting* self of modernity and its *constituted* postmodern counterpart. Benhabib's account of the postmodern/feminist meeting results in a predominantly modern feminism infused with a postmodern strain to create a more diverse politics for the contemporary age.

Contrastingly, I maintain that feminism's intersection with postmodern theory and the emergence of postfeminism cannot be comprehended by having recourse to a modern epistemology of subjectivity. I believe that the postmodern/feminist link has to displace the opposition between the *constituted* and *constituting* selves and formulate concepts of agency from within the constructivist constraints. In this way, liberal fantasies of a rational agent have to be abandoned in favor of a subject who is firmly located within a network of power/discourse. This entails a contentious redefinition of agency and intentionality as the products of discourse, implicated in and conditioned by the very relations of power they seek to rival.¹⁶ Political action and selfhood cannot be presented as emanating from an untainted inner space that is opposed to the outer world of external determination but they are part of an inherently multiple, dynamic and contradictory

discursive field that depolarizes and blurs the binary distinctions between the Cartesian self and the postmodern non-self. Thus, I question the notion of a neutral realm of feminist politics and I assert that there is no outside position from which feminism's connection with postmodernism can be evaluated. I adopt a view of postmodernism as a politically ambivalent, but nonetheless political, discourse whose directionality is not fixed as it provides a double movement of subversion and reinforcement. I resist contemporary critiques that assume that postmodernism is disqualified from political involvement and I postulate that the postmodern discourse offers a paradoxical critique that works within the very systems it attempts to undermine. Moreover, I dispute a rigid and dualistic contextualization that dichotomizes feminism and postmodernism and I insist that postmodern feminism represents a multivalent and pluralistic site of exchange that transcends monological classifications.

2.3 Postfeminist Locations: Feminism and Popular Culture

'It is, in practice, impossible to discuss feminism without discussing the image of feminism and feminists', Rosalind Delmar notes in her attempt to settle the question of 'what is feminism?' (Delmar 1986: 8). Delmar's comment points to the practical impossibility of experiencing and identifying an authentic feminism, unadulterated by the hegemonic and often conservative forces of cultural representation. As Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Read assert, 'feminism is never available in some pure or unmediated form' (Moseley and Read 2002: 234). Instead, 'we are operating in the realm of stereotypes' and 'our understanding of feminism is filtered through the media', forming and shaping our ideas of what it means to be a feminist (Cox et al. 1997: 179). Feminism is engaged in and constructed by battles of representation and in this way, it cannot be comprehended as an unallied and independent 'outside' of popular culture. This is not to say that feminism is devoid of any critical power or agency to make interventions into the public cultural terrain but it is to assert that the feminist movement cannot position itself outside or against the popular realm. Rather, as Moseley and Read suggest, 'popular culture [. . .] functions as one of the sites on, through, and against which the meanings of feminism are produced and understood' (Moseley and Read 2002: 235). The interconnections between feminism and the media are multidirectional and fluid, signifying in a number of conflicting ways that cannot be interpreted dualistically according to an *either/or* logic. Feminist and popular contexts are locked together in an

ambivalent and antithetical relationship that combines complicity and critique, consumption and activity, empowerment and subordination.

This chapter considers the complex intersections of feminism and popular culture and it discusses the contradictory phenomena of popular feminism and/or postfeminism. I argue that feminism cannot dissociate itself from popular culture as it is always formed in relation to it. I resist what Ien Ang designates ‘the crude hypodermic needle model of media effects’ that has been employed by some feminist critics (Ang 1996: 111). Such accounts rely on the misconception that ‘mass-media imagery consists of transparent, unrealistic messages about women whose meanings are clearcut and straightforward’ while also assuming that ‘girls and women passively and indiscriminately absorb these messages and meanings as (wrong) lessons about “real life”’ (Ang 1996: 111). I reject this monolithic view of women as unconditional and passive victims of an inexorably sexist media and I contend that popular culture is a site of struggle, shot through with contradictions that provide women with the paradoxical possibility of active consumption. This implies a view of popular culture as a fundamentally ambiguous and incongruous landscape and of the popular consumer as a creative and productive agent. However, at the same time as affirming and validating consumer agency and popular resistance, I also want to steer clear of a naïve and uncritical kind of populism that celebrates popular culture as a paradise of free choice and consumptive activity as a form of opposition. On the contrary, in my definition, the popular domain is not an autonomous space in which creativity and independence prevail but it is always implicated in the hegemonic field of force that establishes the parameters of popular choices and significations. The concept of *choice* has to be problematized as an

ideological discourse in which ‘the rhetoric of the liberatory benefits of personal autonomy and individual self-determination has become hegemonic’ (Ang 1996: 13). Far from being an attestation of limitless freedom and possibility, choice is always determined and conditioned by a matrix of power relations that demarcate and narrow the range of choices available within the hegemonic structure.

This has important reverberations for popular feminism and/or postfeminism as these movements deploy and rely on the consumerist notion of *choiceoisie* in order to promote and propagate the individualist ideas of empowerment and agency. Postfeminism is heralded as a compromise and negotiation between feminism and popular culture as it responds to feminist demands for action and freedom of choice while simultaneously relating these egalitarian pursuits to the processes of consumption. Thus, the postfeminist self is a consumer who is endowed with a contradictory form of subjectivity that allows for personal choice while at the same time constructing this emancipatory ideal within hegemonic regulations. Some commentators fear that, at its worst, this could result in a thoroughly subjugated and co-opted subjecthood that equates agency with self-objectification and regards consumption *tout court* as an avenue to control and autonomy. In this case, postfeminism is interpreted as a depoliticized and conservative backlash that recuperates and commodifies feminist principles in order to undermine and distort feminism’s collective politics. Contrastingly, I argue that the most challenging representations of postfeminist subjectivity depict the double bind of consumption and the struggle of a ‘free-yet-bounded’ self who is both subject and object, active and passive, complicit and defiant (Ang 1996: 170). Moreover, I suggest that popular commodity culture is a site of conflicting and heterogeneous meanings where

resistance co-exists with subordination. I believe that feminist ideas are negotiated within the popular realm with contradictory effects and results that signify a shift from dualistic to pluralistic regimes of representation. Postfeminism, then, does not depict a monological takeover and straightforward incorporation of feminist ideas into a unanimously hostile popular terrain. Conversely, postfeminism represents the complex interchanges of feminist and popular contexts as it strives to combine previously incompatible opposites in an effort to 'have it all'.

However, critics have discussed popular culture's implication in hegemony in simplistic and homogeneous ways and they have used this 'compromised' positioning as a pretext to condemn and repudiate the popular at large as 'merely serving the complementary systems of capitalism and patriarchy, peddling "false consciousness" to the duped masses' (Gamman and Marshment 1988: 1). In particular, feminist theorists have conceptualized the relationship between feminism and the media as a meeting of two separate entities that is potentially harmful to the feminist side of the interaction. This not only presupposes a reductive and uniform definition of hegemony as a sweeping and all-absorbing coercive force but it also implies that feminism is exempt from this form of imposition and remains in a non-hegemonic outside. Furthermore, the popular consumer is demeaned as a cultural dupe and s/he is conceived in terms of his/her victimization and passivity in the process of meaning production. In a similar manner, consumption is described as an updated form of *the opium of the people*, a calculating scheme designed to deceive and lull its unwitting participants into a false sense of empowerment. Popular culture is criticized and rejected as 'a sort of ideological machine which more or less effortlessly reproduces the dominant ideology' and, therefore, it can

be characterized as 'little more than a degraded landscape of commercial and ideological manipulation' (Storey 1997: 12; 129). The media's influence is seen to be particularly damaging and insidious in its effects on the feminist movement as the popular invader simultaneously uses and abuses, co-opts and sabotages feminist rhetoric in order to misrepresent and exploit feminism while promoting its own popular/patriarchal version of it. In other words, the media's manipulative plotting occurs on two seemingly different but related fronts as, on the one hand, the popular propaganda machine is said to be responsible for a defamation campaign that denigrates the image of the feminist movement while, on the other hand, it popularises and perpetuates feminist notions of freedom and egalitarianism. Feminist critics argue that this superficially pro-feminist development is nothing more than a selective and co-optive gesture that transforms the movement's revolutionary and collective principles into individual consumer choices.

The media is condemned for launching an assault on feminism and invading the body of the women's movement in an attempt to empty out the feminist message of sisterhood and foster 'debilitating caricatures, allowing the culture at large to dismiss and discount it' (Mascia-Lees 2000: 191). These popular constructions of feminism rely on the fantasy of a feminist monolith and a set of fictional images that revolve around the notion of a politically correct feminist identity. In particular, the media is credited with the invention and circulation of 'the mythical, and most persistent, icon of second-wave feminism: the bra-burner' (Hinds and Stacey 2001: 156). The figure of the bra-burning, mannish and fanatic feminist has dominated popular representations of feminism 'so long as to have become one of the most familiar symbols in the contemporary political landscape and cultural imagination' (Hinds and Stacey 2001: 153).¹ This negative

stereotype has been propagated as a metonym for the Women's Liberation Movement with the result that 'we all know what feminists are' (Douglas 1995: 7). As Susan Douglas summarizes, 'they are shrill, overly aggressive, man-hating, ball-busting, selfish, hairy, extremist, deliberately unattractive women with absolutely no sense of humor who see sexism at every turn' (Douglas 1995: 7). This mythologizing or demonizing of feminism depends on and performs an apparently definitive rupture between feminism and femininity in its construction of two polarized and incompatible classifications. The iconic figure of the humourless and drab bra-burner acquires meaning in its opposition to cultural stereotypes of femininity and its rejection of feminine trappings. Press coverage of the early 1970s reflects this media tendency to depict 'the women's libber' as an unfeminine, ugly woman with no make-up who seeks to 'stir up ferment amongst her more attractive and contented sisters' (Hinds and Stacey 2001: 161).² Feminists are characterized as 'enemies of the stiletto heel and the beauty parlor – in a word, as enemies of glamour' (Bartky 1990: 41). As Hinds and Stacey declare,

there is no doubt that the persistent media characterisation of the feminist, from the bra-burner onwards, condenses a range of characteristics antithetical to conventional definitions of desirable femininity. (Hinds and Stacey 2001: 161)

This popular argument against feminism insistently proclaims that women who collectively adopt a feminist outlook and engage in feminist activist politics will effectively be desexed as this display of public action and assertiveness is incompatible with their feminine selves. Feminism is depicted as the preserve of 'only the unstable,

mannish, unattractive woman who has a naturally difficult relationship to her own femininity' (Whelehan 2000: 18).³ In this way, feminism is positioned as a form of violence to femininity, a misguided and unwise attempt at masculinization that transforms the prospective feminist into an asexual and unpopular figure.

Contrastingly, femininity is played off against this negative stereotype of feminism and 'appears not only as more rewarding but also as a lot more fun' (Budgeon 1994: 60). The feminist movement is seen to threaten women with desexualization and social annihilation, undermining their sense of identity and blocking an important source of gratification and self-esteem. Popular advocates insist that femininity is not the terrain of female submission and containment but an empowering and active position that allows the female/feminine subject to express her self in confident and autonomous ways. Femininity is depicted in individualistic terms as a conscious *choice*, a personal right rather than a patriarchal law that is imposed authoritatively. As I will discuss, this conjunction of conventional modes of femininity with notions of power and agency is an important feature of postfeminist rhetoric that no longer understands the relationship between feminism and femininity as necessarily antagonistic.

While the view of feminism as a defeminizing force can clearly be identified as a distorted media refraction, it is important to realize that the sense of incongruity between feminism and femininity is not only publicized in media discourses but also mirrored in feminist writing that constitutes feminine values as a 'problem' and a major cause of women's oppression. Joanne Hollows explores how the notion of a feminist movement and the assertion of a feminist identity are predicated on a rejection of femininity. She reveals that 'feminist critiques [. . .] are often dependent on creating an opposition

between “bad” feminine identities and “good” feminist identities’ (Hollows 2000: 9). In feminist thinking, from Mary Wollstonecraft in the late eighteenth century to Naomi Wolf in the late twentieth, women’s quest for femininity and beauty has been associated with their traditional powerlessness and suffering.⁴ Women are presented as the victims of an ideological manipulation that conceals the cultural constructedness of gender socializations and stereotyping. By internalizing their culturally produced gender role, women’s minds and bodies are said to be colonized by patriarchy as they become involved in their own oppression and normalization. Engaging in a never-ending chase of an ever-changing and elusive ideal of femininity, women spend their lives adapting and changing their selves to attain and fulfil these ideologically constructed markers of womanhood. They undergo a process of self-alienation and objectification in the course of which they channel their energies inward, toward self-modification rather than outward, toward social change. In this way, any feelings of control and mastery that a woman might gain from the adoption of a feminine demeanour and appearance can only be illusory as they are based on ‘repressive narcissistic satisfactions’ and ‘false needs’ produced through indoctrination, manipulation and the denial of autonomy (Bartky 1990: 42).⁵ Ultimately, it is argued that the possession and fulfillment of these needs do not benefit the female subject but a social order whose interests lie in women’s subjugation and disempowerment on the macro-societal level.

In fact, fostered by a continuous involvement in the practices of femininity, women’s self-estrangement can be described as a psychological oppression that separates them from certain attributes and capacities considered essential to a fully human existence. As Sandra Lee Bartky suggests, ‘to be denied an autonomous choice of self,

forbidden cultural expression, and condemned to the immanence of mere bodily being is to be cut off from the sorts of activities that define what it is to be human' (Bartky 1990: 31). This sexualized form of dehumanisation is institutionalized and systematic, serving to 'make the work of domination easier by breaking the spirit of the dominated' who are faced with the sheer impossible task of living up to the 'imaginary feminine', the ideal body-subject of femininity (Bartky 1990: 23; Brook 1999: 67). Women take up the technologies of femininity against the background of a pervasive sense of deficiency and, in so doing, they produce a practiced and subjected body, a *docile body* on which an inferior status is inscribed and whose energies are habituated to perpetual and exhaustive policing.⁶ This self-surveillance is 'a form of obedience to patriarchy' and it is constructed by disciplinary micro-practices of everyday life – 'a regulation of the body's size and contours, its appetite, posture, gestures, and general comportment in space and the appearance of each of its visible parts' (Bartky 1990: 80; 148). Femininity, then, can be described as a strategy of social control whose purpose is to preserve and defend the status quo and define the norms of feminine acceptability and deviance. It is a disciplinary project that works through the internalization of inferiority, placing 'a panoptical male connoisseur [. . .] within the consciousness of most women' who experience their selves/bodies as seen and judged by this anonymous patriarchal Other (Bartky 1990: 72). Following this reasoning, it is suggested that women have lost control over the cultural production of their own image and they are defined by phallogentric imperatives that are neither benevolent nor innocent.

Feminist critics are intent on deconstructing these normalizing representations of femininity that objectify the female subject and tie her to the notions of passivity,

submissiveness and docility. They argue that the dismissal of femininity is crucial in liberating women from their feminine shackles and producing a feminist awareness. In Susan Bordo's words, this solution encapsulates 'the feminist "anti-thesis"' that subsumes patriarchal institutions and practices under the oppressor/oppressed model and insists that 'women are the *done to*, not the *doers*' (Bordo 1993: 22). The underlying belief is that feminism and femininity are mutually exclusive and one cannot be feminine and feminist at the same time. The adoption of one of these identities is achieved at the expense of the other, insofar as any articulation of femininity (behavioral or visual) is inextricably linked to a lack of feminist credentials. As Joanne Hollows notes, these claims are founded on the assumption that 'women's investments in "femininity" [. . .] block the development of a feminist consciousness' (Hollows 2000: 17). According to this logic, the optimal feminist resolution would be to refuse the patriarchal objectifying gaze and reject all feminine attributes and modes of self-presentation. In this way, Carolyn Heilbrun urges her female reader to 'dissociate her personhood from her feminine appeal', declaring that women who 'have done with the business of being women, and can let loose their strength must be the most powerful creatures in the world' (Heilbrun 1988: 54; 128).⁷

Consequently, it is the feminist critic's duty to assume the social function of demystifier in the attempt to enlighten the 'ordinary' feminine woman who obviously suffers from a false consciousness and has to be guided to throw off the mask of femininity. As Imelda Whelehan suggests, the only way out of this media absorption and patriarchal assimilation will be to separate fact from fiction and thus, she declares that 'the role of the feminist of the 90's is to prove herself equal to demythologising the

powerful and ever-changing myths about the female self and nature perpetuated in the mass media and other state apparatuses' (Whelehan 1995: 229). A contrast is set up between the 'real' feminism of the women's movement and the 'fictional feminism' of popular culture, 'made up' and 'grow[ing] out of [. . .] fictional narratives – films, television shows, magazine fiction and [. . .] best-selling novels' (Loudermilk 1997: 2). As Bonnie Dow suggests, there is a distinction between an authentic feminist realm and its compromised and distorted popular simulation, noting that 'it is [. . .] vital to know "what really happened"' while 'it is also illuminating to know what popular media told us was happening' (Dow 1996: xvi). In effect, this line of thought presumes that it is possible to differentiate historical facts that truthfully and accurately record the feminist movement's events, rhetoric and actions from the media interpretations that translate the meaning of feminism into public discourses and, in the process, absorb, dilute and redefine its original messages. In the course of this popular attack on feminist authenticity and authority, feminism is said to lose its radicalism and become attached to more conservative agendas as its images of 'liberation', 'freedom' and 'independence' are detached from their feminist roots and 'now postulate many media forms because they *sell*' (Hollows 2000: 194).

While I will shortly return to this recuperative and co-optive tendency in the media's constructions of feminism, I want to distance myself from the notion of an elitist feminist club of a chosen few who can illuminate the obfuscated and silent majority of women. I stress that feminist criticism should not, and importantly cannot, position itself outside of popular culture as it is always within and part of the society that it strives to criticize. Feminism has to consider women's ambiguous and contradictory practices that

do not fall into rigid and immutable categories of feminist resistance and feminine conformity but, instead, blur the binary opposition between them. As I will discuss, feminist critics have oversimplified the problematic surrounding femininity as they have not taken into account the multiplicity and contradictoriness of gender definitions. I propose that the feminist protest against the damaging effects of feminine myths does not have to culminate in a counterproductive anti-feminine stance that opposes the value of femininity in itself and *tout court*. In fact, femininity is adopted as a paradoxical and multivalent subject position that enables the female individual to gain feelings of empowerment and control while simultaneously subjecting her to cultural norms of appearance and behavior. Instead of being unwitting dupes mystified by a manipulative ideology, women take an active part in the production of their femininity as they negotiate their bodies and their lives within the structural constraints of a gendered social order.

Hence, I do not believe that feminism can provide a blueprint for women's conduct, reiterating the correct line on their involvement in popular culture and encouraging them to rise above this contaminated domain. I reject the binary rationale that posits the popular realm as a repository of retrograde and oppressive representations and the feminist movement as the habitat of the enlightened and liberated critic. I am deeply suspicious of the possibility of discovering an authentic feminist self who is able to lift her consciousness beyond the hegemonic gender constraints into a transcendent realm of immunity to cultural images. I dispute a rigid and dualistic contextualization that locates femininity within the popular landscape while feminism is situated outside the popular in a non-feminine realm. I believe that the polarization of feminist critic and

feminine victim relies on an undifferentiated definition of popular culture as a site of uniformity and homogeneity, presenting *a priori*, monolithic images of sexism and patriarchy. In order to create a fictional dichotomy between the popular *femme* and the anti-popular feminist, popular culture is misrepresented as a patriarchal apparatus that perpetuates passivity and conformity through the powerful rhetoric of the *feminine mystique*, with the ultimate goal to reproduce the status quo.⁸ In a similar manner, femininity is described as a monosemic and oppressive cultural identity that operates as a non-contradictory and unvarying Other, 'a necessary fiction' that produces 'an oppositional feminist identity' (Hollows 2000: 17).⁹ This *either/or* logic is also employed on the rival side of the debate, exemplified by popular fabrications and misconceptions of feminists as unfeminine man-haters.

In the following, I want to problematize uniform definitions of popular culture and, thereby, undermine the accompanying polarity between feminism and femininity. I contend that, within any historical moment, the meanings of femininity and feminism are not fixed and static but they are contingent on transformation, contestation and change. I emphasize the heterogeneity and contradictoriness of feminine/feminist subject positions and I propose that these apparently oppositional identities are placed in a relation of tension and struggle rather than mutual exclusivity. Accordingly, I resist insufficiently textured and undiscerningly dualistic theories that do not allow for flexible and pluralistic modes of feminine and feminist subjectivities and I maintain that popular culture opens up the impasse of thinking of feminism and femininity as antitheses. The popular landscape represents the negotiating terrain where the feminist/feminine opposition is questioned and the meanings of both categories are reworked. Rather than promoting a

simplistic binarism, popular culture puts forward multiple layers of signification that enable a reconsideration of the shifting and historically specific relationship between feminism and femininity. I assert that the intersection of feminism and popular culture and the configurations of popular feminism and/or postfeminism cannot be mapped on to a feminine/feminist dichotomy that has structured both feminist and popular debates. Instead, the popular provides a contradictory and creative context where feminism and femininity, critique and complicity are brought together in an effort to 'have it both ways', to espouse notions of female liberation and choice while promoting the feminization of women's bodies.

Thus, the popular cannot be discussed as a domain of unassailable oppression and domination where hegemonic power is imposed from above. Instead, it can be seen as a site of exchange where power meets resistance and transgression is always within hegemonic limits. In John Fiske's words,

popular culture is contradictory: It is shot through with contradictions that escape control. Those who accuse it of being simplistic, of reducing everything to its most obvious points, of denying all the subtle complexity, all the dense texture of human sentiment and of social existence, are applying inappropriate criteria and blinding themselves to where the complexities of popular culture are actually to be found. (Fiske 1989: 120)

Following Fiske, popular culture cannot be conceptualized with recourse to pre-existing agendas and dualistic models that foreclose the possibility of a pluralistic *both/and*. As he

notes, the popular realm is full of ‘gaps, contradictions and inadequacies’ and it always entails ‘the expression of both domination and subordination, of both power and resistance’ (Fiske 1989: 126; 5). Popular culture displays the struggle between these competing forces and it establishes a space where the popular consumer can actively and *producerly* negotiate the potentially oppressive effects of power structures.¹⁰ Fiske rejects the notion of the cultural dupe who is ‘the victim of the system’ and, instead, he focuses on the subject’s productive capacity as an agent/consumer, stressing ‘how people cope with the system’ and how they employ their resourcefulness and creativity to ‘make do with what is available’ (Fiske 1989: 162; 105; 5).

Drawing on Michel de Certeau’s theory of everyday life as a site of subversive tactics, Fiske seeks to unpack the term consumer and reveal the productivity involved in the act of consumption (de Certeau 1984).¹¹ He advocates ‘an entirely different kind of production called “consumption”’ that uses ‘the products of capitalism [as] the raw materials, the primary resources of popular culture’ (Fiske 1989: 142). Fiske makes a case for the ‘active consumption’ or the ‘semiotic activity’ of the consumer who acts as a ‘poacher, encroaching on the terrain of the cultural landowner [. . .] and stealing what he or she wants without being caught and subjected to the laws of the land’ (Fiske 1989: 142; 143). It is in this process of *bricolage*, of recombining and reusing the established cultural products that the possibilities of resignification and subversion occur. Rather than absorbing a number of pre-fabricated meanings, consumers rearticulate and appropriate the commodities at their disposal in ways that are suitable to and even liberating for their situated practices of living. Accordingly, consumption cannot be understood as conformist and conservative inaction that reproduces the status quo. On the contrary, the

consumers' raids or *guerrilla tactics* can point to the progressive political potential of popular culture that finds its expression on the micro-political level and is concerned with redistributing power within the network of social relations.¹² The politics of popular culture takes as its object the individual's resistances and evasions in the minutiae of everyday life through which s/he constructs meanings and creates a sense of identity. This consumer power may not cause a radically revolutionary effect but it taps into the popular domain as a 'social resource that can fuel [. . .] the motor of social change' (Fiske 1989: 193).

Fiske's insistence on consumer agency and active consumption has been criticized by some commentators as promoting an uncritical and unqualified 'cultural populism' that hails the consumer as a cultural hero and 'fails to connect consumption with production' (Storey 1997: 204).¹³ Fiske is accused of a romantic celebration of popular culture that adopts the term 'resistance' *tout court* to save the consumers from their mute status as passive and helpless dupes. In the course of this rescue mission, the themes of popular pleasure and empowerment are pursued 'to a point at which anything which is consumed and is popular is also seen as oppositional' (McRobbie 1994: 39). As John Storey notes, 'it is at best an uncritical echo of liberal claims about the "sovereignty of the consumer", and at worst it is uncritically complicit with prevailing "free market" ideology' (Storey 1997: 206).¹⁴ By pinpointing the consumer's ability to construct and acquire plural identities through commodities, insufficient attention is given to the forces of domination and ideological manipulation that continue to structure and determine personal experiences and practices. In Joanne Hollows' words, 'the emphasis on the

freedom to play with lifestyles often neglects very basic questions about access to opportunities to consume' (Hollows 2000: 133).

I agree that Fiske builds his theory on a distinction between popular and hegemonic pleasures, asserting that popular consumers can enter 'a supermarket of meanings' from which they make their own selection, which in turn 'they cook up into their own culture' (Fiske 1989: 132). S/he 'enter[s] the represented world [. . .] at will and bring[s] back from it the meanings and pleasures that [s/he] choose[s]' (Fiske 1989: 133). The problem with this argument is that it presents the hegemonic and popular realms in terms of mutual exteriority and antithesis, presuming an autonomous space of liberal pluralism in which people can arguably stay outside hegemony. As Fiske notes, popular culture is formed 'in reaction to [but] never as part of the forces of domination' and he clearly distinguishes between 'popular pleasures' that 'contain elements of the oppositional, the evasive, the scandalous [. . .] the resistant' and their opposite, the 'muted' 'hegemonic' pleasures 'offered by ideological conformity' (Fiske 1989: 43; 127). These hegemonic pleasures are the means by which 'power and its disciplinary thrust are internalised' and they are at odds with the 'bottom-up', popular pleasures that 'exist in some relationship of opposition to power' (Fiske 1989: 49). In his exploration of popular culture, Fiske focuses on 'those moments where *hegemony fails*, where ideology is weaker than resistance, where social control is met by indiscipline' (Fiske 1989: 177; my emphasis).

To be fair to Fiske, his writings on active consumption and consumer agency are more complex than simplistic reiterations of a cultural populist stance. He is clearly aware that 'popular experience is always formed within structures of dominance' and that

'popular meanings and pleasure are never free of the forces that produce subordination' (Fiske 1989: 134). Fiske also captures the tension between the subject's experiences of autonomy and oppression, noting that

the people are not the helpless subjects of an irresistible ideological system, but neither are they free-willed [. . .] individuals; they are a shifting set of social allegiances formed by social agents within a social terrain that is theirs only by virtue of their constant refusal to cede it to the imperialism of the powerful. (Fiske 1989: 45-46)

Fiske is astute in his analysis of the struggle inherent in popular culture but he tends to adhere to dualistic notions of an imperialistic power structure that comes under attack by everyday popular resistances 'that make that ideology work so hard and insistently to maintain itself and its values' (Fiske 1989: 21). He overestimates this popular threat and exaggerates the strength of the semiotic democracy by likening the popular battle to a two-way force in which the partners are implicitly considered separate but equal. In this way, Fiske readily adopts the notions of popular choice and resistance without problematizing and situating these liberatory ideals within hegemonic constraints. This can amount to an apologetic "'yes, but . . .'" discourse' that does not relate the popular to a thoroughly social and political context and downplays the structural oppressions in favor of the representation of 'a rosy world "where there's always a way to redemption"' (Ang 1996: 139).

I contend that Fiske's notion of a failure of hegemonic rule relies on a one-dimensional conception of power as a uniform and homogeneous *bloc* that is undermined by the tactical raids of popular culture. Following the theorist Martin-Barbero, I am wary of an identification of the popular with 'an intrinsic, spontaneous, resistance with which the subordinate oppose the hegemonic' and I am resolute that the hegemonic is located within the texture of the popular, and vice-versa (Martin-Barbero 1988: 448). As I maintain throughout this study, hegemony cannot be explained by a dualistic logic that sees the spheres of domination and resistance as incompatible and antagonistic. I have tried to move beyond this closed circuit in my theorization of power as an inherently contradictory field of force that interlaces complicity and critique, subordination and creation. In this ambiguous and changing matrix, power is not exerted through brute force but through strategies of incorporation and interpellation and the resulting forms of resistance are not just 'ways to find redemption, but also a matter of capitulation – invested in them is not just pleasure, but also pain, anger, frustration – or sheer despair' (Ang 1996: 141).

The popular, then, occupies a theoretically and politically unstable position as it is both a repository of agency and confinement, conformity and evasion. It is a battlefield on which a conflict is fought out between competing interests and values, displaying a shifting balance of forces whose ideological direction is not definitive or stable. It cannot be conceptualized in static terms or through recourse to generalized absolutes that do not do justice to its changeability and incoherence. The popular involves 'an ever-proliferating set of heterogeneous and dispersed, intersecting and contradicting cultural practices' whose meanings are not historically fixed but 'always the result of an act of

“articulation”” (Ang 1996: 125; Storey 1997: 128).¹⁵ As Storey remarks, ‘popular culture is a concept of ideological contestation and variability, to be filled and emptied, to be articulated and disarticulated, in a range of different and competing ways’ (Storey 1997: 202). Popular articulations are never total or final but they are subject to continual rearticulations and relocations of the signifying links. The unfinished nature of the articulatory process helps to explain popular culture’s inherent contradictions and its complicitous critique symptomatic of a postmodern age of confusion in which uncertainty and ambiguity are built-in features.

Thus, popular culture is caught in a dialectic between the processes of production and incorporation and the activities of consumption and subversion. It is a terrain of exchange that refuses to be contained within an *either/or* logic that categorizes it as a site of cultural democracy or a structure of cultural oppression. These antithetical depictions of popular culture are unnecessarily narrow, too preoccupied with finding a correct critical position that would be *either* a romantic celebration of the popular *or* a recognition of the ideological power that underlies popular operations. I propose that, while it is clearly important to situate popular culture within oppressive relations of power, this line of thought is insufficient to analyse questions of consumer appropriation and use. In the same way, to assert the vitality and activity of consumption is not to deny that consumption can be passive, while trying to save the popular consumers from their mute and duped status is not to deny that popular culture may seek to manipulate them. Within the popular realm, dominant ideologies can be disturbed and meanings can be contested but this act of criticism is always vulnerable to recuperation and resignification. In other words, I believe that questions of agency and active consumption have to be

related to questions of social structure and production. It is only in the ambivalent and paradoxical *blur of the binary* that the double bind of consumption/production can be contingently located and discussed.

This sense of the popular as a place of contradiction carries the potential to explode the dichotomies that have structured the debates surrounding the intersection of feminism and popular culture. The popular domain's involvement in the processes of articulation opens up a space for the renegotiation and realignment of the polarity between feminist and popular contexts, between the images of the feminist critic and the popular *femme*. The poles of feminism and femininity are brought into contact on the contentious sites of popular feminism and/or postfeminism on which they no longer exist as fiercely opposed alternatives. Postfeminism establishes a link between previously incompatible antitheses as it depicts the coming together of feminist themes and issues with feminine values and appearances. In this way, women can be both feminine and feminist at the same time, without losing their integrity and being relegated to the position of passive dupes. Femininity is no longer described as feminism's 'other' but it actively contributes to the feminist goal of emancipation and self-determination. This involves a redefinition and re-evaluation of both categories, in the course of which pluralistic and contradictory subjectivities emerge in the postfeminist space between feminism and femininity.

Postfeminism does not adhere to monosemic and irreconcilable definitions of feminist and feminine identities but breaks down their opposition and carves out a new subjective space for women. The postfeminist self stages a re-sexualization and feminization of the feminist body and it constructs a new femininity (or, new

femininities) around the notions of autonomy and agency. These sexualized representations are not meant to portray women as victimized objects but as knowing and active sexual subjects. Rosalind Gill aptly describes this process as ‘a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification’ in the constructions of feminism and femininity in popular culture (Gill 2003: 103). The central mechanism of this postfeminist re-inscription involves a resignification of the language and meanings of femininity. Feminine signifiers are reclaimed for a postfeminist make-over and transformation whereby they are distanced from their patriarchal connotations of female exploitation and they are redefined in feminist terms of self-gratification and liberation. These acts of rearticulation and re-contextualization establish a new signifying relation between feminism and femininity that no longer understands female power as compromised by feminine identity. On the contrary, feminine subjectivities and bodies become the locations of choice and creativity, enabling feminist action and female autonomy.

In the following, I argue that the postfeminist link between feminism and femininity is highly contentious and variable as it signifies in a number of contradictory ways. The postfeminist nirvana of ‘having it all’ and combining feminist and feminine ideals has to be problematized as a field of tension and struggle rather than unity and reconciliation. While I welcome the deployment and resignification of femininity as an active and potentially emancipatory site, I contend that the notion of sexual subjecthood always entails a simultaneous objectification. The movement from patriarchal object to postfeminist subject does not cancel previous significations of subordination but it implies that subject formation or *assujettissement* becomes inseparable from subjection. Thus, I believe that the postfeminist self occupies a paradoxical position of being both

subject and object, concomitantly empowered and disempowered. The ambivalence and contradictoriness inherent in postfeminist subjectivities give rise to multiple definitions of popular feminism and/or postfeminism, ranging from Girl Power's celebration of femininity to its rejection as a form of retrosexism. The postfeminist movement is caught in a continual fluctuation between these various standpoints and its positioning largely depends on the meanings and significations attributed to femininity. While some commentators embrace the fluidity and plurality of feminine identities, others find fault with the narrowness and limitations of femininity. The resignification of feminine myths is understood both as a form of resistance and critique from within hegemonic constructions as well as an ineffectual intertextual sophistication that will not lead to change. The presence of these interpretative possibilities points to the varied voices and positions that co-exist and conflict on the postfeminist landscape.

Postfeminism's multiplicity is also reinforced by its emphasis on 'choice', a notion that has been used in consumerist and feminist discourses alike but with seemingly incongruous effects. Postfeminism draws on an ideology of choice in order to promote femininity as an opportunity for and an instance of a feminist standpoint within consumerism. This postfeminist choice is hailed as a compromise between feminism and popular culture, between feminist demands and feminine standards. However, the movement's detractors maintain that a distinction has to be made between feminism's endorsement of choice as a sign of freedom and independence from structural inequalities and the choice of popular culture, designed to reduce feminist social goals to individual lifestyle. Popular culture is said to employ the rhetoric of choice in order to substitute individual endeavor for feminism's collective campaigning to change the balance of

power, thereby recuperating and distorting this revolutionary principle for antifeminist purposes. I will explore these claims of pluralistic/limited femininity and the notion of feminist/popular choices and I suggest that postfeminism's controversy proceeds from the friction between the contexts of femininity, feminism and popular culture.

Postfeminism's conflicting characterizations as an overly optimistic Girl Power and an unanimously pessimistic retrosexism represent two polar perspectives in a multi-focal postfeminist spectrum that eschews binary categories. I assert that the most challenging and provocative representations of postfeminism can be found in the struggle to hold together its competing components in a flexible structure that displays a *both/and* logic.

On the Girl Power side of the dialogue, the contradictions between femininity, feminism and popular culture have been resolved in an unproblematic unity with the purpose to create a new, popular brand of feminism in which a 'grab-what-you-want attitude combines entrepreneurial individualism with a confident display of high femininity' (Hinds and Stacey 2001: 154). This 'Girlie' feminism performs a glamorous make-over of the drab and unfashionable women's liberationists of the past as it effects a 'shift from the *monstrous outsiders* of the 1960s and 1970s to the *incorporated Ms* of the 1990s' (Hinds and Stacey 2001: 155; emphasis in text). Rather than affirming women's mature sense of capability and resisting their denigration as childish, Girl Power redefines the complexities of female subjectivity by reclaiming once disparaged elements of femininity and girliness. The feminine Girlie is both a response to the bra-burner epithet that has haunted media representations of feminists as well as 'a subversion of the pin-up image' (Whelehan 2000: 37). The Girlie stance discards the notions of an anti-feminine and anti-popular feminism and a sexist femininity as it strives to construct a

middle ground between feminism and popular culture by blending feminist and feminine characteristics in a new, improved mix. As Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards proclaim in their *Girlie* manifesto:

Girlie culture is a rebellion against the false impression that since women don't want to be sexually exploited, they don't want to be sexual; against the necessity of brass-buttoned, red-suited seriousness to infiltrate a man's world; against the anachronistic belief that [. . .] girls and power don't mix. (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 137)

Girlies are adamant that they can emulate feminine standards and yet be confident and active. They can compete successfully alongside their male counterparts and attain equality without sacrificing all forms of 'pink-packaged femininity' (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 137). In fact, their empowerment and assertiveness are directly linked to their feminine identities and their ability to resignify the language of femininity.

Girlies insist that they are not trapped by their femininity but they can gain control by acknowledging and using their insider position within consumer culture. *Girl Power* combines cultural confidence with feminist awareness and it emphasizes that the traditional/patriarchal connotations of girlishness can be interrupted by alternative modes of production/consumption. As Baumgardner and Richards explain, the term 'Girlie' depicts the 'intersection of culture and feminism' and it 'encompasses the tabooed symbols of women's feminine enculturation – Barbie dolls, make-up, fashion magazines' (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 136). Girlies reject the status of victimized dupes and

declare that they can wield these popular/patriarchal instruments for their own purposes. They maintain that they have achieved an empowering and productive balance between the previously competing forces of feminism, femininity and popular culture. In this way,

Using makeup isn't a sign of our sway to the marketplace and the male gaze; it can be sexy, campy, ironic, or simply decorating ourselves without the loaded issues. [. . .] What we loved as girls was good and, because of feminism, we know *how to make girl stuff work for us*. (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 136; my emphasis)

Girlie feminism embraces 'the pink things of stereotypical girlhood' and it reconstructs them as confident expressions of choice and self-differentiation (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 136). The myths of femininity that have historically been imprinted on the female body as signs of docility and subordination are revitalized in Girlie rhetoric that establishes a distance between image and identity and, in this new signifying gap, redefines feminine modes and subjectivities. The central tenet of Girl Power is that femininity is powerful and empowering, endowing the female subject with the agency to create her self and negotiate the possibilities of her gender role. Women can use their femininity to compliment and even further the qualities of subjecthood and independence endorsed by the feminist movement. One can argue that Girlie feminism offers a way out of the one-sided attention to the restrictions of feminine conventions that has obscured women's engagement in the constructions of femininity. The claim of a new meaning for old symbols establishes a space for the inventive and potentially subversive

use of cultural signs and a refashioning of feminine identities. Rather than focusing on the dehumanising aspects of gender socializations, Girlies expose and exploit their constructed nature in order to reveal the creativity and fluidity of feminine traditions and subjectivities. This implies a radical reconsideration of cultural practices and forms such as make-up, high heels and cosmetic surgery as vehicles for autonomy and self-determination rather than symbols of discipline and oppression.

Taken to its logical conclusion, the Girlie feminist stance makes a case for femininity politics or 'femmenism' that forges its political theory from the re-appropriation of feminist discourses into the readings of femininity. As Jeannine Delombard describes this feminine politics by alluding to Audre Lorde's famous precept, 'femmenism is using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house' (Delombard 1995: 22).¹⁶ 'Femmenism' implies using the signs and accoutrements of femininity to challenge and resignify the stable notions of gender formations. Gender is understood as an analytical category, to be questioned and reworked from within its own conventions. Girlie feminism relies on feminist theory's deconstructive strain to conceptualize femininity as a construct and artifice but, instead of dismissing the feminine *tout court*, it argues for its reconstruction and resignification. Displacing essentialist and patriarchal versions of an authentic feminine identity, Girlies try to integrate feminist opposition and postfeminist appropriation in their re-inscription of femininity as liberating and empowering. The simplistic identification of feminine norms as unequivocally repressive is problematized in favor of a diversified definition of multiple femininities. As Ang notes, 'being a woman [. . .] can now mean the adoption of many different identities,

composed of a whole range of subject positions, not predetermined by immutable definitions of femininity' (Ang 1996: 94).

There are different and even contradictory ways to inhabit a feminine subject position (ways of being a woman) and the adoption of a feminine subjectivity is not definitive and total but always involves constant self-(re)construction and self-representation. The norms of femininity are not eternal or innate qualities but they are cultural constructs whose meanings are made up and remade in specific historical and social conditions. There is no single feminine identity but diverse and manifold feminine identities, cross-cut by class, sexual, racial and generational considerations. Moreover, a woman is not permanently fixed on the scale of femininity but occupies transitory positions as a change in her body shape and the natural progression of age can alter her feminine appeal. In this way, gender identity is both 'multiple and partial, ambiguous and incoherent, permanently in process of being articulated, disarticulated and rearticulated' (Ang 1996: 125). In Girlie rhetoric, the changeability of this never-ending operation of becoming a woman is not conceptualized in relation to the tyranny of the *feminine mystique* that marks out the boundaries between the feminine and the unfeminine, the beautiful and the ugly, the ordinary and the deviant. On the contrary, the mobility and fluidity of gender constructions allow the female subject to actively and creatively reinvent and redefine her femininity.

While I welcome Girlie feminism's conjunction of feminism and popular culture and its diversification of the feminine construct, I emphasize that this redefinition and resignification of femininity is always contradictory as it continually threatens to reinscribe and reinforce phallogocentricity. As I have argued, the resignificatory practice is

always positioned ambiguously as an appropriation of the center's logos and a deconstruction from within, vacillating between complicity and critique, agency and confinement. Accordingly, the Girlie's assertion of dynamic self-fulfillment and feminine self-expression is not unanimously liberating but it can also appear as a trap of conformity and disempowerment. As Susan Bordo declares, 'employing the language of femininity to protest the conditions of the female world will always involve ambiguities' (Bordo 1993: 177). Paradoxically, Girl Power functions within and is animated by the same cultural imagery that transfers onto women the labels of inferiority and powerlessness. Girlie's resignification of femininity in relation to feminist ideas of agency and control can simultaneously be described as 'a move towards independence' and 'a repetition of traditional dependence [. . .] and subordination' (Stacey 1994: 186). Girlie feminism operates within a set of paradoxes that construct the feminine self as both a feminist subject and an object of patriarchal consumption/production. Girlie's in-between position implies that it can be recuperated by its patriarchal significations and associations and thus, 'Girlie is both "progress" *and* the "selling of feminism lite"' (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 139; emphasis in text).

The movement's critics deplore that the Girlies' celebrated energies and powers are channelled, in their opinion, towards a confined and limited goal, the adoption and creation of femininity. Although Girlies are convinced that they are free to construct their own appearances and identities through their personal power of self-determination, their range of choices is suspiciously narrow as their empowerment is restricted to the level of feminine attractiveness. According to these critical viewpoints, the notion that women are confident and assertive agents cannot fully account for the fact that the Girlie look is

similar to, if not synonymous with, patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty. As Shelley Budgeon points out, this form of agency is contingent upon 'self-objectification and dependence upon the approving gaze of others' (Budgeon 1994: 66). In this model of social power, women are offered the promise of autonomy and they are endowed with the status of active subjecthood by voluntarily objectifying themselves and actively *choosing* to employ their capacities in the pursuit of a feminine appearance and a sexualized image. Rosalind Gill laments that in this way, 'sexual objectification can be presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active [. . .] female subjects' (Gill 2003: 104). It is argued that the focus on femininity as an avenue to self-determination covers up and obscures a deeper exploitation than objectification – 'one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalised to form a new disciplinary regime' (Gill 2003: 104). In effect, Girl Power's assertion of a feminine subjectivity is a postfeminist guise for, but nonetheless a pernicious return to, the narcissistic acts of self-policing and discipline that have structured disempowering and subjugating versions of femininity. The feelings of control that Girlies gain through the construction of a feminine identity are achieved at the cost of self-alienation and self-objectification and ultimately, they undermine the feminist movement's indispensable critique of oppressive cultural images.

At the core of this critical attack on Girlie feminism, femininity firmly remains located within a dominant ideology that seeks to constitute it in narrow and monosemic ways. It is suggested that the mode of femininity has not been resignified or even modified in the course of its postfeminist re-appropriation and it has only been tinkered with but not redrafted. Girlie's critics are resolute that the feminine conventions and

signifiers cannot successfully be reconstructed and weaned off their patriarchal meanings and they insist that femininity continues to be inscribed on the female body by a particularly insidious and manipulative disciplinary power that is both everywhere and nowhere, 'the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular' (Bartky 1990: 74). This absence of a formal structure or authority designed to carry out the feminine directive creates the impression that the production of femininity is entirely self-willed and voluntary and, therefore, there is no need for social change. In fact, Girlie proponents assuredly proclaim that 'Girl culture assumes that women are free agents in the world, that they start out strong and that the odds are in their favour' (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 134). This vision of Girl Power plays on the illusion that women are no longer constrained by inequalities or power imbalances and they inhabit a new and enlightened era of *choiceoisie* in which they can *choose* to use femininity as a means to fulfillment and empowerment. Consequently, Girlie feminism is criticized for abstracting women's self-representations from an understanding of the complex power relations that frame them and substituting this political awareness with an uncritically positive and liberatory message that women are in control of their lives.

Girl Power celebrates an individualistic agency that personalises the political and collective agendas of feminism and pretends that 'the power of self-definition is all about [. . .] "making choices", regardless, it seems, of who controls the "choices" available' (Whelehan 2000: 4). Girlie's intersection of feminist and popular contexts represents politics as a function of personality, transforming feminism's demands for independence and equality into an ideology of choice. As Elspeth Probyn reveals, 'the question of "what do women want" (Was will das Weib?) has been answered. The answer is that they

want “choice” (Probyn 1990: 156). This is reinforced by the feminist writer Gloria Steinem who declares that ‘the greatest gift we can give one another is the power to make a choice. The power to choose is even more important than the choices we make’ (Steinem 1995: xxvi). Girlie culture has incorporated this feminist insight into its own popular rhetoric while simultaneously refracting the notions of self-determination and autonomy through the lenses of consumerism and femininity. These values are appropriated from feminism’s political agenda and they are placed in the context of a consumerist individualism that redefines feminism with reference to femininity and reduces it to a matter of lifestyle. The Girlie movement addresses women as individuals and popular consumers who are encouraged to produce their personality through the work of femininity, through the consumption of clothes and make-up. Rather than focusing on broader areas of social oppression, Girlie feminism understands its primary role as promoting the individual woman’s independence and liberty to make choices. Freedom comes to be seen as the personal freedom to define one’s self through consumption. The emphasis is displaced from collective needs and abstract ideas of justice onto the individual consumer’s pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment. The attainment and experience of personal choice are depicted as feminist achievements and the answer to the movement’s liberatory aspirations.

Critics are highly suspicious of this solipsistic trend within Girl Power as it depoliticizes feminist themes while also advancing an individualized solution that revolves around the adoption of a seemingly conventional femininity. As Myra Macdonald notes, what is disturbing about this feminine ruse is the tenaciousness and the alacrity with which the myths of femininity have been ‘defensively reinvented, against

the cultural and social changes in women's lives' (Macdonald 1995: 220). The images of femininity have, chameleon-like, displayed the capacity to both change hue and yet to survive, to adopt a feminist meaning of confident and autonomous self-determination and yet be recuperated by patriarchal relations. Commentators claim that Girl Power's array of feminine choices masks the difference between the social goals of the feminist movement and its own sexualized and objectifying femininity. They uphold a dualistic distinction between feminism's collective choice of independence and Girl Power's populist choice of feminine individualism. Accordingly, it is argued that Girlie culture does not depict a positive move away from passive objectification to an embrace of an autonomous and liberated subject. On the contrary, at its worst, Girl Power acts as a patriarchal and popular defence mechanism that relies on the rhetoric of feminine choice to continually remake itself in order to contain and co-opt feminist ideas. In Imelda Whelehan's words, Girl Power is a 'rhetorical device' that is 'all too prone to appropriation for essentially patriarchal ends' (Whelehan 2000: 45).

In effect, it is suggested that Girl Power's ideology of *choiceoisie* does not operate on freedom of choice but it 'reproduces the solid nature of the status quo' by urging women to 'get on the bandwagon, to buy into the old as the new' (Probyn 1990: 152). The celebrated choice of femininity is not an instance of feminist empowerment but a cunning ploy of popular culture to reaffirm patriarchal conventions while repackaging them as distinctly personal and even feminist desires.¹⁷ Girlie feminism's dismissal of a collective struggle in favor of personal problems and solutions may block change as it transforms active politics into a passive narcissism. By co-opting the language of choice and opportunity, Girl Power's populist stance manages to sustain a symbolic attachment

to the feminist idea of equality but, at the same time, it depoliticizes and redefines this revolutionary principle. This creates a semblance of advancement and progress without necessarily furthering or reinforcing this egalitarian right on the structural level.¹⁸

Moreover, critics argue that this manipulation of feminist ideas and terminology can be described as a key hegemonic strategy, fundamental to the political management of conflict and opposition. As has been noted, the discourse of choice and opportunity has 'nothing to do with "resistance", but everything to do with incorporation' as the imperative of choice *interpellates* the subject as active and empowered while drawing him/her into the seductions of consumption (Ang 1996: 12). Individuals are impelled to constantly reconstruct and reinvent themselves and, in this pursuit, life is defined as the ability to make an ever-increasing number of choices. Choice is promoted as the ultimate realization of freedom and sovereignty and its ideological function as a prime discursive mechanism is concealed. The feminist ideals of autonomy and independence are hijacked by a supposedly hostile and patriarchal popular culture that bases its politics on the promotion of personal achievement while implementing practices and policies that reaffirm the conditions of male dominance and female subordination. Vicki Coppock describes this process of appropriation whereby the 'established order' is able to 'maintain its centres of power' and simultaneously provide 'the illusion of negotiation' that 'accommodate[s], even incorporate[s]' forms of opposition 'through what appears to be a more progressive discourse' (Coppock 1995: 183).¹⁹ In this way, feminism falls prey to a conservative manoeuvre of recuperation and incorporation that pretends to respond to feminist principles and tenets but ignores the movement's ideological

challenge by simply adopting the surface terminology, without taking on board the ideology that underlies it.

From this perspective, Girl Power, or any other postfeminist convergence of feminism and popular culture, can only be interpreted as a media attempt to capitalize on feminism's liberatory appeal while containing and neutralizing its radical politics. Feminism's entry into the mainstream and the emergence of popular feminism and/or postfeminism are identified as powerful capitalist and patriarchal tactics to manage feminism's revolutionary, social movement by accommodating its liberal discourses for antifeminist purposes. This line of thought propagates the idea that postfeminism is nothing more than 'a knee-jerk reaction on the part of the mainstream in defence of the *status quo*' (Gamble 2001: 46).²⁰ This pseudo-feminism urges women to literally buy into the images of freedom and liberation while warping the ideals of feminism to conform to the cultural stereotypes that tie the female subject directly to her feminine appearance. Accordingly, Imelda Whelehan suggests that this reconciliation of feminine and feminist ideologies marks a postfeminist era of 'retrosexism' that recasts gender polarities in pseudo-Darwinian terms. Whelehan explores the nostalgic quality of popular images and contemporary television that hark back to a time and place 'peopled by "real" women and humorous cheeky chappies' (Whelehan 2000: 11). She argues that, on the level of popular culture, one can witness a flourishing of 'nostalgia for the "old order" of babes, breasts and uncomplicated relationships' (Whelehan 2000: 178). These media representations of women are characterized by a 'complexly expressed, more sophisticated' form of sexism that makes 'women's oppression seem sexy' and promotes the idea that 'we inhabit a world [. . .] where we can play at sexy vamp with no ill effect

because we are “in control” of the look we create’ (Whelehan 2000: 7; 179). This lifestyle politics denies the existence of a victim culture and, thereby, it undermines feminism’s political consciousness of the oppressive and limited nature of hegemonic choices.

While Whelehan’s argument is clearly compelling as it highlights the dangers of an individualistic stance that dismisses the need for a collective politics, it does not provide an understanding of the complex and pluralistic relations between feminism, femininity and popular culture. Whelehan’s focus on ‘harking back’ to a bygone and mythical age is in danger of missing what is new and potentially subversive about these sexualized depictions of women that are organized around the notions of autonomy and power. Portrayed as responses to feminism that acknowledge the positive gains of the women’s liberation movement, these postfeminist forms of feminine subjectivity operate from different premises than backlash suppositions that simplistically imply a wholesale rejection of feminist ideals. I maintain that the intersection of feminism and popular culture cannot be conceptualized as an insidious and continuous death knell on feminism as it exhibits the possibility of postfeminist resignification. At the same time, I insist that this resignification is always paradoxical and it cannot be seen as an unproblematic union of feminism and femininity. In this way, feminism and popular culture can simultaneously be discussed as both the worst enemies and the best allies in women’s ongoing struggle for equality and power. Importantly, contradictoriness remains an inherent feature of the postfeminist discourse that incorporates both retrosexist and Girl Power interpretations in an effort to elude their *either/or* distinction. Popular feminism

and/or postfeminism represent problematical sites of exchange that hold together polarized antagonists in a non-dualistic and pluralistic space.

3. The Postfeminist Woman: Singletons, Cinderellas and Supergirls

3.1 The Postfeminist Singleton and the Dilemma of *Having it All*

All I ever wanted was to be rich and to be successful and to have three kids and a husband who was waiting home for me at night to tickle my feet. [. . .] And look at me! I don't even like my hair.

Ally McBeal

'The term "new woman" seems to reappear with nearly every generation', Janet Lee remarks in her discussion of postmodern theory and female/feminine representations (Lee 1988: 168). From the "new woman" in the late nineteenth century, who so shocked society with her "independence", to that of the present day, who so preoccupies the theorists of "post-feminism", women have been presented with a regularly updated and evolving range of subject positions that celebrate assorted female roles and practices as improved and emancipatory versions of womanhood (Lee 1988: 168). The media has been instrumental in the construction and marketing of female subjectivities and it has urged women to leave behind their 'old' self and change into the 'new woman' of the moment. Popular culture reflects the transient and changing definitions of modernity and liberation as it propagates a number of diverse and even paradoxical forms of *in vogue* femaleness and femininity.¹ The differing incarnations of the 'new woman' are bound up with the socially and historically specific politics of identity that circumscribe and

delineate the conditions of female subjectivity and agency. In this way, the concept of the 'new woman' serves as 'a recurrent sales technique' that promotes and sells a protean but durable image of female selfhood (Lee 1988: 168).

The cultural climate of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has produced a particularly ambivalent and contradictory embodiment of the 'new woman' as the millennium female model is defined in terms of her relation to a highly contentious postfeminist context and times. The new 'postfeminist woman' or 'PFW' has been the subject of considerable debate and she has variously been described as an anti-feminist backlasher, a sexually assertive 'do-me feminist', a prowoman pseudo-feminist and a feminine Girlie feminist (Neustatter 1989; Shalit 1998; Kim 2001; Brunsdon 1997). As I intend to show, these interpretative possibilities point to the precariousness and equivocation in postfeminist examinations of female/feminine identity, showing it both as a source of confident autonomy and of disempowerment in its unstable oscillations. The postfeminist landscape generates complex and ambiguous portrayals of femaleness, femininity and feminism, exploring the contingent and unresolvable tension between these subject positions. In particular, the postfeminist woman (PFW) navigates the conflicts between her feminist values and her feminine body, between individual and collective achievement, between professional career and personal relationship. She inhabits a non-dualistic space that holds together these varied and often oppositional stances and thus, she provides multiple opportunities for female identification. The PFW wants to 'have it all' as she refuses to dichotomize and choose between her public and private, feminist and feminine identities. She rearticulates and blurs the binary

distinctions between feminism and femininity, between professionalism and domesticity, refuting monolithic and homogeneous definitions of postfeminist subjectivity.

In the following, I suggest that the most challenging and controversial depictions of postfeminism's project to 'have it all' consider the postfeminist woman's struggle to integrate 'it all' into her life and combine her job aspirations and material success with her desire for a rewarding home life, her feminist beliefs in agency and independence with the pleasures of feminine adornment and heterosexual romance. In these provocative representations, the PFW lacks a harmonious inner wholeness or balance and she is bewildered by her messy and chaotic self that she is unable to control or gain happiness from. She faces the dilemma of 'having it all' as she strives to reconcile her experiences of being female, feminine and feminist without falling apart or having to abandon one integral part of her existence. The PFW is troubled by her fate as a 'Superwoman' and she sees herself burdened by her choices and unable to accept her pluralistic ambiguity (Walters 1995: 121). She is anxious about her blurry and depolarized postfeminist position and she continues to judge her self according to rigid dichotomies that oppose her careerism to her need for hearth and husband, her heterosexual femininity to her potentially desexualizing feminist agenda. She is simultaneously frustrated and elated by her contradictoriness and hybridity, wrestling with self-doubt and despair as well as celebrating hope and confidence.

This chapter focuses on the figure of the postfeminist singleton, the young, unattached and mostly city-dwelling woman who is caught between the enjoyment of her independent urban life and her desperate yearning to find 'Mr. Right' with whom to settle down. The singleton's predicament centers on her recognition that 'having it all' implies

walking a tightrope between professional success and personal failure, between feminist and feminine empowerment. Her single status is both glorified as a glamorous and fashionable lifestyle alternative as well as pathologized as a deviant and deficient social problem. Paradoxically, the singleton is touted as 'bold', 'ambitious', 'witty' and 'sexy' while concomitantly being bemoaned as 'shallow', 'overly compulsive', 'neurotic' and 'insecure' (Chick Lit USA: 1). She is 'savvy yet vulnerable, fallible yet likable, feminist yet not' as she crosses the borderline between passive and active, subject and object, feminine and feminist, private and public spaces (Shalit 1998: 27). Thus, she occupies an ambivalent postfeminist in-betweenness that transcends dualities and refutes their mutual exclusivity. The postfeminist singleton moves *across* binary distinctions and she is unwilling to compromise on her joint desires for job *and* romance, her feminist *and* feminine values. Instead, she is determined to be a 'marvellous career woman/girlfriend hybrid', simultaneously fulfilling her public and private ambitions (Fielding 1999: 18).

As I will discuss, the postfeminist singleton has been the subject of a wide range of print, broadcast and film texts that have emerged in the 1990s, fictionalizing the experiences of single, professional women in an urban environment. Serial dramas such as Ally McBeal (1997-2002. Fox) and Sex and the City (1998-2004. HBO), based on Candace Bushnell's 1996 novel, depict the ups and downs of 'sexy, hip, smart and sassy' singletons and their 'quest to find the one thing that eludes them all – a real, satisfying and lasting relationship' (*Sex and the City*, season 1). While I will allude to these televisual embodiments, this chapter pays particular attention to 'the singleton par excellence', Helen Fielding's literary creation Bridget Jones whose fictional diary recounts the mishaps of a British thirty-something in her attempt to negotiate the tensions

between heterosexual courtship and unwed freedom, between female emancipation and self-abnegation, between feminism and femininity (Whelehan 2000: 136). Bridget Jones's Diary, both in its printed and filmic manifestation (1996 and 2001 respectively), has been credited with catching the mood of the period or summoning the *zeitgeist* as Bridget is hailed as 'no mere fictional character, she's the Spirit of the Age' (Melanie McDonagh quoted in Fielding 1999: inside cover). Bridget rejects the pejorative label 'spinster' and its negative connotations of unattractiveness, loneliness and social ineptitude and, instead, she redefines her status by coining the term 'singleton', a new, rebel identity with its own language and attitudes, forging an unconventional and self-selected urban family of friends. While Bridget is trying to throw off the stigma attached to her single state and resignify it as a novel and rewarding subjectivity, she also remains ensnared and persecuted by her recurring fear and 'existential angst' of 'dying alone and being found three weeks later half-eaten by an Alsatian' (Fielding 1996: 20). Bridget's inherent contradictoriness and deep-seated ambiguity about her lifestyle cast her as the 'original Singleton' and 'the patron saint of single women', 'captur[ing] what [. . .] it is like to be female' (Virginia Blackburn and Sally Emerson quoted in Fielding 1999: inside cover). In fact, she is 'a kind of "everywoman" of the 1990s' insofar as 'the current era of the single woman might as well be described as post-BJ' (Whelehan 2002: 12; Zeisler 1999: 2). In this way, 'the Bridget Jones persona' enters the cultural consciousness and becomes 'an identifiable character in modern life' (Whelehan 2002: 80).

In this 'Bildungsroman of the [. . .] single girl', Bridget struggles to make sense of her chaotic life as she searches for her place in the postfeminist landscape and 'career[s] rudderless and boyfriendless through dysfunctional relationships and professional

stagnation' (Skurnick 2003: 1; Fielding 1996: 78). Fielding identifies her character's disorientation and disintegration as a symptom of a postmodern era of uncertainty, noting that 'Bridget is groping through the complexities of dealing with relationships in a morass of shifting roles, and a bombardment of idealized images of modern womanhood' (quoted in Whelehan 2002: 17). In these complicated times, women seem to have lost their sense of direction as they are in the process of experimenting with a new set of identities, simultaneously revolving around feminist notions of empowerment and agency as well as patriarchal ideas of feminine beauty and heterosexual coupledness. Bridget neatly expresses the tensions between the lure of feminist politics that enables her to fulfill her public ambitions and a romantic fantasy that sees her swept off her feet by a mysterious and passionate Byronic hero. As Imelda Whelehan points out, Bridget can be described as 'a woman who recognizes the rhetoric of feminism [. . .] but isn't always able to relate this to her fulsome desire for a hero from a Jane Austen novel' (Whelehan 2000: 136). These apparently conflicting impulses leave the postfeminist singleton in a state of constant emotional turmoil and ambivalence. Bridget's lack of control causes a perpetual fluctuation between the promise of a utopian and undivided wholeness and the disappointment following the recognition that 'having it all' is a demanding and complex undertaking.

Importantly, Bridget internalizes and individualizes this postfeminist problematic as she turns her confusion inward and interprets it as her personal, psychological dilemma. Offering an intimate engagement with and promising a closer insight into Bridget's 'real' self, Fielding's novel employs the diary format and a confessional tone to provide the fiction of an authentic female voice, bewildered by the contradictory

demands and mixed messages of heterosexual romance and feminist emancipation. In this way, Bridget Jones's Diary exemplifies and epitomizes postfeminism's 'return to the I', the 'implosion of personal styles and narratives' in the postfeminist 'rhetoric of autobiography' (Daniele 1997: 83; 81; 89). Postfeminism's personalism is translated into a visualized interior monologue in the case of Ally McBeal (Calista Flockhart) who often retreats into the imaginary world of her mind to deal with sexist putdowns, express her sexual desires and unearth her subconscious fears.² As Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Read assert, the textually rich articulation of Ally's interiority is not signaled as 'manifestly unreal, but instead as *emotionally real*', literalizing the character's inner landscape for the viewer (Moseley and Read 2002: 243; emphasis in text). Ally McBeal refuses to distinguish between reality and fantasy in its multi-layered representation of Ally's subjectivity, making the heroine's emotional presence 'concrete, immediate, and all pervasive' (Moseley and Read 2002: 244). This reliance upon the subjective voice has been discussed as a postfeminist re-enactment of the consciousness raising experiences of second wave feminism. However, while fruitfully exploring the complexities of twenty-first century femaleness, femininity and feminism, postfeminism's 'personal expression nevertheless differs from the personalizing of the political effected through consciousness raising' (Siegel 1997a: 51). It is argued that postfeminist writing/film fails to move out of the protagonists' personal sphere and relate the process of confession to a wider context of female discrimination and social inequality. Postfeminism's return to the personal does not provide an access to feminist politics and, thus, it risks sliding into a lifestyle feminism, confined to navel-gazing introspection rather than life-changing analysis and interrogation.

In fact, Ally McBeal is impervious to the feminist movement's political claims and, instead, she prefers to 'cultivate her own garden' and maintains the primacy of her personal problems, proclaiming that she plans to change society but she 'just want[s] to get married first' (quoted in Shalit 1998: 29). Bridget Jones has also been portrayed as the poster child of this self-absorbed postfeminism in her individual quest to combine her feminist ideals of egalitarianism with her 'pre-feminist concerns' and overarching desire to get married (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 36).³ Accordingly, Germaine Greer denounces Bridget Jones's Diary as 'an updated version of the old Mills & Boon scenario' while Ruth Shalit describes Ally McBeal as 'a slap in the face of the real-life working girl, a weekly insult to the woman who wants sexual freedom and gender equality' (quoted in Whelehan 2002: 59; Shalit 1998: 32). Similarly, the novelist Beryl Bainbridge has famously distanced herself from this literary 'froth sort of thing' while the feminist writer Erica Jong laments that today's young women 'are looking for the opposite of what their mothers looked for. Their mothers sought freedom; they seek slavery' (quoted in Ward 2003: 1; quoted in Jacobson 2004: 3).

These commentators criticize the lack of feminist politics and collectivity in postfeminist depictions of the singleton and they focus on her nostalgic and retrogressive pursuit of romance/marriage. Postfeminist texts are decried as 'nothing more than the contemporary version of the "How to Get Married Novel"', a 'retro form that details the search for and nabbing of a husband, any husband' (Jacobson 2004: 3). The postfeminist singleton is said to embrace a passive and disempowered image of womanhood that has simply been revamped for the postfeminist era but, in effect, rejects the feminist movement and its principles of collective social action. In this way, postfeminism's

“new woman” is almost identical to the old’, firmly demarcated and determined by her quintessential femininity and her heterosexual appeal (Whelehan 1995: 144). Underlying these various critiques of postfeminist fiction is a belief that feminism and femininity are antithetical and incompatible, undermining one another through their oppositional goals and values. Ultimately, Bridget and Co. are seen to be too feminine to be truly feminist, too preoccupied with their appearance and their desire to land a mate and neglectful of feminism’s group struggle and political agenda.

In the following, I oppose unanimously dismissive accounts of the postfeminist singleton that define her as an egocentric ‘composite of frivolous neuroses’ and a pre-feminist nostalgist obsessed with male approval (Bellafante 1998: 56). Refusing the ‘narrow-minded description of the genre’ as a reprisal of some well-worn clichés, postfeminist proponents insist that ‘these books don’t trivialize women’s problems’ and can be designated as ‘coming-of-age stories, finding out who you are, where you want to go’ (Jacobson 2004: 3). Rather than locking the heroine in a vicious and immobilizing circle of introspection, postfeminism’s personalized narratives depict the struggles of contemporary womanhood to blend and integrate her contradictory aspirations. The postfeminist singleton endeavors to find a subject position that permits her to hang onto the material and social gains achieved by the women’s movement as well as indulge in her romantic longings. As Bridget Jones proudly proclaims, ‘we are a pioneer generation daring to refuse to compromise in love and relying on our own economic power’ (Fielding 1996: 21). Instead of readily rejecting Bridget and her televised doppelgängers as spoiled princesses disrespectful of their mothers’ feminist achievements or as aspiring wives nostalgically searching for a role akin to that of a romance character, I discuss the

postfeminist singleton as a brave and yet vulnerable contemporary heroine, simultaneously bewildered and confident in her quest to 'have it all'.

Starting each diary entry with a calorie/alcohol/cigarette count for the day, Bridget clearly intends to manage and take charge of her confusing existence but she remains obsessed with the twin specters of marriage and physical insecurity. As Alison Case notes, 'the fact that Bridget keeps a diary [. . .] is an important aspect of her character – an indicator of her desire to take control of her life, get some perspective on her more obsessive behaviours' (Case 2001: 178). Perceiving herself as wanting and unable to resolve her inner struggle, Bridget turns to self-help manuals to find relationship guidance and discover a code of behavior that will allow her to overcome her feelings of inadequacy and perplexity. She focuses on self-discipline and self-improvement as the key to remodel her body and, on a larger scale, as the way to gain mastery over her destiny and find a boyfriend. Bridget's diary sets out her goals in the form of a lengthy list of New Year's resolutions but her persistent failure to carry out her plans marks the singleton's inconclusiveness about her position and her constant weighing of the costs and benefits of living in a postfeminist culture. Bridget's fallibility and haplessness generate a number of humorously narrated incidents and eventually, come to be seen as the character's passport to fulfillment and happiness, securing her an economically and socially powerful partner. In other words, Bridget realizes that her 'natural', chaotic self is infinitely preferable to the fictitious one she aspires to and that being 'real' and out of control is what makes her loveable and attractive (Fielding 1999: 376).

This ultimately positive assertion of the postfeminist singleton's incongruous multiplicity can be distinguished from previous backlash representations of the single, working woman that deny the overlap of female desirability and careerism and, instead, reinstate the division between the professional world and the private world of the domestic sphere that prevents women from 'having it all'. Curiously echoing and inverting feminist critics' assertions of the incompatibility of feminism and femininity, the backlash assumes that working women are too feminist to be feminine and, in their search for professional success on male terms, they are bound to end up single, unloved and fraught with neuroses. Proclaiming the dichotomy between partnerless businesswoman and homemaking wife, the backlash insists that women 'must choose between a womanly existence and an independent one' (Faludi 1992: 490). On the opposite end of the spectrum, Girlie, 'do-me' feminism rejects the notion of conflict and strife and assuredly declares that the utopian 'having it all' has become an achievable reality and a distinct possibility in the postfeminist *choiceoisie*. The singleton's seemingly incongruous characteristics have been magically reconciled as she welcomes and celebrates her pluralistic status. As will be discussed, these heroines of 'chick lit' and 'chick flick' embrace 'their own lives in all the messy detail' and firmly believe that 'nothing is standing in [their] way' (Chick Lit USA: 1; *Legally Blonde* 2001. MGM).

While critics have tried to theorize and categorize the figure of the postfeminist singleton in relation to either backlash or Girlie feminist rhetoric, I maintain that she problematizes and depolarizes the above standpoints in her open-ended negotiation of her femaleness, femininity and feminism. Vacillating between dissatisfaction and optimism, anxiety and determination, she is simultaneously haunted by backlash images of the

deviant and abject singleton as well as elated by Girlie feminism's successful chick/chic achiever. The postfeminist singleton recognizes the difficulty and tension involved in her chaotic heterogeneity and, although she avoids reinforcing binary distinctions, she is unable to deny the existence of friction and struggle to hold together her feminist and feminine, public and private desires. In this way, she is both hopeful and disillusioned, enjoying and loathing her single life at once. The postfeminist singleton's non-dichotomous and contradictory subjectivity causes her to be in a state of confusion and self-doubt. In tragic-comic depictions such as Ally McBeal, the main character spends much of her time contemplating her fate as an unmarried and childless career woman and hallucinating a dancing baby. Similarly, despite her happy ending in the arms of Mr. Darcy, Bridget Jones provides a 'terrifying picture [. . .] of a person at war with herself', 'wracked with chronic body dysmorphia' and building her life around a set of imaginary rules and rituals (Whelehan 2002: 63; 45). Yet, at the same time, Bridget also celebrates the 'joy of single life' that allows her to 'seize power' in her job, spend 'delicious night[s] of drunken feminist ranting' and forge 'extended families in the form of networks of friends connected by telephone' (Fielding 1996: 244; 133; 125; 245). Thus, postfeminism's innovative portrayals of the singleton dramatize the complexity of her blurry, in-between position and articulate a paradoxical space that refuses to impose the idea of an appropriate and monolithic feminine/feminist identity. Rather than asserting the sheer impossibility or the effortless realization of a postfeminist nirvana where women can 'have it all', the postfeminist singleton expresses the pains and pleasures of her problematical quest for balance in a world where personal and professional, feminist and feminine positions are mutually pervasive.

On the one hand, postfeminist representations of single womanhood have been discussed as manifestations of a cultural backlash that blames feminism for women's apparent lack of control over their lives and encourages them to abandon an overly ambitious and ultimately destructive project of 'having it all'. Susan Faludi outlines the backlash tenets that have been propagated in a range of media texts in the 1980s and 1990s and that are based on the assumption that contemporary female identity is troubled and tormented. In fact, the popular press perpetuates claims that

professional women are suffering "burnout" and succumbing to an "infertility epidemic". Single women are grieving from a "man shortage". [. . .] Childless women are "depressed and confused" and their ranks are swelling. [. . .] Unwed women are "hysterical" and crumbling under a "profound crisis of confidence". [. . .] High powered career women are stricken with unprecedented outbreaks of "stress-induced disorders". [. . .] Independent women's loneliness represents "a major mental health problem today". (Faludi 1992: 1-2)

As Faludi explains, these so-called female crises have been laid at the door of the feminist movement that has supposedly 'gone too far', providing women with more independence and choice than they can handle and thereby wrecking their relationships with men (Faludi 1992: xiii). Feminism is said to be responsible for 'the sad plight of millions of unhappy and unsatisfied women' who, thinking they could combine career and family, have jeopardized an essential part of their femaleness (Walters 1995: 119). Suzanna Danuta Walters summarizes the backlash argument whereby feminism

'promised more than it put out', 'we thought we wanted equality, but realize instead that we cannot have it all' (Walters 1995: 121). Attempting to live up to an ambitious 'Superwoman' image, working women have been positioned in a no-win situation as they are either condemned to a 'double-day/second-shift' existence or they recognize that their professional success has come at the cost of relationships and marriage (Walters 1995: 122). Backlash propaganda aims to dichotomize and create a dissonance between women's private and public, feminine and feminist aspirations, splitting their 'lives into half-lives' (Faludi 1992: 491). Moreover, the backlash not only warns women that they cannot have it both ways and must choose between home and career but it also makes the choice for them by promoting wedded life and domesticity as a full and fulfilled existence. In other words, women are told that 'if they gave up the unnatural struggle for self-determination, they could regain their natural femininity' (Faludi 1992: 490).

Faludi is adamant that the backlash can be attributed to an entirely hostile media that acts as an anti-feminist force to sabotage and undermine the women's movement and slander it as 'women's own worst enemy' (Faludi 1992: 2). In particular, single professional women are targeted by the popular press and pilloried for their unmarried state and the error of their independent ways. Working singletons are cautioned that, unless they hurry and change their overly liberated lives, they are going to end up loveless and manless as 'single women are "more likely to be killed by a terrorist" than marry' (Faludi 1992: 124). In fact, 'to be unwed and female' comes to be seen as an 'illness with only one known cure: marriage' (Faludi 1992: 122). Unattached career women are pathologized and defined as abject and deficient, selfish and emotionally stunted, and ultimately regretful about neglecting their essential roles as wives and

mothers. The backlash seeks to segregate single working women and represent them as 'defective units', 'alone and isolated only by their own aberrant behaviour' (Faludi 1992: 376). Singlehood is described as a woman's personal psychosis, self-inflicted and curable only through an extensive 'feminist-taming therapy' and self-transformation (Faludi 1992: 372). As Faludi notes, single women are taught to see that 'what they think is a problem with the man is really something inside them', and therefore, it can only be dealt with through individual, rather than collective, responsibility (Faludi 1992: 376). Particularly, the singleton's feminist convictions have become a trap as the focus on career has engendered a negligent and misguided attitude towards her heterosexual relationships. This personalizing and individualistic trend results in the fragmentation of any sense of commonality between women and the depoliticization of their anxieties that are portrayed as purely personal ills, unrelated to patriarchal pressures and confining social structures.

In this way, the backlash endeavors to convince women of their need to scale back their professionalism and rekindle their interest in romance and marriage. The denigration of single womanhood is reversely accompanied by an enhancement and resignification of domesticity that packages women's retreat to home and husband in activist rhetoric. As Elspeth Probyn reveals, this marks 'the new traditionalism' that articulates and naturalizes a 'vision of the home to which women have "freely" chosen to return' as they have acknowledged its superior and preferable status as a site of fulfillment (Probyn 1990: 149). The new traditionalist narrative centralizes and idealizes a woman's apparently fully knowledgeable choice to abstain from paid work in favor of family values. The domestic sphere is rebranded as a domain of female autonomy and

independence, far removed from its previous connotations of drudgery and confinement. According to Faludi, this 'back-to-the-home movement' is the creation of the advertising industry and, in turn, 'a recycled version of the Victorian fantasy that a new "cult of domesticity" was bringing droves of women home' (Faludi 1992: 77). Couched in the language of women's liberation, the return to the domestic realm veils and conceals the political assault on women's rights, their re-imprisonment in the home and regression to a stance of feminine passivity. This 'linguistic strategy' is an inherent part of the backlash's conservative agenda that seeks to re-label the terms of the feminist debate, control the definition of 'equality' and ultimately, 'switch the lines of power through a sort of semantic reversal' (Faludi 1992: 269). The backlash employs resignificatory techniques to work against the gains of the feminist movement, individualize women's problems and splinter their collective struggle for emancipation while promoting its own stereotypical values and reasserting the primacy of traditional gender roles.

Backlash texts try to convince their female readers/viewers of the impossibility and undesirability of being Superwomen as, in the attempt to juggle job and family, boardroom and babies, they jeopardize their feminine appeal and sign up to an exhausting existence filled with pain and guilt. The stigmatization of working womanhood is particularly castigatory and deprecatory in the case of single women who dare to diverge from homely femininity in search of a career. In the most one-dimensional backlash scenarios, the unattached and childless professional woman is portrayed as a figure of evil and a neurotic psychopath, designed to deter women from seeking public success and neglecting their feminine duties. She is the epitome of Otherness and insanity, standing in direct antithesis to the virtuous housewife and threatening the traditional family unit. The

dichotomy between the liberated and unmarried businesswoman and her apparent opposite, the homemaking wife, has famously been battled out in the now classic film Fatal Attraction (1987. Paramount) that reaffirms the family through patriarchal violence and eliminates the single woman in order to restore the peace and primacy of the domestic sphere. The film's villain, Alex Forrest (Glenn Close), embodies all that counters the dominant patriarchal structure as she is an independent career woman and an autonomous free spirit, maintaining a large apartment in Manhattan's meat district and living out her sexuality and her emotions aggressively and excessively. Alex knowingly enters into a weekend affair with the married lawyer Dan Gallagher (Michael Douglas) but then refuses to obey 'the rules' as she oversteps her assigned patriarchal position as the temptress/mistress and attempts to 'have it all'. Pregnant with Dan's child, she is resolute that she will not be 'ignored' or treated 'like some slut' and, as a potential mother figure, she demands 'a little respect'. Insisting that she is not Dan's 'enemy', Alex wants her lover to 'face up to' his responsibilities as a father and 'play fair with [her]'.

However, Fatal Attraction forcefully and unequivocally undercuts the single woman's social position by depicting Alex's joint desires to succeed in her career and have a family as equivalent to madness. Rather than exploring the problems her yearnings pose (i.e. changing gender relations), the film trivializes Alex's anger by focusing on her increasingly psychotic behavior and it obscures Dan's paternal duties by siding overwhelmingly with him and favoring his life inside the established familial entity.⁴ Dan rejects any form of liability or blame for his actions, declaring that having his baby is Alex's ill-considered and wrongful 'choice' and 'has nothing to do with him'. He can be

discussed as the epitome of male anxiety over the breakdown of differences between women, the disappearing line between businesswoman and housewife, following women's advancements in and encroachments upon the male sphere of work. Dan is determined to maintain the separation between his eccentric and self-reliant mistress and his loving and homemaking wife and thus, he disputes Alex's efforts to cross the border between the two archetypes and inhabit an impure in-between position. As an extramarital partner, Alex does not have any rights or deserve his support as he has 'a whole relationship with someone else'. Her calls for fairness are presented as completely 'irrational' and unreasonable, a symptom of her escalating psychological disintegration and loss of control.

Increasingly, the plot evolves to alienate Alex from both Dan and the audience by concentrating on her metamorphosis from competent and attractive professional to an allegorical emblem of the insane, Other woman and the 'working woman from hell' who pours acid onto Dan's car, kidnaps his daughter and, most disturbingly, boils the child's pet rabbit (Walters 1995: 123). Any overlap or similarity between Alex and Beth Gallagher (Anne Archer) is denied as the two female characters are polarized and categorized as the demonic singleton versus the dutiful wife, the lonely professional woman versus the good mother.⁵ Women's private and public, domestic and professional lives are seen to be incompatible and dichotomous and, in this way, it is the wife's responsibility to be the final arbiter of familial justice and destroy her unmarried nemesis. Confirming Bromley and Hewitt's assertion that 'in the 1980s the single career woman must be killed in order to preserve the sanctity of the family', Beth defeats her arch-enemy in a bloody finale and shoots the she-monster Alex has become in her intrusive

and violent quest to find an avenue into Dan's life (Bromley and Hewitt 1992: 23). The brutal killing is depicted as a justified act of self-defense and an overdue punishment for the mad seductress who unlawfully tries to enter the family unit.⁶ Moreover, by eliminating the film's primary antagonist, Beth also ensures that Alex's baby, a potentially perverse progeny, has no chance of survival and dies in order to preserve the patriarchal family.

The backlash firmly relegates women to their conventional gender roles of wife/mother and instructs them that their desire for a place outside the home leads to a variety of dire personal consequences and may even result in death. While the backlash's demonization of the professional single woman into a neurotic psychopath continues to have a powerful deterring impact upon subsequent generations, there have been concerted efforts to deconstruct and subvert this negative and one-dimensional image. The postfeminist singleton is still traumatized by Alex Forrest's cautionary tale but at the same time, she clearly distances herself from this monstrous stereotype. The film adaptation of Bridget Jones's Diary (2001) opens with Bridget's realization that she is 'about to turn into Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction*' and her proactive decision 'to take control of my life and start a diary to tell the truth about Bridget Jones'. Similarly, Candace Bushnell emphasizes that 'there is nothing wrong' with the 'smart, attractive, successful' single women in New York, insisting that 'they're not crazy or neurotic. They're not *Fatal Attraction*' (Bushnell 1997: 25). In the same way, Ally McBeal refuses to enact the feminine role of passively wooed maiden, complaining that 'when guys are persistent, it's romantic, they make movies about it. If it's a woman, then they cast Glenn Close' (Memorable Quotes from "Ally McBeal": 1).

At the same time as providing unanimously pessimistic and unfavorable descriptions of working womanhood, it is important to realize that the backlash also offers its own version of the career woman that contain her most threatening and autonomous characteristics and re-appropriate her feminist ideas. Backlash narratives try to recuperate and capitalize on the liberatory appeal of female agency and independence as they redefine 'having it all' in the safety of the marital structure in order to make it compatible with its own conservative agenda. In the aptly entitled Having It All (1991), Maeve Haran describes the married woman's dilemma to reconcile the conflicting demands of public and private life, 'reveal[ing] everything we won't admit about being a working woman' (Haran 1991, cover page). Haran's main character, 'high-flying executive' Liz Ward, finds herself 'torn in two' and 'pulled two ways' in her effort to personify 'the classic nineties woman' who has 'a glittering career *and* kids', a 'brilliant degree', a 'job in TV' and a 'handsome husband' (Haran 1991: 1; 176; 70; 3; 96; emphasis in text). Having been appointed 'the most powerful woman in television', the 'first woman Programme Controller of any major TV company in the UK', Liz is determined 'to show not simply that a woman could do it, but that a woman could do it brilliantly' (Haran 1991: 79; 31). However, in the pursuit of her professional ambition, she realizes that she has lost touch with 'the things that really matter' as her 'obsession with work' causes her to neglect her domestic responsibilities and duty to care for her husband and children (Haran 1991: 118; 32). Moreover, Liz has also been remiss about her femininity and physical attractiveness and, by 'playing men's rules' to advance her career, she has effectively 'become like them' and 'taken on their aggressiveness and their competitiveness' (Haran 1991: 225). While fighting 'tooth and nail to be treated the

same as men' and join their 'club', Liz has deviated from her natural path as a wife and mother, denying that she 'belong[s] to another species' and is essentially and fundamentally different from men (Haran 1991: 75; 6).

Confronted with her husband's unfaithfulness and her own feminine failure, Liz has to reassess her priorities and admit that she cannot 'Have It All' but has to make a choice between 'success and happiness' (Haran 1991: 80). In true backlash manner, Liz decides that

it was time to tell the truth. That women had been sold a pup. Having It All was a myth, a con, a dangerous lie. Of course you could have a career and a family. But there was one little detail the gurus of feminism forgot to mention: the cost to you if you did. (Haran 1991: 53)

Thus, the liberal feminist argument that 'women are capable of participating in male culture and of living up to male values' has been taken to an extreme as, in order to compete with men, women have been required to clone the male competitive model (Jaggar 1983: 250). Feminism has 'swung too far' by promoting work as 'the Holy Grail, Paradise Regained and Club Med rolled into one' and, instead of liberating women, it has put them 'more in chains than [their] mothers were' (Haran 1991: 82). Rather than improving and alleviating women's personal and social station, the feminist movement has placed them on double duty at home and work, saddling them with both female and male burdens. As Liz reflects on her previous pity for the preceding female generations who had been 'condemned to a dull life without achievement',

who had more quality of life? Her mother who could choose what to do with her time [. . .] or herself: high-powered and hard-pressed, always earning a fortune with never any time to spend it? (Haran 1991: 117)

In this way, Liz has become a victim of her own success as the freedom and choice provided by the women's movement have turned out to be a trap that prevents her from 'being the woman she wanted to be' (Haran 1991: 538). In fact, 'now' that women 'could be anything they wanted', their 'choices made it harder to be happy' (Haran 1991: 538). In a nostalgic search for a simpler life, Liz chooses to become a 'mommy-tracker', leave her urban surroundings, 'the whole melting pot of crime and dirt, greed and tension' and settle in a 'lovely, peaceful' rural idyll, 'almost chocolate box in its beauty' (Haran 1991: 73; 195; 197). Haran is intent on depicting her character's 'return home' as a quasi-feminist act as Liz 'dares to be a housewife', despite her husband's assertion that he does not 'want a wife at home', he 'want[s] an equal [. . .] a woman who's her own person with her own life' (Haran 1991: 224; 177). After leaving her doubtful husband, the newly single Liz surrenders to 'the joys of home-making [. . .] guiltily, as though she were taking a lover' (Haran 1991: 213). In this backlash scenario, the domestic realm is resignified as an 'enjoyable' environment, far removed from 'the drudgery she'd gone to any lengths to avoid' (Haran 1991: 212). As a conscious and supposedly empowering lifestyle choice, domesticity is distanced from its previous 'bleak' connotations of 'suffocation and sacrifice' and it is redefined as a modern haven of 'security and comfort', a 'real home' that ends up seducing Liz's husband and luring him back to his wife and children (Haran 1991: 241; 240).

Ultimately, Haran pays lip service to women's desire or need to work as Liz decides to re-enter the career path on a part-time basis and alongside her husband as the Managing Directors of the employment agency 'WomanPower' that claims that 'half a woman is the best man for the job' (Haran 1991: 431). Thus, the dichotomy between women's private and public desires has been resolved as these extremes have been made compatible as part-time associates that allow Liz to have the best of both worlds and enjoy 'a life in balance' (Haran 1991: 539). 'BALANCE' is heralded as 'THE BUZZWORD OF THE NINETIES', connoting a space where 'one finds harmony between competing forces, demands and circumstances' (Haran 1991: 444; emphasis in text; Douglas Vavrus 2000: 414). As Liz notes, 'being at home *part* of the time gave a spice to working, and working made the time off seem all the more precious' (Haran 1991: 417; emphasis in text). In other words, family and job are described not only as congruous and reconcilable life components but also, they complement and complete one another in a symbiotic and harmonious alliance. Reunited with her husband, Liz idealistically proclaims that 'perhaps together anything *would* be possible': she could 'have it all' and fulfill her dream of 'a life where I had enough work to keep my brain alive, and enough space to enjoy my children, and fun, and sex, and food, and love [. . .] and gardening' (Haran 1991: 559; 453; emphasis in text).

In this utopian vision, modern woman has achieved a compromise between her feminine and feminist values, between professional and personal happiness. This standpoint relies on a romantic egalitarian fantasy where men and women jointly abandon their excessive career ambitions in favor of an all-embracing partnership. Liz's short-lived spell of singlehood is portrayed as a necessary period of confusion during which

wife and husband renegotiate the boundaries between work and family and then, re-enter their stable and newly equilibrated relationship. Although Haran advocates the extension of women's qualities from the private to the public sphere, she also naturalizes their domestic role and reifies traditional notions that women's most important work is at home. As Liz notes, she 'needed to work' but 'never again would she put her career before her family' (Haran 1991: 347). Thus, the 'dream of balance' idealizes motherhood and relies on a retreat from sexual politics, eschewing any acknowledgement of women's collective problems or their need for collective action to solve them (Haran 1991: 553). Haran's endorsement of a part-time settlement of the feminist/feminine, public/private dualism understates women's economic and social pressures that might prohibit such an equilibrium and thus, it can be discussed as an individual lifestyle choice rather than a universal panacea. 'Having it all' is qualified and downgraded to 'having it part-time', allowing the privileged woman to avoid the conflicts between professional and private fulfillment by providing a personalized solution that might not be relevant or achievable for the vast majority of working women.

While the ideal of a balanced life comes under attack by the postfeminist singleton's chaotic heterogeneity, the notion of a unification of feminist and feminine, public and private desires has also been propagated by Girlie feminism that promotes femininity as the path to female empowerment. Girlie feminism unproblematically proclaims that women can 'have it all' and embrace a wholeness that harmonizes feminism and femininity, career and home. Moreover, these previously incompatible opposites have not just been reconciled but they are also presented as being interconnected and dependent on one another. Feminism comes to be seen as women's

'freedom' to adopt a sexualized image and exploit her feminine wiles. The feminist message of female agency and independence is negotiated and restyled by the Girlie stance that conceptualizes a new woman who is self-assured and comfortable with her femininity and her sexual difference. This contemporary embodiment of modern womanhood has 'made it by being successful and highly paid in her career', 'look[ing] good, lov[ing] men and sex' (Neustatter 1989: 238). Ruth Shalit refers to this 'new breed of feminist heroine' as 'do-me feminists', 'untrammled, assertive, exuberantly pro-sex, yet determined to hold her own in a man's world' (Shalit 1998: 27). According to Shalit,

the do-me feminist is plucky, confident, upwardly mobile, and extremely horny. She is alert to the wounds of race and class and gender, but she knows that feminism is safe for women who love men and bubble baths and kittenish outfits; that the right ideology and the best sex are not mutually exclusive. She knows that she is as smart and as ambitious as a guy, but she's proud to be a girl and girlish. (Shalit 1998: 28)

The do-me feminist expresses her individual activism primarily through the articulation of her feminine identity and she is reluctant to politicize her relationships and her sexualized femininity. Mirroring the backlash's part-time compromise between feminist and feminine, public and private ambitions, do-me/Girlie feminism places women's desires firmly within a phallogentric matrix of feminine achievement and heterosexual attractiveness. As Angela Neustatter reveals, the Girlie 'new woman' no longer requires 'any of that nasty bra-burning, butch, strident nonsense' and she has

learnt to make it for herself 'feminine-style' (Neustatter 1989: 137). She sees feminism as 'old hat, a bore, and above all, something she does not need' (Neustatter 1989: 238).

Instead, she consciously employs her physical appearance in order to achieve personal and professional objectives and gain control over her life. In this way, the Girlie feminist has 'a different relation to femininity than either the pre-feminist or the feminist woman' as 'she is neither trapped in femininity (pre-feminist), nor rejecting of it (feminist), she can use it' (Brunsdon 1997: 85). This new woman is both feminine and feminist at the same time, merging notions of personal agency with the visual display of sexuality. She inhabits a contradictory postfeminist terrain that unites patriarchal notions of feminine beauty with feminist expressions of female empowerment. Importantly, this feminine/feminist 'brainy babe' has to be distinguished from 'all other versions of the New Woman' as her adoption of femininity is framed by 'a cultural climate in which women can now be traditionally "feminine" and sexual in a manner *utterly different in meaning* from either pre-feminist or non-feminist versions demanded by phallogcentrically defined female heterosexuality' (Shalit 1998: 27; Sonnet 1999: 170; my emphasis). As Esther Sonnet reveals, the current 'return to feminine pleasures [. . .] is "different" because, it is suggested, it takes place within a social context fundamentally altered by the achievement of feminist goals' (Sonnet 1999: 170). The do-me feminist 'wants it all' and she does not manipulate her appearance 'to get a man on the old terms' but she 'has ideas about her life and being in control which clearly come from feminism' (Brunsdon 1997: 86). Thus, femininity is resignified and it comes to be associated with feminist ideas of female power and agency rather than its previous meanings of patriarchal oppression and female subordination.

The Girlie/do-me feminist stance has been translated in literature and film into what has come to be designated as chick lit/flick. As Imelda Whelehan points out, chick lit/flick 'is a very 1990s phenomenon' that reappropriates the term 'chick' (along with 'babe') 'to new and ironic connotations' (Whelehan 2002: 67). Chick lit/flick wants to distance itself from feminist positions that have been deemed 'anti-sex' and 'anti-glamour' and instead, it celebrates the pleasures of feminine adornment and sexuality (Whelehan 2002: 68). Chicks are encouraged to get in touch with their femininity and use it as a statement of empowerment. Accordingly, Ally McBeal coquettishly asserts her feminine/feminist rights as a 'sexual object' when a prospective boyfriend fails to kiss her good night, raging that 'most men would have asked to sleep with me. [. . .] Why can't he be a man and just paw me a little' (quoted in Shalit 1998: 31). In a similar manner, Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon) is determined to be a 'one girl revolution' and 'begin the toughest fight of her life – for love, honor, justice and respect for blondes everywhere'. The heroine of Legally Blonde (2001. MGM) follows in Ally's footsteps as she decides to enter law school and 'do something more with [her] life than just become a Victoria's Secret Model'. This 'Miss Perfect Ten' 'declare[s] her independence from the critics' and she is convinced that she can 'handle anything' and that 'nothing can go wrong'. She refuses to be categorized by her 'blonde hair and big boobs' as she embarks on a journey to resignify her blondness in the heads of the Harvard students and professors who understand her Californian fairheadedness as a limitation. In this way, Elle manages to win her first law case and release her former aerobics instructor and fellow blonde Brooke Taylor from her murder charges by blending her newly acquired legal skills with her extensive knowledge of fashion and cosmetics. Elle discovers that

she 'hold[s] more cards' than she thinks she does as 'being blonde is actually a pretty powerful thing' that can be channeled 'towards a greater good'. This 'Cosmo girl' successfully exploits her blonde power and asserts her 'courage of conviction' and 'strong sense of self' that enable her to redefine her restrictive and demeaning label of 'Malibu Barbie', 'a dumb blonde with Daddy's plastic' as a 'valuable' and empowering asset.

Elle's resignification of her feminine image and her decision to become a lawyer do not derive from her public ambitions but are entirely founded on her desire to 'hold on to a man' and 'get the love of [her] life back'. After being jilted by her boyfriend Warner (Matthew Davis) for being 'too blonde', Elle is resolute that 'becoming a serious law student' and following him to Harvard is the only way to win him back. As Warner tells her, he needs to 'marry a Jackie' and 'not a Marilyn' if he is going to live up to his East Coast potential and become a senator. Newly single Elle soon relinquishes her attempts at non-blonde 'seriousness' and discards Warner in favor of her professor who appreciates the true value and superiority of her blondness. Rather than trying to repress and deny her blonde strength, she embraces a sexy form of empowerment that projects her femininity as an enjoyable path to both emancipation and romance. Elle repudiates feminist concerns over sexual objectification and instead, declares that women do not have to be 'boring and ugly and serious' to fulfill their professional and private aspirations. Elle's career success is positioned within a heterosexual framework that constructs women in terms of their feminine and sexual appeal. As Ruth Shalit comments, 'the new working women [. . .] wear their careers as lightly as their [. . .] accessories. To them, a job is a lifestyle accoutrement, a crisp stratagem to make themselves more attractive' (Shalit

1998: 30). Women are advised that their feminist quests for agency and control can be combined with the search for a partner as their sexual power is automatically appealing to and aimed directly at men, to attract their attention and ultimately gain their approval.

The notion of sexual projection as a means to feminist/feminine empowerment has been criticized as 'a new arrangement of an old song' that mobilizes women's sexuality and femininity in service of a patriarchal agenda and status quo (Helford 2000: 297). The do-me feminist draws a sense of power and liberation from her sexual difference and, thus, she can be said to propagate the 'old-fashioned' idea that 'women get what they want by getting men through their feminine wiles' (Kim 2001: 325). Moreover, she can be discussed as an individualistic figure who 'tips her hat to past feminist gains but now considers them unnecessary and excessive' (Helford 2000: 299). The do-me feminist rejects the concept of group oppression and subjugation and instead, she favors and valorizes individual effort and choice. Constituted by and through a desire to gain personal advancement without the support of a feminist collectivity, she can be 'accommodated within familiar [. . .] western narratives of individual success' (Brunsdon 1997: 86). In supplanting the analysis of sexual politics with the notion of personal choice, do-me feminist discourse focuses on women's feminine powers and eschews the notion of an external battle with patriarchal forces. As Neustatter reveals, the new feminine woman is a media persona constructed to be in unison with patriarchy and to 'satisfy the yearning [. . .] for a woman who does not appear to be in opposition' to men (Neustatter 1989: 239). 'If she will look good, act sexy, be on their side, then she can go out and be successful at work and drive a flash car' (Neustatter 1989: 239). In Janet Lee's words,

bored by feminism and its unglamorous connotations [. . .] the media [. . .] [has] decided that we've *done* feminism and it's time to move on. We can call ourselves "girls", wear sexy underwear and short skirts; because feminism taught us that we're equal to men, we don't need to prove it anymore. (Lee 1988: 168; emphasis in text)

According to this glamorized, all-achieving, stress- and problem-free media invention, women's economic progress and social position are dependent on personal initiative and do not require continued feminist action and solidarity. Thus, the do-me feminist acts as a token opportunist whose progress and choices are no longer obstructed by structural oppressions but they result from her own will and self-determination. Critics are adamant that the do-me feminist's emphasis on feminine and individualist achievement undermines and denies feminism's ongoing fight for greater change on the macro-societal level. The 'me' based feminism of the twenty-first century flattens the dynamics of the feminist movement into one-dimensional characters that are nothing more than cartoons, 'Gilliganesque caricature[s]' and 'brilliant 'iteration[s] of Jessica Rabbit' (Shalit 1998: 32). As Neustatter declares, 'the design is not about making women happy or looking at their needs' and it should be interpreted as 'the most cleverly marketed idea yet for attempting to put a full stop at the end of women's liberation' (Neustatter 1989: 239; 238).

The do-me feminist discourse has been characterized as a 'pro-woman' but 'anti-feminist' rhetoric that takes women's right to education, career and wealth for granted but repackages these feminist principles into feminine issues (Kim 1991). As L. S. Kim

notes, the do-me feminist depictions of ‘the working girl (or single girl in the city) seem to proffer a feminist tone or objective but it ultimately seems to be a false feminism’ that sets up ‘pro-woman’ values and expressions in opposition to feminist goals (Kim 2001: 323). Kim suggests that Ally McBeal illustrates this pro-woman/anti-feminist stance as the program offers female protagonists in roles that are categorically strong and empowering but then deflates and feminizes their feminist capacities. In fact, Ally and her colleagues are Harvard Law School graduates, working in an up-and-coming Boston law firm and enjoying financial independence and social equality. As Ally notes, ‘I’ve got it great, really, good job, good friends, loving family, total freedom and long bubblebaths. What else could there be?’ (quoted in Ally McBeal quotes: 3). In Kim’s framework, Ally’s position as a liberated woman is sabotaged by her constant search for the missing element in her life, a man and a heterosexual partnership. Ally admits that, even though she is ‘a strong working woman’, her existence ‘feels empty without a man’ and, unlike her 1970s precedent Mary Tyler Moore, she ‘doesn’t want to make it on her own’ (Kim 2001: 331; Chambers 1998: 58). This postfeminist singleton clings to a fairytale notion of love and she often retreats into her private fantasy world to reflect on the deficits in her personal relationships. Kim objects that Ally remains trapped in ‘a state of pseudoliberation’ as her high education and professional credentials have not gained her personal fulfillment or self-understanding and her main strategy for success and happiness is ‘through sexuality’ (Kim 2001: 321; 332). In this way, Kim identifies Ally’s joint desires for career and home, feminism and femininity but she categorizes and dichotomizes these expectations as ‘pro-woman’ and ‘anti-feminist’. Following Kim’s logic, Ally emerges as a ‘self-objectifying, schizophrenic woman’ and a ‘falsely

empowered image', too self-diminishing and indecisive to bear the feminist label (Kim 2001: 332; 323).

Rather than establishing a dualistic and antithetical relationship between Ally's feminine and feminist, private and public traits, I argue that her status as an imperfect and contradictory feminist role model makes her an embodiment of postfeminist in-betweenness and heterogeneity. Ally refuses to choose between her professional and personal, feminist and feminine aspirations and she unashamedly declares that she wants to 'have it all' – marriage, children and partnership in the law firm. As she states,

I had a plan. When I was 28, I was gonna be taking my little maternity leave, but I would still be on the partnership track. I would be home, at night, cuddled up with my husband reading "What to Expect When You're Nursing" and trying cases. Big home life, big professional life, and instead, I am going to bed with an inflatable doll, and I represent clients who suck toes. This was not the plan. (quoted in Moseley and Read 2002: 247).

The postfeminist singleton is unwilling to compromise on her job and relationship ambitions and, despite discouraging setbacks, she perseveres in her attempt to realize her utopian project. Unlike the backlash's negotiated or 'do-me' feminism's sexy counterparts, she does not view her empowerment primarily within a heterosexual matrix that defines women in terms of their femininity/domesticity. Armed with a feminist consciousness, she is alert to the tyranny of femininity that constructs the female subject as a passive object of male desire. Yet, simultaneously, she is also aware of her feminine

power and its potential to be deployed in new and liberating ways. Similarly, she rejects backlash representations of the abject and psychotic singleton but, at the same time, she continues to be traumatized and haunted by the ghost of Alex Forrest.

Thus, the postfeminist singleton inhabits an ambiguous and equivocal landscape that renegotiates feminist, anti-feminist, feminine and patriarchal descriptions of womanhood. Importantly, she does not achieve an equilibrium between these competing forces but she is engaged in a persistent struggle to hold together her various components in a strenuous and tense relationship that does not privilege one over the other. As Ally McBeal asserts, 'balance is overrated' and she pridefully proclaims that 'I don't want to be balanced', 'I like being a mess. It's who I am' (quoted in Shalit 1998: 32). Ally's imbalance comes to be seen as her 'badge of honor', enabling her to surpass a 'black and white' worldview and 'forever see grays' (quoted in Shalit 1998: 32). In a similar manner, Bridget Jones reveals that 'confusion [. . .] is the price I must pay for becoming a modern woman' as she tries to combine her progressivist feminist beliefs with her deeply entrenched patriarchal views about gender and relationships (Fielding 1996: 119). Bridget wants to promote 'the Urban Singleton Family' as a 'state [. . .] every bit as worthy of respect as Holy Wedlock' while, simultaneously she is also determined to leave behind her 'freakish' single life laden with 'fearsome unattractiveness hang-up[s]', 'an aching loneliness' and 'a gaping emotional hole' (Fielding 1999: 402; Fielding 1996: 27; 244). Bridget's paradoxical outlook is encapsulated and summed up by her New Year's resolution to not 'sulk about having no boyfriend, but develop inner poise and authority and sense of self as woman of substance, complete *without* boyfriend, as best way to obtain boyfriend' (Fielding 1996: 2). In this way, the postfeminist singleton is

characterized by a chaotic and incongruous multiplicity as she is concomitantly located within the conflicting discourses of feminism, patriarchy, backlash and Girlie rhetoric. She emerges with a number of contradictory associations and beliefs as she takes up her pluralistic postfeminist position in her refusal to homogenize these diverse standpoints according to an *either/or* logic. Instead, she epitomizes a *both/and* dynamic that illustrates the incoherence and inconsistencies of being feminist, feminine and female in the early twenty-first century.

In fact, postfeminist portrayals of the singleton still feature backlash myths that record the perceived neuroses of the single, childless, thirty-something, career woman. In *Sex and the City*, a fashionable urbanite laments that ‘the issue of unmarried, older women is conceivably the biggest problem in New York City’ while Ally McBeal is reminded by her male colleague that, after the age of thirty, she is statistically more likely to be ‘struck by lightning’ than get married (Bushnell 1997: 28; *Only the Lonely*, Season 2). Faced with this ‘men shortage’, Ally decides to intensify her efforts to find a partner, wailing that ‘there are no good men. I read this article, and on average, there are two [. . .] per state’ (*Only the Lonely*, Season 2). The successful lawyer traces her childless and boyfriendless condition back to her previous lack of focus on her personal life and her rejection of her true love Billy in favor of her professional goals. As she reflects on her current unhappiness, ‘so here I am, the victim of my own choices’ (*Pilot*, Season 1). The suggestion is that feminism in the shape of a career and independence has not brought Ally the desired fulfillment, and she might be far happier if she had stayed on the ‘natural’ path to motherhood and marital bliss.

In the same way, Bridget Jones wonders what her life would be like if she had 'follow[ed] the course nature intended by marrying Abnor Rimmington [. . .] when [she] was eighteen' (Fielding 1996: 119). Bridget is acutely aware of her status as an 'unmarried freak' and 'love pariah' and she is whipped into high marital panic by the constant prompting and patronizing of her 'Smug Married' friends that her 'time's running out' and her biological clock is ticking away (Fielding 1996: 132, 41; Fielding 1999: 3). As 'an old girl' who has not 'snapped up' a decent partner, Bridget feels like a 'failed human being' and a 'social outcast' (Fielding 1996: 40, 41, 290). The urgency and hopelessness of her position are made explicit by her realization that 'dating in your thirties is not the happy-go-lucky free-for-all it was when you were twenty-two' (Fielding 1996: 11). Bridget reveals that 'finding a relationship seems a dazzling, almost insurmountable goal' as she has reached her 'female sell-by date' that determines her reproductive capacity and her visibility on the attractiveness scale (Fielding 1996: 144; 213). In fact,

the trouble with trying to go out with people when you get older is that everything [. . .] gets infused with the paranoid notion that the reason you are not in a relationship is your age [. . .] and it is all your fault for being too wild or willful to settle down in the first bloom of youth. (Fielding 1996: 143-144)

Bridget's mother condenses and summarizes the novel's backlash element by stating that the modern woman is 'just so picky' and has 'simply got too much choice' (Fielding 1996: 195). Rather than 'pretending to be superdooper whizz-kids' who will not

compromise on ‘anybody unless he’s James Bond’, Bridget is instructed by her mother to embrace the old-fashioned feminine doctrine ‘to “expect little, forgive much”’ (Fielding 1999: 373; Fielding 1996: 196). Moreover, the maternal counsel stresses that women are ill-advised to follow the feminist route to emancipation that is seen as antagonistic to women’s heterosexual appeal and instead, they should concentrate on their natural femininity to dupe men into courtship and then ‘train them’ (Fielding 1999: 375). As Mrs. Jones tells her daughter, ‘that’s what’s so silly about feminism [. . .] anyone with an ounce of sense knows we’re the superior race’, admonishing Bridget that ‘if you don’t do *something* about your appearance you’ll never get a new job, never mind another boyfriend’ (Fielding 1999: 375; Fielding 1996: 192; emphasis in text).

Bridget is aware of the ‘irresistible’ feminine power that women have over men but she is reluctant to obey and conform to Jerry Hall’s famous adage that ‘a woman must be a cook in the kitchen and a whore in the sitting room’ (Fielding 1996: 67; Fielding 1999: 18). Even though she sometimes wishes to be like her mother and she is envious of the preceding generation’s ‘confidence in self’, Bridget is unable to shed her doubts about the feminine trajectory to female empowerment and she acknowledges the unnaturalness and artificiality of the feminine ideal that is constructed through sheer hard work (Fielding 1999: 371; Fielding 1996: 66). In this way, Bridget notes that

being a woman is worse than being a farmer – there is so much harvesting and crop spraying to be done: legs to be waxed, underarms shaved, eyebrows plucked, feet pumiced, skin exfoliated and moisturized. [. . .] The whole performance is so highly tuned you only need to neglect it for a few days for the whole thing to go

to seed. Sometimes I wonder what I would be like if left to revert to nature – with a full beard [. . .] spots erupting, long curly fingernails like Struwelpeter. [. . .] Is it any wonder girls have no confidence? ⁷ (Fielding 1996: 30)

Bridget is clearly familiar with feminist analyses that investigate the disciplinary practices of femininity that are part of an oppressive and inegalitarian system of sexual subordination and that women take up against the background of a pervasive notion of female deficiency and inadequacy. Yet, she also admits that the feminine discipline and performance provide her with a contradictory sense of identity as a desirable and self-objectifying subject, endowed with a sexual power that ‘everyone is sensing’ and ‘wanting a bit of’ (Fielding 1996: 66). As a ‘child of *Cosmopolitan*’, she has been ‘traumatized by supermodels and too many quizzes’ and she knows that ‘neither my personality nor my body is up to it if left to its own devices’ (Fielding 1996: 59). Bridget embodies a paradoxical position as she crosses the binary distinction between complicity and critique, denouncing as well as endorsing feminist and feminine values.⁸ She is involved in the discourses of feminism and femininity and she adopts an ambiguous and multivalent perspective that combines censure and participation. The postfeminist singleton’s pluralistic and heterogeneous stance has not only been condemned by critics as a ‘joke’ at the expense of the feminist movement but Bridget’s own love interest Mark Darcy also finds fault with, what he considers to be, her indecisiveness (quoted in Whelehan 2002: 62). As he notes, ‘a woman must know what she believes in, otherwise how can you believe in her yourself?’ (Fielding 1999: 253).

In fact, Bridget's predicament is not related to her insecurity or inconclusiveness about her beliefs but it stems from her "'Having It All" syndrome' and her unwillingness to sacrifice *either* her feminist *or* feminine, her public *or* private aspirations (Fielding 1996: 71). Bridget is informed by both feminist and feminine rhetoric and she struggles to reconcile her multifarious convictions and desires. She remains caught in a tension between her romantic longings, her feminist awareness, her feminine performance and her professional objectives. She is anxious that her feminist beliefs in equality and independence are incompatible with her femininity or, quite simply, that feminism has undermined and ruined her chances of having a meaningful heterosexual relationship. As she provocatively declares, 'after all, there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism' (Fielding 1996: 20). This statement's self-evident 'truth' is reinforced by Bridget's later realization that her happy ending with Mark Darcy has been delayed by his misperception of her as a 'radical feminist' and 'literary whizz-woman' (Fielding 1996: 236). While Mark's first impression of her relies on a flawed description by her smug married friends, Bridget herself has helped to create this image as, in her first meeting with her future lover, she claims to be reading Susan Faludi's Backlash (1992) in order to give herself an aura of intellectual credibility.

Bridget and her singleton friends have clearly inherited feminism's language of empowerment and agency that enables them to progress in their careers and renounce male 'emotional fuckwittage' as 'SHITTY, SMUG, SELF-INDULGENT BEHAVIOUR' (Fielding 1996: 20; 127; emphasis in text).⁹ Bridget's feminist awareness gives her the strength and power to turn down Daniel Cleaver's initial attempts to draw her into a sexual relationship without 'getting involved' or committed (Fielding 1996: 33). Bridget

indignantly rejects and dismisses his overtures as ‘fraudulently flirtatious, cowardly and dysfunctional’, reinforcing the singleton principle that ‘men won’t get any sex or any women unless they learn how to behave properly’ (Fielding 1996: 33; 127). She seeks to advance the single woman’s right to an earnest and lasting partnership and she refuses to be demeaned to a casual sexual liaison, not worthy of commitment and faithfulness. Bridget wants to champion the unmarried state as a valuable identity and she aims to counter the mythologies of abject single femininity that proliferate among smug married people. In what amounts to a singleton manifesto, Bridget’s friend Shazzer proclaims that

there’s more than one bloody way to live: one in four households are single, most of the royal family are single, the nation’s young men have been proved by surveys to be *completely unmarriageable*, and as a result there’s a whole generation of single girls like me with their own incomes and homes who have lots of fun and don’t need to wash anyone else’s socks. (Fielding 1996: 42; emphasis in text)

Thus, ‘singletondom’ asserts itself against ‘Middle-England propaganda’ as ‘a normal state in the modern world’, deserving of respect and forging the ‘Urban Singleton Family’, a new set of relations that are ‘just as strong and supportive [. . .] as anyone’s blood family’ (Fielding 1999: 402; 38). In a similar act of female/feminist confidence, Bridget refuses to undermine her ‘sense of personal dignity and self-esteem’ and sabotage her position as ‘a serious professional journalist’ in order to act out her employer’s ‘demeaning scheme’ that sees her ‘prostituting’ herself on television by satirizing and

feigning female/feminine incompetence (Fielding 1999: 83; 32). As she notes, 'I need [a job] that will allow me to make serious use of my talents and abilities' (Fielding 1999: 83). The film adaptation provides a visually powerful example of female assertiveness by depicting Bridget's departure from her job as a quasi-feminist statement. After being cheated on by her boss and now boyfriend Daniel, Bridget (Renée Zellweger) decides not to 'be defeated by a bad man' or accept the 'permanent state of spinsterhood'. Instead, she walks out of her publishing job by publicly humiliating Daniel, to the collective approval of her workmates and supported by the background music of Aretha Franklin's hymn of female empowerment, *Respect*. Moreover, Bridget rejects Daniel's later attempts to rekindle their relationship because she is not prepared to settle for his unromantic and pragmatic vow that 'if I can't make it with you, I can't make it with anyone'. As she tells him, 'that's not a good enough offer for me. I'm not willing to gamble my whole life on someone who is not quite sure. [. . .] I'm still looking for something more extraordinary than that'. Bridget is resolute that she will not abandon her joint desires for heterosexual courtship and feminist emancipation and she continues her perplexing and complex quest to 'have it all'.

Bridget Jones's Diary emphasizes the difficulties of this almost quixotic project, centering on the singleton's persistent failure to live up to her own ideals and her endeavor to combine her diverse longings. Critics have polarized Bridget's inherent tension between the confident paragon she aspires to be and her imperfect and striving 'natural' self as a feminist/feminine, public/personal dichotomy. Accordingly, the novel's 'key contradiction' can be found in the gap between 'the autonomous career women' who populate singleton narratives and 'the rather pathetic romantic idiots' they become in

their relationships (Whelehan 2002: 42). As Imelda Whelehan notes, ‘while the success of professional women is trumpeted [. . .] intimate heterosexual relationships remain unreconstructed, and people have no means of transforming their personal life to match their professional life’ (Whelehan 2002: 42-43). This line of criticism relies on a perception of feminism/career as incompatible with femininity/romance and it presents Bridget as a divided individual, torn between her image as an assertive and public feminist and a self-deprecating and private *femme*.

Contrastingly, I contend that Bridget’s struggle is not to choose between feminism and femininity, job and relationship, but it is associated with her determination to ‘have it all’, at the same time. The novel sets up a friction between Bridget’s ideal, balanced persona and her chaotic, genuine self, depicting the singleton’s journey through self-doubt to the understanding that ‘realness’ is the only guarantee for happiness. Bridget is destined never to achieve her goals of perfection and thus, at the point when she reaches her dream weight of 8 stone 7 pounds, her friends assume she is ill and Bridget is left to lament eighteen years of wasted dieting. As she reveals, ‘I feel like a scientist who discovers that his life’s work has been a total mistake’ (Fielding 1996: 107). Bridget’s path to self-realization and fulfillment is lined with self-help manuals, designed to reconcile the mixed messages that Bridget receives from her feminist/feminine sources. Steeped in the language and principles of both feminism and femininity, Backlash and Cosmopolitan, Bridget is aware that neither Faludi’s feminist manifesto nor a women’s glossy magazine will deliver the much-needed personal advice on how to negotiate the contradictory and confusing associations of single womanhood in contemporary society. In this way, the singleton’s real reading consists of John Gray’s now classic self-help

book Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus (1992).¹⁰ As Bridget notes, she is loyal to 'the-Mars-and-Venus-concept' that, merged with 'Zen' and 'Inner Poise', is meant to consolidate her identity as an 'assured, receptive, responsive woman of substance' whose 'sense of self' comes from 'within' (Fielding 1999: 242; 10; Fielding 1996: 95). Self-help books are heralded as 'a new *form* of religion' for 'where else is one to turn for spiritual guidance to deal with [the] problems of modern age' (Fielding 1999: 75; 264; emphasis in text). Bridget hopes that, by 'centr[ing]' on herself, she will learn the rules of the dating game and the necessary techniques to manage the 'delicate' 'blending of man and woman' (Fielding 1996: 27; Fielding 1999: 10).

Yet, paradoxically, by concentrating on her 'Venusian' self in order to enhance her chances of capturing 'Mr. Right', Bridget adopts a separatist stance that aggravates rather than alleviates her anxieties about relationships and promotes a view of men as 'unattainable strategic adversary aliens' (Fielding 1999: 384). Gray's self-help manual depicts men and women's lives as moving along in different trajectories (and even different planets) with diverse and conflicting priorities and needs. Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus moves away from feminist ideas of gender construction and, instead, advances an essentialist notion that the sexes are characterized by intrinsic and unalterable differences that they have to learn 'to respect and accept' in order to give love 'a chance to blossom' (Gray 1992: 3). Bridget and her friends relate this knowledge of unbridgeable and innate gender distinctions to their own lives and partnerships that are discussed in terms of a sex war. As Bridget declares,

[the] whole dating world is like [a] hideous game of bluff and double bluff with men and women firing at each other from opposite lines of sandbags. [It] is as if there is a set of rules that you are supposed to be sticking to, but no one knows what they are so everyone just makes up their own. (Fielding 1999: 114-115)

In these circumstances, courtship becomes 'a matter of strategy and subterfuge', a 'controlled conflict' where friends are regularly consulted and books ransacked for a grain of truth (Whelehan 2002: 27). Accordingly, Bridget seeks to win Daniel Cleaver's attention and heart by pretending to be an 'aloof, unavailable ice-queen' 'combined with *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* approach' but her attempt ends unsuccessfully with her being drawn into another instance of 'emotional fuckwittage' (Fielding 1996: 73, 75; 76). Bridget is so exasperated by the rituals and conventions that mystify the relations between men and women that she proposes an institutionalized and governmentally operated 'code of Dating Practice for Singletons' at a brainstorming session at work (Fielding 1999: 195). Similarly, Mark Darcy also reflects on the 'danger' of this sex segregation and 'these mythical rules of conduct', noting that 'it hardly leaves room for a man' as the 'first point of reference' is 'self-help book nonsense' and 'some breathtakingly arbitrary code' (Fielding 1999: 252; 253). Commenting on this constant process of self-evaluation and scrutiny, he reveals that 'you end up feeling like some laboratory mouse with an ear on its back' (Fielding 1999: 253).

Ultimately, it is Mark Darcy's admiration for Bridget's genuineness that makes her appreciate her natural, messy identity in favor of the ideal and book learned self she aspires to incarnate. It is Bridget's 'realness' and gaucheness that apparently win Mark's

heart, the fact that she is not ‘lacquered over’ like ‘all the other girls’ and that she will ‘fasten a bunny tail to [her] pants’ (Fielding 1996: 237). Bridget is wanted and desired, not despite but because of her imperfections and her persistent failure to remake herself in another image, as thinner, more poised, more intellectual – in short, more like the ‘lacquered over’ women Mark rejects. The film adaptation translates this celebration of Bridget’s imbalanced self into Mark’s revelation that he likes her ‘just as [she is]’. Bridget’s singleton friends react to this statement with utter astonishment as it exposes their elaborate self-improvement schemes as futile and even reactionary. Bridget’s lack of control proves to be her most loveable trait and thus, she is rewarded for being chaotic, for being ‘no good at anything. Not men. Not social skills. Not work. Nothing’ (Fielding 1996: 224). Importantly, the last entry to her diary is stripped of any weight and calorie updates and it confidently declares that she has ‘finally realized the secret of happiness with men’ (Fielding 1996: 307). Ironically, Bridget finds wisdom in the maternal advice to ‘do as your mother tells you’, a point that is reinforced in Fielding’s 1999 sequel when Mrs. Jones meaningfully proclaims that ‘it doesn’t make any difference what you look like [. . .] You just have to be real. [. . .] You have to be brave and let the other person know who you are and what you feel’ (Fielding 1996: 307; Fielding 1999: 376, 377).

Thus, Bridget Jones’s Diary discards the notion of a perfect feminine or feminist identity and it embraces a postfeminist in-betweenness and incoherence as the space of ‘real’ fulfillment. This optimistic and humorous assertion of postfeminist chaos stands in marked contrast to more open-ended and inconclusive singleton narratives that eschew the politics of the happy ending. In this way, Ally McBeal lingers on the unresolvable tension between the singleton’s contradictory aspirations, frequently closing an episode

in a bitter-sweet mode that sees the character walking home alone from work, accompanied only by Vonda Shepherd's melancholy background music. In the following, I contend that ambivalence rather than resolution remains the main focus of postfeminist explorations of femaleness, feminism and femininity. It is in the struggle and dilemma between autonomy and disempowerment, subjectification and objectification, that postfeminism's frontier discourse finds its most challenging and complex expressions.

3.2 The Postfeminist Cinderella and the Paradox of Choice

Everybody's plastic – but I love plastic. I want to be plastic.

Andy Warhol

There are no ugly women, just lazy ones.

Zsa Zsa Gabor

'The postmodern body is no body at all', Susan Bordo notes in her study on the body in Western culture and in this way, she emphasizes the effacement of bodily materiality in postmodern theory (Bordo 1993: 229). Following postmodernism's deconstruction of the humanist subject, the status of the body has been transformed from a fixed, unitary and natural given, the 'only constant in a rapidly changing world', to a malleable construct, a historically and socially specific medium of culture (Davis 1997b: 172). As Bordo reveals, the body is a powerful symbolic configuration that is 'trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity' (Bordo 1993: 165-166). It is the surface on which the central tenets, hierarchies and ideologies of a cultural context are inscribed and incarnated and, thus, it is never innocent or impartial, allowing direct and unmitigated access or knowledge, but it is always understood and read through various interpretive schemes. The body is the location where the law or *logos* of a society is made flesh, 'where the social is most convincingly represented as the individual' and 'where the power-bearing definitions of social and sexual normality are, literally, embodied' (Fiske 1989: 70; 90). In Foucauldian

terms, it comes to be discussed as a 'docile' body, the primary site for the operation of modern structures of power that are not top-down and repressive but rather, subtle, elusive and productive (Foucault 1977). The body can be seen as the agent and object of processes of discipline and normalization, a cultural text about gender and power relations as well as a practical and direct locus of social control. As Anne Balsamo proposes, the body can be interpreted both as a 'product' and a 'process', the embodiment of norms and deviations *and* a way of knowing and marking the world (Balsamo 1996: 3). It is located in the material and symbolic realms of representation and in this way, it can simultaneously be discussed in terms of a metaphor as well as an everyday, lived experience or social practice embedded in concrete contextual surroundings.

Some scholars have argued that the postmodern notion of social constructionism can be extended to a radical suggestion that thoroughly 'textualizes' the body and thereby, eradicates its historicity and materiality. The body is considered 'meaningless' until the law 'writes it into a text, and thus inserts it into the social order' (Fiske 1989: 91). Michel de Certeau characterizes this process as an 'intextuation' whereby the body is made into a signifier of these rules and becomes denaturalised and dissociated from its physical groundings.¹ The biological body becomes a fiction, nothing more than an empty shell to be filled with meaning and moulded into a social discourse. It is a separable and pliable asset that is no longer tied to a physiological reality but it is open to (re)signification and transformation. The postmodern body is described as an object of work to be fixed or improved, an alienated product and a 'text of our own creative making' from which we maintain a 'strange and ironic detachment' (Bordo 1993: 288). Accordingly, Susan Bordo invokes 'plasticity' as a postmodern paradigm, celebrating a

new imagination of human freedom from bodily determination (Bordo 1993). The belief in the body's plastic promise has furthered a disembodied ideal and a credo of limitless change that treats the body as pure text in order to emphasize the possibilities of re-arrangement and agency. In effect, postmodernism's suspicion of the category of 'nature' has not only produced an understanding of the body as a culturally mediated form but it has also advanced a fantasy of liberation from these constraints, promoting the body as the instrument of self-expression and choice. As Bordo points out, 'in place of God the watchmaker, we now have ourselves, the master sculptors of that plastic' (Bordo 1993: 246). The body comes to be seen as the vehicle *par excellence* for individuals to realize their dreams of autonomy and independence to choose their own appearance. In Kathy Davis's words, the body is 'just one more feature in a person's "identity project"', 'the ultimate cultural metaphor for controlling what is within our grasp' (Davis 1997a: 2). The malleable postmodern body enacts a protean vision of heterogeneity and multiple embodiments, allowing the subject to transcend his/her locatedness and indulge in the epistemological fantasy of *becoming* multiplicity, of 'having it any way' s/he wants (Bordo 1993: 228).

In the following, I explore how this erasure of bodily materiality is played out concretely in forms of body regulation and transformation that eschew the notion of a natural or essential body and instead, highlight its flexibility and alterability. Modern subjects are engaged in a variety of corporal routines, ranging from dietary management, cosmetic rituals, building and maintenance as well as complete reshaping and sculpting of the body. This chapter pays specific attention to the contemporary reconstruction practice of cosmetic surgery whose technological advancements could be employed to

literalise the ideal of plastic pluralism, shaping the body to the meanings that the individual chooses. However, I suggest that this ostensibly and potentially liberating medical procedure is inherently contradictory as it can be viewed as a source of oppression and freedom, complicity and critique. On the one hand, one can argue that cosmetic surgery is used by the patients as a resource to protest against the constraints of the “given” in their embodied existence and to seek release from these restrictions. Advocates of this surgical alteration present such bodily remoulding as being about agency and choice. As Kathy Davis notes, ‘cosmetic surgery may be, first and foremost about [. . .] taking one’s life into one’s hands, and determining how much suffering is fair’ (Davis 1991: 23). Similarly, in his historical overview of aesthetic surgery, Sander L. Gilman emphasizes that ‘the patient’s perception of autonomy is central to the popularity’ of body remodelling exercises (Gilman 1999: 17). The modern culture of *chirurgia decoratoria* is said to be born out of an Enlightenment ideology of autonomous self-making that instructs the individual to remake him- or herself in the pursuit of happiness.² In this way, physical appearance is no longer a predetermined and irreversible biological fact but it is a plastic potentiality – to be arranged, re-arranged, constructed and re-constructed.

Yet, the much heralded freedom of action takes place within structural limits that firmly demarcate the concept of choice within restrictive patterns of attractiveness and normality. While ‘choice’ appears to be egalitarian, it is ideologically determined and enmeshed in social and cultural norms that impose strict parameters on these choices. The body that the individual experiences is always negotiated through and constrained by a proliferation of homogenizing and normalizing images whose ‘content is far from

arbitrary, but is instead suffused with the dominance of gendered, racial, class, and other cultural iconography' (Bordo 1993: 250). The pursuit of freedom and happiness through a bodily transformation presupposes decisive categories of inclusion/exclusion and it is rooted in the necessary creation of random demarcations between the perceived inadequacy or deviance of the self and the ideal sphere into which one aspires to move. Thus, the cosmetic surgeon enables the patient to 'pass' as a member of the coveted group characterized in terms of a standardized appeal and desirability.³ Gilman points out that 'the heart of the matter in aesthetic surgery is the common human desire to "pass"' in order to 'regain control of ourselves and to efface that which is seen (we believe) as different' (Gilman 1999: 330; 331).⁴ Kathy Davis and Anne Balsamo express similar views, stating that 'cosmetic surgery is, first and foremost, about [. . .] wanting to be ordinary' as "difference" is made over into sameness' and the material body is translated into a sign of culture (Davis 1995: 12; Balsamo 1996: 58). In this way, subjects do not freely choose their reconstructed appearances as their plastic potential is pressed into the service of dominant norms and models of physicality that are strongly racially, ethnically and heterosexually inflected.

In fact, I argue against notions of complete disembodiment and I maintain that this abstract and unsituated celebration of heterogeneity cannot escape the body's concrete locatedness that delimits its shape, size and general configuration and establishes the range of choices available in modern body cultures. I contend that the individual's agency to interact with his/her body is always situated within and part of systematic and pervasive processes of discipline and regulation that homogenize bodily images. As Susan Bordo points out, the idea that 'what the body does is immaterial, so

long as the imagination is free' glorifies itself only through 'the effacement of the material praxis of people's lives, the normalizing power of cultural images, and the continuing social realities of dominance and subordination' (Bordo 1993: 275). Instead of plastic multiplicity, the body operates in a highly restricted realm of cultural plasticity that reconstructs the bodily frame according to eminently ideological standards of physical appearance. In other words, while I do not dispute that 'everything we know about the body [. . .] exists in some form of discourse', I assert that the body's discursiveness cannot be understood in terms of a disembodied freedom that is entirely detached from its physicality within a given culture (Suleiman 1985: 2). The body can be comprehended as an interaction between the material manifestation of a 'flesh and blood' entity and the symbolic construction that is embedded in a cultural context and is never unmediated, never free of interpretation.

At the same time, I propose that the body's status as a plastic construct of culture offers possibilities of a transgressive and empowering body politics that works within confines in order to destabilize bodily norms. Body discipline can be understood as a paradoxical practice that makes use of the body's constructedness to promote feelings of emancipation and liberation while perpetuating a densely institutionalised system of values. I argue that body-related exercises such as plastic surgery produce tensions between empowerment and disempowerment as they put forward a complicitous critique that simultaneously endorses as well as undermines cultural constraints and directives. This *both/and* logic exemplifies the *paradox of choice* as the decision to undergo a bodily modification involves personal deliberation and agency, yet the context within which such 'choices' are made is inextricably linked to ideological conventions. Thus, the

notion of 'choice' represents a complex and ambivalent concept that is socially and culturally determined and, therefore, it cannot wholly be divorced from the body's lived and practical materiality marked by economic, ethnic and other differences. The individual involved in these body-shaping regimes can concomitantly be depicted as an active and creative subject as well as a passive and victimized object, inhabiting an ambiguous and non-dualistic landscape where subjectification entails subjection and docility may be experienced as liberating.

I assert that the postmodern body can be conceived at once as a socially and historically colonized territory and the location for effective action and self-determination. It blurs binary distinctions as it is *both* the instrument of processes of domination and control *and* the site of subversive struggles for emancipation and resistance. In particular, I explore the paradoxical aspects of female embodiment illustrated by the postfeminist body that adopts the disciplinary practices of femininity to achieve self-definition and autonomy. Postfeminism embraces the conventionally feminine body, proclaiming that it can be perceived as a means to broaden female prospects and further women's empowerment. The postfeminist body is embedded in a socially and culturally charged terrain of signification that reconstructs the female body as a signifier of ideal feminine beauty, a billboard for the dominant denotations of Western femininity. Historically, women have been addressed by a number of cultural discourses and images that urge them to construct an imaginary body revolving around the adoption of a normative femininity. Following Arthur Kroker, one can suggest that women have always been postmodern bodies in the sense that the female body has

perpetually functioned as a sign of culture and the central location through which patriarchal power relations are sustained. As Kroker asserts,

women's bodies have always been postmodern because they have always been targets of a power which, inscribing the text of the flesh, seeks to make of feminine identity something interpellated by ideology, constituted by language, and the site of a "dissociated ego". (Kroker 1987: 24)

Kroker identifies the special status of the female body in postmodernity, describing it as a social construct and a scene of inscription that reproduces the cultural meanings that circulate about feminine qualities and demeanour. The female body comes to be seen as 'the vehicle of confession' through which women internalize the discourse of femininity and assume an alienated stance *vis-à-vis* their own bodily material (Balsamo 1996: 78).

Within postfeminism, the body's sexualized physique becomes the primary locus of femininity, the visible site upon and through which gender identity is conceived and completed. As Sandra Lee Bartky notes, this focus on feminine incarnation marks a trend that sees femininity 'coming more and more to be centred on [a] woman's body – not its duties and obligations or even its capacity to bear children, but its sexuality, more precisely, its presumed heterosexuality and its appearance' (Bartky 1997: 148-149).⁵ The postfeminist body is moulded according to firmly demarcated standards of heterosexual desirability that delineate the dimensions and outward form of feminine normality and attractiveness. Postfeminist plasticity is shaped in the service of a beauty system that objectifies and sexualizes women and enrolls them in a strict body discipline.⁶ In this way,

postfeminism upholds and reinforces women's traditional preoccupation with beauty practices, encouraging them to create a feminine body out of a female one and enter into a highly regulated realm of gender conventions that surface as styles of the flesh.

Feminist critics have condemned this feminine directive as an instance of patriarchal colonization and they adopt an unanimously negative view of femininity as 'a tradition of imposed limitations' that heavily polices women's choices about their appearance and produces subjected bodies on which a distinct and narrow range of cultural meanings are imprinted (Brownmiller 1984: 14). According to this logic, a dichotomy is set up between feminism and femininity, between the feminist demystifier and the feminine dupe who blindly submits to restrictive beauty regimes and suffers from a false consciousness, a perpetual misperception of both self and world. Anti-pornography writer Andrea Dworkin describes the female body's beautification as a subjugation and confinement, declaring that

standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her body. They prescribe her motility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her body. *They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom.* (Dworkin 1974: 113; emphasis in text)

The female subject's material imprisonment is mirrored on the internal level as she assimilates the dogma of feminine beauty and becomes a self-policing subject, bent on replicating and embodying the standards of bodily acceptability. The feminine ideal is internalized as an inherent component of female nature as women are prompted to

channel their energies in the hopeless quest for an elusive and perfect femininity. In this way, the feminized body is portrayed as being in the grip of systematic relations of social control that delineate the physical and psychological reality of being a woman. Following this line of criticism, postfeminism's feminine body can be understood as a patriarchal construct used to perpetuate female subordination and contribute to the reproduction of uniform images that serve to negate women's diversity under the homogenizing banner of femininity.

However, postfeminist advocates insist that the quest for a feminine body can be undertaken for self-gratifying and even feminist reasons as the postfeminist woman is in a position to exercise her femininity as an empowering and subversive tool. In postfeminist rhetoric, femininity's inauthentic status as a textually-mediated discourse comes to be theorized as a realm of possibility and resignification. The absence of an original or essential feminine nature provides the necessary semiotic gap for the re-deployment of femininity in new and emancipatory ways. By exploiting the cracks and fissures in the construction of gender identities, women can escape their presumed over-identification with or absorption in their own femininity and create an ironic distance that allows them to read against the grain and dissociate their feminine image from its demeaning and oppressive connotations. The postfeminist woman performs a destabilization and denaturalization of the feminine norm and thus, espouses a distanced and parodic form of gendering that exposes its inauthenticity and fabrication. This gender parody takes as its object not the image of the woman but the idea that an essential feminine identity exists prior to that image. As Judith Butler observes, 'the parody is *of* the very notion of an original' (Butler 1990a: 138; emphasis in text). The prospect of

assuming femininity in order to re-interpret it has been heralded as a postfeminist strategy to blend feminist principles and aspirations with feminine physicality and conventions. Femininity is stripped of its deceptive naturalness and it comes to be seen as a complex and diverse discursive construct that is no longer immediately and irreversibly linked to female subjection but presents deconstructive opportunities for an enabling re-appropriation. Postfeminism asserts the compatibility of feminism and femininity and declares that these previously antagonistic opposites have been reconciled in the understanding and re-definition of femininity as a gesture of feminist agency and defiance.

While I do not deny the important role that femininity plays in bringing the woman-as-agent into existence, I also declare that this postfeminist potential for empowerment and resistance cannot be found outside of the systematic constraints of power and gender hierarchies. I maintain that the notion of gender rearticulation and disruption cannot dissolve into an abstract possibility and critical stance that negates the materiality of oppression. Postfeminism's ostensibly liberated subject is constantly in danger of being reabsorbed into the dominant patriarchal expressions and significations of femininity. In fact, I propose that the postfeminist body remains caught in a struggle over the meaning of the feminine construct, exhibiting a curious blend of activity and passivity, affirmation and subversion, complicity and critique. The postfeminist body eludes *either/or* categories in its adoption and creation of a feminine physique that can simultaneously be construed as the location for feminist emancipation and the site of patriarchal possession and consumption. In her act of bodily remoulding, the postfeminist woman is victim and perpetrator, subject and object all in one as her feminized self

enhances as well as diminishes her power, producing as well as erasing her sense of identity. Within postfeminism, femininity is characterized by a paradoxical two-sidedness whereby it can effect both a defamiliarization and normalization of female iconography and it can concomitantly be described as a product of patriarchal enslavement and a means of feminine/feminist agency. Postfeminism reclaims the female body as an ideological battlefield, a locus of ongoing controversy where women/feminists grapple with opposing cultural constructions of femininity. The postfeminist body's most compelling characteristic and critical capacity lies in its representation of femininity as undecidability, a 'slippery subject to grapple with, for its contradictions are elusive, ephemeral and ultimately impressive' (Brownmiller 1984: 19).

This chapter focuses on the figure of the postfeminist Cinderella who exemplifies postfeminism's multivalent and pluralistic ambiguity in her concurrent search for feminine attractiveness and feminist empowerment. This postfeminist heroine concentrates on her body as the site for transformation and she seeks to improve her social status and increase her self-esteem by constructing an artificial femininity and re-creating herself as an object of male desire. As critics have repeatedly noted, Cinderella can be identified as a classic tale of female enculturation and socialization, dealing 'most explicitly with the discovery of beauty, as a woman may experience it' (Zetzel Lambert 1995: 78). It is 'the very fairy tale most often cited by feminists as an example of a patriarchal culture's schooling of girl children for a life of subservience to men' (Zetzel Lambert 1995: 78). In this story of rivalry, female success is described in terms of victory in a beauty contest as Cinderella wins the Prince by appearing as the most beautiful woman at the ball and by proving that she has the smallest foot of any woman in the

kingdom. Her own bodily material is shown to be inadequate and deficient and thus, she needs the external help and magic of a fairy godmother to change her into an epitome of femininity. This supposedly benign and benevolent helper turns out to be an agent of patriarchy, reconstructing the female body as a signifier of a restrictive ideal of feminine beauty. In this way, the female reader is instructed to define her identity as a being-for-others rather than a being-for-herself and to re-invent her body in a feminine mould in order to compete for male attention. Through consistent dedication and loyalty to feminine conventions, she aspires to embody the socially and culturally determined beauty construct and transform herself into a patriarchally defined but nonetheless admired object of reverence.

The Cinderella tale highlights the fact that beauty is a female identity claim, a route to success in Western culture and a legitimate strategy for women to access a number of social privileges. As Rita Freedman notes, 'there is no denying the power of beauty to influence others' and thus, women 'pursue beauty in their search for self-esteem' and happiness (Freedman 1986: 230). By remodelling herself into an embodiment of feminine attractiveness, Cinderella achieves an awareness of her own womanliness as a desirable and attractive being who can wield her sexual power. The seductiveness or lure of femininity is that it provides the abiding individual with a secure sense of self as well as a sense of mastery. By following the rules of the beauty system, the female subject acquires social acceptability and admiration whereas a rejection of feminine appearance may be akin to 'a kind of death', to a renunciation of the only kind of life-conferring choices that are available to her in patriarchy (Morgan 1991: 43). Accordingly, Sandra Lee Bartky declares that

to have a body felt to be “feminine” [. . .] is in most cases crucial to a woman’s sense of herself as female [. . .]. To possess such a body may also be essential to her sense of herself as a sexually desiring and desirable subject. (Bartky 1997: 145 -146)

Women obtain a feeling of control within the structural limits of their social order by investing in their physical capital and changing their bodies to conform to the cultural beauty norms. They draw a sense of freedom from their sexual difference by reclaiming their power over men in order to be recognized and valued as an idolized subject. In this way, a woman can experience femininity as rewarding and empowering, allowing her to gain regard and success through her feminine wiles. Hence, any political project that questions the patriarchal construction and feminization of the female body may be apprehended as ‘something that threatens her with desexualization, if not outright annihilation’ (Bartky 1997: 146). In particular, the feminist critique of femininity may pose a threat not only to the female individual’s ‘sense of her own identity and desirability but to the very structure of her social universe’, her understanding of her positioning within society (Bartky 1997: 146).

Feminist commentators have been reluctant to take into account the gender-constituting and identity-confirming aspects of femininity/beauty and they reject women’s sexual empowerment as a patriarchal survival strategy that masks as an imaginary and fraudulent freedom through self-objectification. They foreground the victimizing and repressive aspects of the Cinderella story, emphasizing that even ‘the idealisation of female appearance camouflages the underlying belief in female inferiority’

as 'the sexy woman [. . .] is sexy, but as object, not as subject. She expresses not so much her desire as her pleasure in being desired' (Coppock 1995: 24; Coward 1997: 361). This line of criticism perceives women to be in a state of false consciousness that puts forward the promise of social power and heterosexual romance while exploiting and manipulating their fears of physical imperfections.⁷ The female subjects internalize the feminine doctrine as 'common sense' and they adopt a perception of reality that involves them in a series of unreflective actions that preserve patriarchal forms of female self-normalization. In Rita Freedman's words, this mandate for beauty transformations can be referred to as 'the Cinderella Complex' that works to 'further increase dependency by diverting a woman's energy, depleting her resources, and diminishing her self-esteem' (Freedman 1986: 70; 71). Accordingly, women act as deluded and indoctrinated participants in their subordination as they establish an alienated and almost pathological relationship with their own bodies. By assimilating the fantasy model of beauty, women commit themselves to a relentless self-surveillance and self-doubt as they endeavor to incarnate the imaginary feminine ideal and stigmatize their unadorned and unimproved body as a source of shame. The un-feminine body is interpreted as flawed in its difference and, therefore, it has to be refashioned through the maintenance work of femininity, including such diverse practices as make-up, dieting and cosmetic surgery.

Contrastingly, I argue that postfeminism offers a thematic variation on the Cinderella motif as it portrays the character's pursuit of femininity and beauty in terms of self-expression and autonomy. In the following, I want to move away from the idea that women are deceived and coerced dupes and I dismiss the notion of false consciousness that relies on a fictitious and oversimplified dichotomy between feminism and femininity,

between the enlightened feminist critic and the victimized *femme*. I aim to explore the postfeminist paradox that allows for tensions and contradictions between Cinderella's social constraints and her personal liberation of increased social power. The postfeminist Cinderella takes an active and subjective role in her bodily construction as she decides to become her own Pygmalion and refuses to be categorized as the passive object of cultural signification. As Efrat Tseëlon points out, 'for women it is about shaping a new identity, about coming out of the closet, about transforming themselves with a magic wand' (Tseëlon 1995: 81). Postfeminism does not depict femininity/beauty as thoroughly objectifying patriarchal schemes and it makes room in its ranks for those women who experience emancipation and freedom through feminine discipline. Instead of classifying the postfeminist Cinderella as a 'chauvinized woman' who is 'ashamed, eager to please, worried about her weight', the postfeminist landscape endows and empowers her with the qualities of agency and subjectivity (Bartky 1990: 8). The Cinderella characters discussed in this chapter feminize their bodies in order to combat appearance anxiety and achieve personal and professional success, sometimes involving technology that would astound a fairy godmother. Confined to a state of feminine deviance and social invisibility, the postfeminist Cinderella is either too old, too big or generally too anomalous to conform to the standards of feminine attractiveness. Yet, refusing to be branded as a freak, she attempts to cross into the realm of feminine beauty through enacting a disciplinary regime and a transformational practice on her own body. She consciously and actively chooses to embody and recreate the feminine construct in order to alter her standing from a colonized and oppressed victim of patriarchy to a self-determined and powerful agent. In the course of this remodelling, femininity is reconstructed by a resignificatory

operation that generates the potential for a gender parody, a denaturalization and subversion from within the feminine norm.

Yet, while seeking to establish her individuality and moulding herself into a new image, the postfeminist Cinderella is also engaged in a de-individualizing and normalizing process that limits her cultural choices to an idealized vision of feminine beauty. The character's celebration of a multiple and malleable identity takes place in a cultural context in which 'the standards by which women are judged and critically judge themselves alter little' and the meta-message of femininity remains tied to heterosexual desirability (Coppock 1995: 29). In this way, the postfeminist Cinderella occupies a paradoxical in-betweenness that simultaneously situates her as a sexual being and an empowered agent, a patriarchal object and an autonomous subject. She inhabits an ambiguous and multivalent borderland as she struggles to achieve a sense of balance between these conflicting positions. The postfeminist Cinderella vacillates between her subjective and objectified status, between her wish to achieve an active selfhood and her temptation to hold back and passively assume a patriarchal meaning of femininity. In fact, I argue against a dualistic logic that posits the feminine construct within a framework of binary oppositions that juxtapose complicity and critique, feminism and femininity. I maintain that femininity's complex contradictoriness cannot be summed up by a one-sided attention to its restrictive and oppressive characteristics but it is to be found in the overlapping features of activity and passivity, affirmation and resistance, alienation and absorption. I resist simplistic deductions based on a monological reasoning that defines woman through a masculinist rationale as 'what turns man on' as 'socially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness, which means sexual

availability on male terms' (MacKinnon 1982: 530-531). Conversely, I contend that femininity blurs the binary as it works to bring the woman-as-subject into existence while concomitantly creating her as a patriarchally determined object. In the following, I propose that this pluralistic paradox is encapsulated in the understanding of femininity as a masquerade that can be discussed both as a defensive mechanism resulting from social powerlessness and a potentially subversive critical tool that initiates change in gender roles.

The novels analyzed in this chapter engage with postfeminism's frontier discourse and they examine the boundaries between subjectivity and objectification in their depictions of a postfeminist Cinderella who remakes and recreates her body in a feminine mould. In Faustine (1995), Emma Tennant describes the subject/object dilemma in terms of a personality split and she adopts a pessimistic view of the beauty culture as a devilish ambush or curse that lures women into losing their soul and voice. Tennant rewrites the Faust theme in her depiction of a 'sad menopausee' who falls prey to the devil in his modern incarnation of a TV salesman who sells the cult of eternal youth and beauty (Tennant 1995: 407). This postfeminist Cinderella is robbed of her identity in the course of her feminizing endeavors and she is transformed into a de-individualized cult object, a media star of Marilyn Monroe proportions. Contrastingly, in her 'fairy tale for feminists' Jemima J. (1998), Jane Green explores how the tyranny of slenderness can be turned into a fertile ground for female action and control (Wells 2000: 1). The eponymous Jemima embarks on a mission to shed her overweight body and re-invent herself as a feminist/feminine role model that 'is an inspiration to us all' (Green 1998: 334). Green emphasizes the life-enhancing qualities of femininity that, in the right hands

and with the help and guidance of a feminist-minded fairy godmother, can be used as a means of self-expression and choice. Yet, in her most controversial and problematical personification, the postfeminist Cinderella obscures and confuses dualistic distinctions as she exhibits a contradictory mix of active and passive, complicit and critical facets. This postfeminist ambivalence is exemplified in The Life and Loves of a She Devil (1983) by Fay Weldon's protagonist Ruth who remoulds and surgically alters her grotesquely large body to mirror the physical image of her husband's lover. She forcefully and painfully enforces her feminine rights and she is both oppressed and liberated by the beauty system, simultaneously undermining and upholding it.

Critics have tried to classify this paradoxical form of postfeminist subjectivity in terms of a micro-/macro-societal division that considers postfeminism's creation of a feminine plastic as an empowering and even rational gesture for the individual woman who wants to raise her social status and value through constructing an 'improved' physical self. Yet, at the macro-societal level, women may be seen to collaborate with the dominant discourses and ideologies that disadvantage them and sustain wider social inequalities. Rosemary Gillespie applies this micro/macro differentiation to the medicalization of appearance through cosmetic surgery that reinforces limited and restrictive models of femininity while allowing the female subject to experience positive feelings of control and choice. As Gillespie reveals,

changing women's bodies through cosmetic surgery may on the one hand be seen to perpetuate female subordination. [. . .] Paradoxically, however, at the same time it may be empowering for women. Through reinventing and investing in

their bodies, individual women may raise their social value through creating an appearance that conforms to dominant images of beauty. (Gillespie 1996: 81)

Women's day-to-day partaking in a body image discipline (whether it be through cosmetic surgery, dieting, obsessive exercise or make-up) can increase their self-esteem and empowerment on the micro-societal level while such practices can also contribute to the reproduction of social structures that construct oppressive images of female beauty. In this way, cosmetic surgery simultaneously exhibits enabling and constraining features and it can be embraced as an individual lifestyle choice that seeks to make life as enjoyable as possible within the context of structural limitations. Kathy Davis summarizes the inherently ambivalent nature of this transformational exercise, noting that 'cosmetic surgery might be both a problem and a solution' (Davis 1991: 22).

This distinction between women's personal and collective spheres relies on an interpretation of the postfeminist Cinderella as a token achiever who affirms female oppression while neutralizing that affirmation in an individualistic rhetoric. The macro/micro contrast establishes oppositional criteria of female success that depict the postfeminist *woman* advancing through feminine accomplishments whereas *women* gain greater freedom through a politicized feminist critique that counteracts the patriarchal system of feminine enculturation.⁸ According to this logic, any feminine victory will be at best temporary as the individual's creative force and autonomy remain constrained on the micro level of practical achievement and they are directed towards the gain of instant pleasure and social reward rather than a generalized change in the hegemonic structures.⁹ Women are no longer encouraged to think of themselves as a disadvantaged gendered

group but rather as atomized subjects claiming their right to be desired and successful in a sexist society. This focus on the postfeminist token is seen to be disempowering for the majority of women as it mystifies their unequal social position and presents them as no longer needing a collective politics.

I want to problematize this notion of postfeminist tokenism that advances an oversimplified classification and dichotomy between feminism and femininity, between individual and communal success. I maintain that femininity is an inherently and internally contradictory construct that enhances as well as diminishes women's power. I propose that the spectrum of feminine power/powerlessness is contained within the double-edged concept of masquerade that can serve as a placatory display of feminine receptivity and passivity while also implying an active and subversive destabilization of the feminine position. Psychoanalyst Joan Riviere pioneered the idea of 'womanliness as a masquerade' in her 1929 essay where she examines femininity as a charade of power, a reaction-formation that compensates for the female subject's theft of masculine subjectivity by disguising herself as an object of male desire and 'masquerading as guiltless and innocent', as 'merely a castrated woman' (Riviere 1986: 38).¹⁰ The feminine masquerade comes to be seen as a disarming impersonation and a defence mechanism, defusing patriarchal anger and deflecting attention from women's pursuit of male control and authority through the construction of a non-threatening/non-phallic and sexualized image. As Riviere famously declares,

womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to

possess it – much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods. (Riviere 1986: 38)

Riviere identifies the masquerade as a sign of disempowerment and the result of the female subject's social subjugation, a 'compulsive reversal of her intellectual performance' (Riviere 1986: 38). In a similar manner, Mary Ann Doane reveals that the masquerade is not employed to illuminate female autonomy and creativity 'but to designate a mode of being for the other – the sheer objectification or reification of representation' (Doane 1991: 33). Riviere's patient renounces her subjective status and adopts the feminine mask in order to conceal her lapse into the realm of power and her illicit assumption of masculinity. In this description, the masquerade is theorized as a joyless compensatory gesture, 'a device for avoiding anxiety' and 'the very antithesis of spectatorship/subjectivity', specifying a norm of femininity but 'not a way out' (Riviere 1986: 38; Doane 1991: 33). The concept of masquerade upholds a gender hierarchy that makes femininity dependent on masculinity as a frame of reference for its very definition. The masquerade presupposes a system dictated by a dualistic logic that subordinates feminine passivity to masculine activity and thus, it remains tied to a set of binary oppositions that masculinize female agency and desire.

While, on the face of it, the masquerade facilitates an understanding of the woman's position as a passive spectacle rather than an active subject, it has also been heralded as an empowering strategy capable of undermining the phallographic dichotomy. In fact, Riviere's theory can be reconceived in more subversive and challenging terms as it harbors the possibility for a reinterpretation of the myths of femininity. This critical

potential is lodged within the notion of masquerade and it is to be found in the deconstruction of an authentic feminine essence and its representation as a resignifiable social construct. Riviere emphasizes that she does not make a distinction between 'genuine womanliness and the masquerade', proclaiming that 'whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing' (Riviere 1986: 38). Mary Ann Doane develops and expands this psychoanalytic account of femininity, proposing that the masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning lies in its denial of the feminine construction as 'immediacy, or proximity-to-self', as precisely 'imagistic' (Doane 1991: 37; Doane 1992: 235). As she notes, the patriarchal conception of femininity is one of nearness and over-presence, hence lacking the distance between 'oneself and one's image' (Doane 1992: 235). For a woman to embrace this stance of feminine closeness is to accept her place within patriarchy and to affirm her own disempowerment in the cultural arena. In flaunting womanliness as a mask that can be worn or removed, the masquerade challenges this patriarchal notion as it delineates femininity as a culturally assigned site. Thus, it provides an internal contradiction that attributes to the woman the necessary gap and alienation for redeploying femininity and reading it differently. In Doane's words,

to claim that femininity is a function of the mask is to dismantle the question of essentialism before it can even be posed. In a theory which stipulates a claustrophobic closeness of the woman in relation to her own body, the concept of masquerade suggests a "glitch" in the system. (Doane 1991: 37)

Consequently, Doane concludes that ‘the effectivity of masquerade lies precisely in its potential to manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by the woman’ (Doane 1992: 240).

Riviere’s and Doane’s insights have been reworked in contemporary theories of gender parody that take up the idea that there is no authentic or essential femininity in order to advance the notion of the performative status and the imitative structure of the feminine construct. Judith Butler has been instrumental in the formulation and theorization of gender *performativity* whereby femininity and masculinity come into being when a body performs or ‘does gender’ in a stylized reiteration of conventions that eventually become naturalized and consolidated. As Butler notes, gender is ‘an identity tenuously constituted in time’ and ‘instituted through the stylisation of the body’ (Butler 1997c: 402). The gendered body is performative in the sense that it has ‘no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality’ and thus, gender ‘can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived’ (Butler 1990a: 136; 141). Instead, ‘gender is always a doing’, a ‘performance that relies on a certain practice of repetition’ that retroactively produces the effect of identity and the illusion that there is an inner gender core (Butler 1990a: 25; Butler 1990c: 2). Hence, ‘all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation’, an ‘imitation for which there is no original’ but rather the idea of an imaginary or fantasized origin (Butler 1993b: 313).¹¹

While the everyday performativity of gender resides in unacknowledged acts of citation that produce the female body as feminine, Butler’s particular interest lies in disrupting this appearance of natural continuity and making ‘gender trouble’. By

exposing gender as a reiterative mechanism and a performative achievement, Butler explores the potential of an unfaithful and critical repetition that might displace the very constructs by which it is mobilized. As she notes,

if the ground of gender is the stylised repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.

(Butler 1997c: 402)

In other words, femininity becomes available for a deconstructive practice and/or politics that use and resignify simulation in ways that challenge the stable notion of gender as the edifice of sexual difference. Instead of a monological and homogenous structure, the gender template is opened up to a more complex and fragmented set of signposts that refashion the body and allow the subject to disengage from the roles of an apparently naturalized femininity/masculinity. Yet, at the same time as proclaiming that gender can 'be rendered thoroughly and radically *incredible*', Butler is also aware that this form of parodic imitation cannot be confused with a voluntarist stance whereby subjects choose their various identities much as they would select their clothes (Butler 1990a: 141).

Butler is adamant that 'gender performativity is not a question of instrumentally deploying a "masquerade"' for such a construal of performativity presupposes an intentional subject *behind* the deed (Butler 1995: 136).¹² On the contrary, gender is an involuntary and imposed production within a culturally restricted space and it is always

put on under constraint as a compulsory performance that acts in line with heterosexual conventions.¹³ In this way, femininity is ‘not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment’ (Butler 1993a: 232).

Thus, performativity is simultaneously theorized in terms of transgressivity and normativity whereby it both empowers and constrains the subject. As Butler admits, ‘there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion’ as the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles remain ‘part of hegemonic, misogynist culture’ (Butler 1993a: 231; Butler 1990a: 138). Like the masquerade, Butler’s notion of gender parody is characterized by an undeterminable disruptive and revolutionary potential that cannot be summed up by a dichotomous logic as *either* a powerful and self-conscious protest *or* a disempowering and unconscious placation. As Véronique Machelidon concludes,

the subversiveness of masquerade [and gender parody] can probably never be calculated, for its actors as well as its spectators [. . .] are themselves located within the power they are hoping to expose. But neither should the possibility of subversion ever be underestimated because power always generates contradictions and because “subjects” will respond idiosyncratically to its multiple, complex, and at times inconsistent cultural imperatives. (Machelidon 2000: 116)

Ultimately, the importance of the concepts of masquerade and gender parody is that they constitute a transgressive doubleness, an inscription of alternative wishes that both

undermine and reinforce patriarchal representations of womanliness, blurring the opposition between activity and passivity, subject and object.

Emma Tennant explores the postfeminist spectrum of feminine significations in her novel *Faustine* (1992), centered around the sufferings of a grandmother who refuses the invisibility of 'the no woman's land of old age' and makes a pact with the devil in order to regain her youthful looks and beauty (Tennant 1995: 372). Tennant's text is a female-orientated re-writing and variation on the Faust theme that portrays a Cinderella figure invading the God-Man-Devil trinity and siding with the darker forces to obtain sexual power. The narrative focuses on the granddaughter Ella who embarks on a quest for her roots as she tries to come to terms with both her mother and her grandmother, the feminist theorist Anna and Muriel Twyman, the eponymous Faustine. Tennant examines the interconnections and contradictions between patriarchal, feminist and postfeminist conceptions of female power in her portrayal of two mother-daughter relationships that are disrupted by the older woman's beautification and rejuvenation.¹⁴ Importantly, Muriel is never given the opportunity to disclose her motives and clarify her own view of the events as the book is divided between four different narrators who provide outside and subjective perspectives on Faustine. These external voices include Ella who only has her childhood recollections to rely on, Muriel's daughter Anna and Jasmine, Muriel's best friend who turns out to be the tale's *Frau Marthe*, 'a natural witch' in league with the devil/Mephisto (Tennant 1995: 408). The latter provides the final comment on Muriel's life and her metamorphosis, revealing the devilish origin of the beauty myth that holds out the promise of 'an impossible, artificial present' in exchange for women's souls (Tennant 1995: 361). In his pursuit of 'Satanic chaos', the devil seeks his prey among

middle-aged women and enrolls them in a vicious and unrelenting circle of self-objectification and de-individualization (Tennant 1995: 407). After her transformation, Muriel becomes a walking advertisement and she is reborn as 'the ultimate symbol' of 'the meaninglessness and uniqueness of beauty', the cult persona Lisa Crane (Tennant 1995: 305). Ultimately, beauty becomes a curse and the protagonist is driven 'pretty well insane' by her diabolical make-over (Tennant 1995: 397).

Muriel/Lisa/Faustine remains a void at the center of the novel as she never appears in person but is remembered by the various narrators. These different reconstructions are dissonant and even contradictory, creating the image of an utterly self-divided person, unable to cohere or hold together her paradoxical facets and characteristics. Ella's memories of 'the simple, loving Muriel' stand in stark contrast to the 'heartless' 'Snow Queen' Lisa Crane who has 'a new, ruthless attitude [. . .] to anyone [. . .] who crossed her path' (Tennant 1995: 344; 408; 380; 378). Ella idealizes her grandmother as her 'one sacred thing', 'the dream of my childhood' and 'the only secure thing I have' (Tennant 1995: 342; 373). The young woman's search is for an imaginary childhood idol and in this way, she compares herself to 'a heroine in a romantic novel', except that 'my quest wasn't for a dashing young man [. . .] it was for an old woman' (Tennant 1995: 294). 'I have her in a place no one can ever touch', Ella declares and she reacts sulkily to Jasmine's suggestion that Muriel was bored with caring for her granddaughter which, according to Ella, should have made her 'blissfully happy' (Tennant 1995: 343). She constructs her own vision of Muriel and clearly misreads her grandmother who 'was like a magician to me, for she could do anything. [. . .] She could get me what I wanted just as soon as I asked for it' (Tennant 1995: 327).

Ella fails to comprehend that her grandmother is a sexual being with needs and desires and thus, she cannot conceive of Muriel as ‘a woman [. . .] with a future when what was expected of her and her contemporaries was the acceptance that nothing lay ahead but memories of the past’ (Tennant 1995: 386). Significantly, Ella cannot understand the connection between the media star Lisa Crane and the grandmotherly Muriel except in terms of a working relation between employer and employee. ‘It seems highly unlikely that someone like my grandma would be invited to eat off gold plates’, Ella notes when she sees a sumptuous dinner being prepared and she concludes that ‘of course, Muriel had been a cook and housekeeper here for Lisa Crane’ (Tennant 1995: 340; 311). She only gradually accepts that the ‘wealthy image queen’ with the ‘exquisite features of Helen of Troy’ and the unsophisticated and loving Muriel are the same person, realizing ‘how deeply embedded in a pre-adolescent state’ she has been (Tennant 1995: 336; 353; 385). Ella’s growing up experience leads her on the same Satanic path to beauty as she increasingly becomes influenced by the ‘Empress of the Air’ or ‘the ruler of the world’ and she internalizes her iconic vision of femininity (Tennant 1995: 392; 355). As she explains, ‘the core of me drained out, as if the fame of Lisa Crane has taken away any picture of myself I might ever have had’ (Tennant 1995: 374). In the end, Ella is enlisted in ‘the endless duplication of that image’ as her mirrored reflection merges with that of Muriel/Lisa, becoming indistinguishable, ‘like two halves of an apple’ (Tennant 1995: 305; 398).

Tennant emphasizes the deeply embedded beauty myths that span over female generations and equally effect grandmother and granddaughter. Importantly, Ella displays no interest in her mother’s feminist commitments that are ‘something frightening and far

away from me' (Tennant 1995: 323). She rejects 'the books on the sufferings and triumphs of women' that Anna buys for her in favor of Muriel's 'pink celluloid dolls [. . .] with hair so impossibly blonde it made ordinary hair seem as dull as ditchwater – or as my mother's hair' (Tennant 1995: 323). Tennant makes an implicit statement about the pre-feminist/patriarchal component of postfeminism while also problematizing oppositional feminist discourse that simplistically dismisses and denounces beauty as a monological cultural restriction. The novelist discredits the idea that women's obsession and enchantment with the imaginary feminine can be shed with feminist rhetoric that fails to account for the 'exquisite power' that beauty affords them (Tennant 1995: 408). She recognizes the lure of the feminine construct that bewitches ordinary women and poses as a 'source of salvation', transforming them into 'visible' and desirable social subjects (Freedman 1986: 47).

In this way, Ella follows in her grandmother's footsteps as she becomes the devil's latest convert to the cult of eternal youth. She takes up Muriel's viewpoint as she simulates and reiterates her fear of old age, noting that 'I never want to grow old' as aging implies 'going into a lifetime's confinement – a dark place where I would be neither heard nor seen' (Tennant 1995: 341; 398). This is reinforced by the devil's handmaiden Jasmine who provides an accurate description of tormented womanhood fighting back the years, revealing that 'growing old [. . .] was probably the worst thing that could happen to a woman in a free, consumerist society' (Tennant 1995: 325). 'The great explosion of youth' comes to be experienced as an involuntary exile for, 'if one was older, with legs that didn't look so good when exposed right up to the thigh, you were really excluded from the world' (Tennant 1995: 345). The nurse's tale constructs Muriel

as a desperate woman ‘well and truly trapped’, reduced to performing the domestic roles of housekeeper and nanny while suffering ‘invisible day[s]’ at the office of ‘*New Image*’ where she contributes to the worship of youth and helps to perpetuate ‘all the lies’ (Tennant 1995: 345; 328; 322). Jasmine recollects Muriel’s anguished statement that ‘once you get to a certain age [. . .] you simply cease to exist’ and become ‘anonymous in the disintegration of personality that comes with old age’ (Tennant 1995: 328; 321). In this reconstruction, Muriel’s rejuvenating pact with the devil is represented as an empowering release from her given, biological constraints, putting ‘all within [her] grasp’ (Tennant 1995: 348).

Tennant critically examines the protagonist’s attempt to improve her social status and her quality of life by portraying it as a process of de-individualization and nullification that reconstructs the Cinderella figure as a beautiful object whose only power lies in the attraction of the male gaze. Muriel’s satanic metamorphosis transforms her into a ‘Marilyn Monroe’ persona who ‘lives on her sexuality alone’ and emanates ‘some magic quality’ (Tennant 1995: 390). Lisa Crane’s physical ‘perfection’ and sexual power render her inhuman and even grotesque so that Anna and Ella can only refer to her as a ‘hybrid’ or ‘freak’ who is ‘both sultana and concubine’ at the same time (Tennant 1995: 353; 387; 352).¹⁵ As Ella comments on Lisa’s paradoxical being, ‘her position of power and her teasing beauty seem to contradict each other to the point of making her an impossible anomaly – a monster’ (Tennant 1995: 352). Fittingly, this imaginary construct inhabits a mausoleum and shrine given over to her photographic and filmic mementoes, where a video of Lisa Crane plays day and night and tapes are ‘succeeding each other unendingly, in a terrible travesty of life’ (Tennant 1995: 374). It is a fairy tale place,

'slumbering', 'sheltered' and 'hidden', giving 'the illusion of time standing still' (Tennant 1995: 308; 319; 310; 320). In this 'arranged' and 'false' environment, Lisa Crane never appears in flesh but she is portrayed as an immaculate object, caught on celluloid and devoid of any human feelings or connections (Tennant 1995: 309).

Muriel's physical transformation into the cult star is described in terms of a self-alienation and self-negation whereby her old caring identity is annihilated and made soulless/heartless in the repudiation of her emotional ties with her daughter and grandchild. As the devil's tale reveals, Muriel has to learn to 'enjoy the body of a young and sexually forceful woman again' and wipe out 'her memories and experiences [that] are those of a woman whose cycle is done – in short, a hag' (Tennant 1995: 407). Muriel has to reject 'the hag within' and become the devil's creation who selfishly 'dream[s] only of herself' and has no time 'for anyone other than herself' (Daly 1979; Tennant 1995: 369; 380). Muriel's rejuvenation separates her from her friends and family as it reverses 'the natural order of things' and 'the natural progression of generations' (Tennant 1995: 387). In this way, Muriel and Anna become rivals for male approval and compete for the same man Harry/Mephisto, leaving the daughter with the feeling that her own existence has been invalidated by her mother's actions (Tennant 1995: 389). In a similar manner, Ella realizes that her quest for her grandmother inverts the mythical mother-daughter relationship between Demeter and Persephone and 'it is the wrong way round' as she is 'the maiden who is bound to go under the earth in the autumn and return in spring' (Tennant 1995: 387). In the end, Muriel/Lisa's satanic pact becomes a curse that plagues her with 'terrible dreams' and forces her to embody an ever young and unchanged image of beauty (Tennant 1995: 397). As Jasmine describes, she 'suddenly

looked haggard – not a day older [. . .] but drained [. . .] and haunted’ (Tennant 1995: 397). Ultimately, Tennant’s bleak cautionary tale offers no salvation for any of her female characters, leaving the final word to ‘the prince of all mingling and ambiguity’ (Tennant 1995: 407). The devil is seen to be responsible for the perpetuation of the beauty myth, ‘cover[ing] the surface of the dying world’ with shops, magazines and TV stores that persuade women to exchange their selves and give up their individuality in return for a sexy and youthful appearance (Tennant 1995: 406). As he concludes, ‘souls cannot co-exist with consumerism’, warning the reader that ‘next time you see those young women anywhere, remember one of them could be Muriel [. . .] or Ella [. . .] or it could be you!’ (Tennant 1995: 409).

Contrastingly, Jane Green offers a more optimistic and less supernatural account of women’s preoccupation with femininity and beauty in her ‘novel about ugly ducklings and swans’, Jemima J. (1998) (Wells 2000: 2). Green depicts the struggles of the overweight, talented but undervalued journalist Jemima Jones who re-moulds herself as a slim, beautiful and gym-obsessed glamour girl, only to find out that ‘swans have their problems too’ (Wells 2000: 2). Jemima J. combines an intimate, first-person narrative that details the protagonist’s involvement in and victimization by the tyranny of diet and exercise with a third-person, fairy godmother perspective that omnisciently guides Jemima on the middle path to happiness and well-being. Green espouses and promotes a balanced ideal whereby Jemima rejects the more compulsive and oppressive facets of body discipline in favor of a maxim of self-love and choice. The character fulfils her Cinderella potential and she is united with her prince after she completes her empowering journey to self-realization and emancipation. Jemima discovers the affirmative and

identity-confirming aspects of bodily routines as she actively decides to take charge of her life, lose weight and gain professional success (Green 1998: 166). Green adopts a postfeminist stance that merges feminist and feminine principles and proclaims the compatibility of beauty practices with notions of agency and self-determination.¹⁶

Jemima begins her quest towards self-fulfillment from the position of a docile and compliant inmate of the beauty Panopticon whose life revolves around her physical appearance and her own deviance from the normative body of femininity. Starting her confessional tale with an axiomatic 'I wish I were thin, gorgeous, and could get any man I want', Jemima reveals herself to be a devoted follower and admirer of feminine beauty who judges women according to the standards of female materiality depicted in fashion magazines (Green 1998: 1). The protagonist has interiorized patriarchal injunctions concerning body shape and she assumes a male consciousness and gaze as she 'drink[s] in the models' long, lithe limbs, their tiny waists, their glowing golden skin' (Green 1995: 1). As Jemima acknowledges her almost erotic obsession with these images of beauty:

I have a routine: I start with their faces, eyeing each sculpted cheekbone, heart-shaped chin, and I move slowly down their bodies, careful not to miss a muscle. I have a few favourites. In the top drawer of my chest of drawers in my bedroom at home is a stack of cut-out pictures of my top super models, preferred poses. Linda's there for her sex appeal, Christy's there for her lips and nose, and Cindy's there for the body. (Green 1998: 1-2)

In this way, even though Jemima does not initially live up to the imaginary feminine ideal, she has clearly internalized its sexual associations and she participates in its perpetuation, 'always judg[ing] books by their cover' (Green 1998: 65).

Jemima is given the opportunity to transform her un-feminine and bulky self into a beauty construct when she re-invents herself over the internet and adopts the persona of JJ, a successful and stunning television presenter. As Jemima reveals, this electronic landscape is a realm of possibility and resignification, 'another world, where people can be anyone they want' (Green 1998: 33). In fact, she muses that 'this could open up a whole new life for me, a new life that doesn't care about looks, about weight, about expanses of flesh' (Green 1998: 60). Underrated in her job and ill-fated in her passion for her unobtainable colleague Ben, Jemima decides that 'living on the internet seems a far easier option than giving up chocolate' and she embarks on a chat room romance with Californian dream man Brad (Green 1998: 60). However, when her long-distance boyfriend demands that they meet, Jemima is forced to embody her fictional creation and conquer her food addiction in order to physically remodel herself in the image of the thin 'hard body' of her e-mails (Green 1998: 174). Jemima launches into a rigorous regime of diet and exercise that sees JJ 'emerging from the fat of Jemima Jones' until her old self exists 'in name alone' (Green 1998: 175; 204). Jemima's new desirable appearance proves to be an instant and empowering success, helping her to further her career and attracting the male gaze. As the third-person narrator comments on Jemima becoming a visible subject on the patriarchal gage of female attractiveness, 'that look finally confirmed [. . .] [that] Jemima Jones is beautiful. She is slim, she is blonde, she is beautiful' (Green 1998: 215). Jemima realizes that she finally has 'a choice' and she can

employ her sexual power to accomplish what was unachievable to her in her previous body (Green 1998: 234).

However, rather than heralding a sexualized performance of femininity as a strategy for female empowerment and happiness, Green makes her heroine undergo a psychological change that provides her with the spiritual strength to embrace her own identity and disengage herself from the cult of slimness. Jemima's physical transformation does not engender a reformed and altered psyche as the dieter suffers from a distorted self-image. As she explains, 'it feels like it can't be real, that I'm playing at being thin', 'if anything I feel a bit of a fraud' as 'I look like a completely different person, [but] underneath I still feel the same, I still feel fat' (Green 1998: 235; 220). Jemima is anxious that Brad will 'see through the illusion and see the fat unhappy girl lurking beneath' (Green 1998: 234). Thus, when she finally meets this 'ultimate specimen of the perfect man', Jemima attempts to turn into JJ and personify the beauty construct she has invented (Green 1998: 245). As the narrative voice of the all-knowing fairy godmother sceptically remarks, 'Jemima and Brad look like the perfect couple, like they've just stepped out of a romantic love story' but 'looks [. . .] aren't everything' (Green 1998: 268; 245). The narrator reassuringly declares that 'fate will sort out' Jemima's happiness 'once and for all' but first, she has to achieve self-awareness and 'learn to love herself' (Green 1998: 366; Wells 2000: 3).

Jemima comes to realize that she is 'playing a role' and parodying the persona of the skinny and blonde 'trophy girlfriend' that Brad needs in the image-obsessed Los Angeles 'to prove that he'd made it' (Green 1998: 379; 384). As she notes,

I've become so immersed in being Brad's girlfriend I've forgotten who I really am. [. . .] If I'm totally honest about it, I haven't felt myself since I lost weight and I never understood before how much I used the excess weight to protect myself. (Green 1998: 379)

Jemima demystifies her own stereotypes of feminine success and beauty, admitting that 'this is about me [. . .] it's about thinking that being blonde and slim and perfect will automatically bring you happiness, and then discovering that life is full of as many disappointments as there were before' (Green 1998: 388). Jemima decides to abandon her embodied feminine construction and no longer use her size and her flesh as a safety protection 'to hide away from the world, to hide my sexuality, to hide who I [am]' (Green 1998: 399). She ultimately emerges as a triumphant and self-aware 'survivor', an 'amazing woman' who has 'control' and who knows 'as an absolute certainty, that deep down [she has] an amazing reserve of strength' (Green 1998: 447; 428; 426; 477). As Jemima proclaims her credo of affirmative action and personal power,

you have to make things happen [. . .]. You can change your life if you're willing to let go of the old and actively look for the new [. . .] fairy tales can come true [. . .] if we trust in ourselves, embrace our faults, and brazen it out with courage, strength, bravery and truth. (Green 1998: 333; 449)

Fay Weldon's satire The Life and Loves of a She Devil (1983) echoes both Tennant's and Green's novels as it focuses on the struggles and triumphs of a

postfeminist Cinderella who undergoes extensive cosmetic surgery in order to re-invent herself as a diabolical and feminine subject, bent on revenge against her unfaithful husband. Weldon's work leaves the reader with several puzzles as on the one hand, it is a feminist critique of female oppression and unequal power relations between the sexes. Yet, it is also a tale with a surprising twist as the female protagonist uses and resignifies her feminine position to regain control over her life and achieve self-determination. Weldon's text offers a scathing portrayal of feminine beauty norms that encourage women to alter their bodies and submit themselves to the excruciating pain and staggering expense of cosmetic surgery, without reducing the female subjects to the position of deluded victims and cultural dupes. The novelist explores the contradictory dimensions of bodily transformations as she repudiates monolithic notions of the docile female, trapped by the constraints of beauty regimes and blinded by social forces beyond her comprehension, in favor of a complex vision of a knowledgeable agent who assesses her situation and makes her choices within her contextual surroundings and structural limits. Weldon examines the postfeminist paradox and tensions between empowerment and disempowerment, subjectivity and objectification, deliberately refusing to endorse an *either/or* logic that relies on diametrically opposed stereotypes of the liberated feminist and the subordinated *femme*. Instead, the Cinderella/she devil figure is positioned between these two poles, displaying a strong will and agency while employing this 'feminist' energy to embody a highly restrictive norm of feminine appearance.

In particular, the heroine's body is surgically remoulded to mirror the physical image of her hated arch-rival, Mary Fisher, a successful writer of popular romances and her husband's lover. Weldon depicts the journey of her protagonist Ruth in several

stages, from being a social freak, to becoming an entrepreneur and the epitome of a feminist success story, to finally transforming herself into a 'blonde, simpering doll on stilts', 'an impossible male fantasy made flesh' (Weldon 1983: 241; quoted in Haffenden 1985: 306). Importantly, the author does not represent Ruth's feminist and feminine achievements as irreconcilable or conflicting and she undermines dualistic frameworks that do not allow for interpretative open-endedness and contradiction. Weldon criticizes simplistic and monological ideologies of appropriate female behavior as her heroine's postfeminist metamorphosis can be understood as a combination of a feminist desire for autonomy with a patriarchally enforced urge to be beautiful and seductive. It is precisely at this 'point of discomfort', this frontier between feminist and patriarchal discourses, that 'Weldon shows how ambivalences can be embraced rather than dismissed or avoided' (Davis 1995: 67).

Weldon draws attention to and reworks a number of fairy tales and romance stories in order to deflate the notion of ideality that underlies patriarchal myths of feminine beauty. Ruth can be identified as a born Cinderella with a neglectful mother and favored half-sisters (Weldon 1983: 13). At the beginning of the novel, she is confined to the realm of sexual and physical unattractiveness, the category of the *personae non grata* who lack 'the compulsion of the erotic' (Weldon 1983: 11). Being six foot two inches tall, overweight and clumsy, Ruth is 'fixed here and now, trapped in [her] body' and she is described as 'a vast obliging mountain', a 'giantess' and 'an affront to the natural order of things' (Weldon 1983: 9; 34; 42). Her bodily extraordinariness and deviance make her a social outcast, a 'dog', so far removed from the norms of desirability that she cannot aspire to approximate the cultural beauty ideal through the everyday maintenance work of

femininity (Weldon 1983: 12). Make-up and dieting will not be sufficient to transform her differences into sameness and to achieve her overall goal 'to be like other women' and like Mary Fisher in particular (Weldon 1983: 234). In fairy tale terms, Ruth can be compared to the ugly stepsister who is determined to take over Cinderella's role, even to the extent of cutting off parts of herself to make the glass slipper fit. Devoid of supernatural guidance and help, she cannot hope for an instant and painless metamorphosis but she has to become her own fairy godmother, employing the modern magic of cosmetic surgery and spending years and millions to change her appearance. Ruth has an even better blueprint for her eventual condition as she repeatedly invokes Hans Christian Anderson's little mermaid who acquired legs instead of a tail and, with every step, felt that she was stepping on knives.¹⁷ Ruth exhibits a similar willingness to endure pain, noting that 'il faut souffrir [. . .] in order to get what you want. The more you want the more you suffer' and 'if you want everything you must suffer everything' (Weldon 1983: 170). In the course of her time- and money-consuming surgical reconstruction, she even welcomes pain as 'the healing agent', marking 'the transition from her old life to her new one' (Weldon 1983: 247; 248).

Ruth's journey also incorporates a popular romance formula as the protagonist's progress can be interpreted as a quest to regain the love of prince charming, her husband Bobbo. However, in Weldon's version, the state of desperation, loss and separation that the heroine has to go through before the reunion with her beloved, is situated after the traditional happy ending, marriage. Besides, Bobbo is far from being a stereotypical romance hero, being not only selfish, childish and irresponsible but also outwardly silly, his name supposedly being an intentional pun on the Spanish word meaning 'stupid'. In

this way, Weldon provides the reader with the rough outline or silhouette of a Cinderella transformation and a romance happy ending as, after all, the ugly duckling turns into a swan and the princess is reunited with her prince, but she removes the elements of ideal love and magic from her story. The novelist demystifies a number of popular patriarchal texts that define female success in terms of feminine beauty and desirability. Ruth ostensibly follows in Cinderella's footsteps and achieves the same goals through the same means but her victory has come at a high price, years of torture and millions of pounds, while it is also no longer axiomatic that the prince is worth fighting and suffering for. Thus, Weldon's reworking of the romance and fairy tale scenario exposes the artificiality of these myths and represents a critique from within the norm.

In a similar manner, Weldon also subverts feminist ideals of female comportment according to which women have to opt out of the patriarchal beauty contest. Initially, after Bobbo abandons her for Mary Fisher, Ruth appears to comply with the feminist call for political rejection of femininity as she sheds her dependent and passive nature and divests herself of all her motherly and wifely obligations by giving away her children and framing her husband to get him imprisoned. Moreover, she enters into a lesbian relationship with Nurse Hopkins, builds up a flourishing employment agency and even finds refuge in a separatist feminist commune. Following the feminist writer Mary Daly, Ruth can be discussed as a 'natural witch' or a 'wild woman' who privileges 'real' femaleness over 'false' femininity (Daly 1979). Weldon uses a similar image to describe Ruth's psychological change into a she devil who rejects patriarchal laws and conventions. As Ruth notes, instantly, 'there is no shame, no guilt, no dreary striving to

be good. There is only, in the end, what you want. And I can take what I want. I am a she devil' (Weldon 1983: 49).

Ruth's personal and professional success takes place while she is still visually represented by her unfeminine body and in some ways, her final transformation into a plastic construct of femininity and 'the show-girl type' seems redundant and contradictory (Weldon 1983: 241). The protagonist's physical metamorphosis into 'an insult to womanhood' has been interpreted as a denial and sabotage of her she devil persona and it has been criticized by a number of commentators as a 'violent derailing of our expectations' and a 'Sadecan assault' on our beliefs (Weldon 1983: 239; Wilde 1988: 406; 414). The character's self-inflicted 'humiliation' and the reductive conventionalization of her body are denounced as 'petty [. . .] and trivial goals' as she 'should have done what she ought, faced up to things, not what she wanted' (Wilde 1988: 414; quoted in Newman 1993: 199). The critics' objections relate to the fact that Ruth's evolution into an economically independent and supposedly disenthralled feminist role model does not engender a 'raised' consciousness that might lead to the espousal of a political perspective and the rejection of beauty norms. Ruth's adventures in the world of the working woman and her various sexual encounters do not lead to a feminist liberation or a political viewpoint. Tellingly, the 'Wimmin's commune' that Ruth temporarily joins ultimately seems 'too denim-coloured and serviceable', lacking 'glitter at the edges', and it cannot tempt her to give up her dream to 'live in the giddy mainstream of the world' (Weldon 1983: 213; 214).

Weldon refuses to locate her protagonist's diabolical conversion within the larger framework of an organized and regulated feminist struggle for collective liberation and

emancipation. She problematizes Ruth's satanic change from the outset by depicting it as a matter of obedience to her husband rather than a self-willed feminist awakening. One can argue that Bobbo initiates his wife's black baptism by continually and strategically renouncing her feminine identity. Throughout their marriage, he denies Ruth access to 'that other erotic world, of choice and desire and lust' in which women can have 'power over the hearts and pockets of men' (Weldon 1983: 28). As Ruth reveals, 'it is all the power we can have, down here in Eden Grove, in paradise, and even that' is withheld from her (Weldon 1983: 28). Bobbo considers Ruth to be 'essentially unlovable' and he reduces her self to her unshapely body, revealing that 'he had married *it* perforce and in error and would do his essential duties by *it* but he would never be reconciled to its enormity, and Ruth knew it' (Weldon 1983: 46; 37; my emphasis). He refuses to grant his wife the traditionally feminine role and patriarchal status of a sexual being, even telling her that she is not 'a natural rape victim' (Weldon 1983: 38). Confined by her physical shape and the ensuing social position, Ruth is driven by a desire to fit in or 'pass', if not as the epitome of beauty, than at least as a good housewife and mother. Yet, these remaining pillars of traditional femininity are taken away from her in the course of her redefinition as a she devil. According to Bobbo, Ruth is a 'third-rate person', 'a bad mother', 'a worse wife' and 'a dreadful cook' (Weldon 1983: 47). Furthermore, he declares that 'I don't think you are a woman at all. I think what you are is a she devil' (Weldon 1983: 47). Ruth unquestioningly accepts this new identity as proof of Bobbo's superior knowledge, noting that 'since he does so well in the world and I do so badly, I really must assume that he is right. I am a she devil' (Weldon 1983: 49).

In this way, Weldon eschews predetermined and monolithic conceptualizations of femaleness, feminism and femininity and, instead, she puts forward an unresolved stance that favors ambiguity and contradiction. The novelist rejects the assumption that inside every woman, there is an authentic female or rather feminist self who is unconstrained by the pressures of the beauty system.¹⁸ Throughout her psychological and material transformations, Ruth remains situated within and part of a gendered social order that defines the standards of feminine acceptability and desirability. As she admits, 'I am jealous of every little, pretty woman who ever lived and looked up since the world began' (Weldon 1983: 29). Yet, at the same time as depicting the protagonist's contextual dependency, Weldon also refuses to portray Ruth as a feminist failure who is unable to find the 'real me', the autonomous feminist subject who is positioned outside cultural restrictions. Acknowledging that 'this is a slightly frivolous novel', Weldon sets out to undermine a pre-packaged and totalizing feminist agenda that takes a uniformly negative view of beauty practices and cosmetic surgery (quoted in Kenyon 1988: 123). Instead, she makes room for a much more ambivalent interpretation that does not rob the feminine subject of her agency and determination but considers the paradoxical possibility whereby she is simultaneously a victim of the discourse of feminine beauty as well as one of its most devastating critics.

Accordingly, it is vital to take into account Ruth's power and agency in her cultural signification and in the material reproduction of beauty ideals. The protagonist takes an active part in her Cinderella transformation as she becomes the driving force behind her self-correction and feminization. She is the agent who negotiates her body, using its cultural constructedness to reinscribe the bodily text with her chosen writing. As

her disheartened surgeon Mr. Ghengis points out, 'he was her Pygmalion, but she would not depend upon him, or admire him or be grateful' (Weldon 1983: 230). Ruth employs cosmetic surgery as a source of empowerment, denying her doctors the position of godlike creators and, in Victor Frankenstein fashion, demanding this role for herself. Being completely in charge of her 'extensive renovation', she is both monster and Frankenstein, creature and creator at the same time (Weldon 1983: 234). As she proclaims,

anyone can do anything [. . .] if they have the will and they have the money. [. . .]
 We are here in this world to improve upon [God's] original idea. To create justice, truth and beauty where He so obviously and lamentably failed. [. . .] I will be what I want, not what He ordained. I will mould a new image for myself out of the earth of my creation. I will defy my Maker, and remake myself. (Weldon 1983: 124; 170)

Ruth's reconstructive endeavor is conceived within particularly narrow parameters of femininity as her perception of the imaginary feminine ideal takes the specific shape of Bobbo's lover, Mary Fisher or rather, the publicity image featured on the dust jacket of her romantic books. Ruth clearly 'thinks and talks in clichés' and she designs her new self according to patriarchal norms and in particular, her husband's criteria of feminine attractiveness (Weldon 1983: 26). By selecting the conventional prettiness of Mary Fisher as her ultimate goal, Ruth reveals her involvement in and collusion with the stereotypes of feminine beauty and she contributes to the perpetuation

of these bodily restrictions. She recreates herself as Mary's clone, a repetition of the fantasy image that the writer presents to the world.¹⁹ Living in the High Tower far removed from the realities and injustices of the world, Ruth's nemesis is not a flesh-and-blood being but a symbolic construct, the personification of her own mass-produced, fictional heroines. The cosmetic surgeon Mr. Ghengis objects to his patient's self-reduction and transformation into this caricature, the 'feeble' and 'absurd' incarnation of 'the balding businessman's dream' (Weldon 1983: 241; 249). He fails to realize that Ruth is motivated by a yearning for success and achievement within her cultural and structural context. The protagonist's transformation into an artifice enables her to enter the erotic world from which she has been excluded and fulfil her aspirations 'to take everything and return nothing', 'to be loved and not love in return' (Weldon 1983: 29; 49). Once Ruth becomes the object of Bobbo's sexual desires, the sado-masochistic power relations between them are reversed. As she proclaims her *Schadenfreude*, 'I have all and he has none. As I was, so he is now. [. . .] Somehow it is not a matter of male and female, after all; it never was, merely of power' (Weldon 1983: 256).

Ultimately, Ruth takes over Mary Fisher's life and body and she becomes a copy or reiteration of femininity. The character's erasure and re-inscription of her own bodily material can be discussed as an act of masquerade and gender parody, undermining the idea of an essential female or feminine identity. Ruth's metamorphosis emphasizes the possibility of 'putting on' femininity, suggesting that it is also possible to remove it. In this way, she seizes the mask of ideal womanhood from Mary Fisher and, in so doing, she exposes its inauthenticity and artificiality. As Mr. Ghengis declares, 'there is no such thing as the essential self', 'it is all inessential, and all liable to change and flux' (Weldon

1983: 234; 235). Yet, Weldon refuses to advance a straightforward espousal of parodic gender performances or present her protagonist as a consciously masquerading critic of Western beauty culture. Ruth notes that her 'exceptionally adaptable personality' is not moulded by critical and/or political aspirations but by a desire for conformity and integration, revealing that

I have tried many ways of fitting myself to my original body, and the world into which I was born, and have failed. I am no revolutionary. Since I cannot change them, I will change myself. I am quite sure I will settle happily enough into my new body. (Weldon 1983: 217)

Ruth knows the rules of the game and she will play by them, following Mrs. Black's advice that 'if you can't beat them, join them' (Weldon 1983: 239). Paradoxically, her agency and transformational powers are generated by the same ideological framework that defines and constrains her social position. Eluding an *either/or* logic, she is neither an innocent victim paralysed by her structural confines nor the triumphant creator of a more authentic self, a volitional subject who adopts and elects a new identity at will. Catching her reader off guard by a literary ploy, 'a comic turn, turned serious', Weldon examines the contradictory and multivalent aspects of embodiment that are skipped over in monolithic discourses of feminism and femininity (Weldon 1983: 256). The novelist puts forward both the reactionary and subversive potential of beauty practices, without privileging or committing herself to one side of the dualism. She portrays the complex

intermingling of resistance and subordination as she explores the dilemmatic situation of a 'free-yet-bounded' female subject who is simultaneously oppressed and liberated.

3.3 The Postfeminist Supergirl and Living in the In-Between

'Action heroines are a new breed of [. . .] female protagonists', Elizabeth Hills notes, emphasizing the transgressive and transformative nature of female characters who confound the binary logic of the masculine/feminine dualism (Hills 1999: 38). The modern day active heroine does not adhere to the stereotypical 'men act and women appear' polarization but she problematizes the critical framework that constructs the notions of a passive, feminine woman and an active, masculine man in terms of a diametrical opposition and mutual exclusivity (Berger 1972: 46). As Yvonne Tasker reveals, at the most fundamental level, images of the active heroine disrupt 'any clear set of critical distinctions between passivity, femininity and women on the one hand and activity, masculinity and men on the other' (Tasker 1993: 77). This new type of heroine is far from being immobile and passive: she fights, she shoots, she kills, solves crimes and rescues herself and others from dangerous situations. She has been described as a 'sheroe' who is 'in full command of the narrative, carrying the action in ways that have normally been reserved for male protagonists' (Matrix: 1; Brown 1996: 56). In effect, she adopts a number of characteristics and attitudes that have been deemed masculine or male and, thus, she challenges the essentialist dichotomy that denies women the recourse to action and strength, both physical and mental, as a means to empowerment. As has been observed, for that reason alone, 'the very presence of the female action-adventure hero [. . .] is noteworthy' and it can be discussed as a symptom of and a response to a feminist critique that seeks to undermine the bipolar systems of gendered identity (Helford 2000: 293). Elyce Rae Helford maintains that 'we would not have female action-adventure

heroes without a feminist [. . .] consciousness' and she defines the active heroine as 'composed equally of herstory, affirmative action, equal opportunity, and repudiation of gender essentialism and traditional feminine roles' (Helford 2000: 293).

Yet, at the same time as representing female strength and activity, the sheroe has also been the target of critique and she is seen as a compromised and even conservative figure whose 'limitations [. . .] are equally (or more) important to attend' (Helford 2000: 294). The action heroine is criticized for her heroic/individualistic status that ultimately turns her into a 'token', an isolated symbol of empowered womanhood, far 'stronger and faster than a typical woman' and displaying 'new varieties of toughness that few real women can obtain' (Helford 2000: 292; Inness 1999: 8; 179). While her individual greatness offers an alluring fantasy of transcendence and power 'in a society where women are too commonly raped, assaulted, and murdered', her tokenism also works to secure the status quo as it glorifies the exception in order to 'obscure the limits of mobility' and 'the rules of the game of success' within the hegemonic system (Inness 1999: 8; Cloud 1996: 122; 123). The tough and active heroine promotes an illusion of freedom and power but simultaneously and conversely, she operates to support oppressive social forces and gender inequalities. Moreover, the female action-adventure hero is also censured for her inability to shed and denounce all signifiers of feminine subordination as 'the toughness of even the toughest women is limited, confined, reduced, and regulated' (Inness 1999: 178). Feminist critics take issue with the fact that femininity remains an unavoidable component of the active heroine, as a visible sign of gender conformity or as a polar opposite that the sheroe wants to distance herself from by embracing a masculinized image. In this way, she is depicted as a 'schizophrenic

character', 'split between traditionally feminine and masculine traits and sometimes strongly ambivalent about this division, suggesting that being tough is not "normal" for women' (Inness 1999: 144; 149).

In the following, I want to problematize this notion of self-division and I argue that the postfeminist action heroine inhabits a non-dualistic space where seemingly irreconcilable opposites interact. The action heroine's conflicting identifications involve a continuous play between passivity and activity, vulnerability and strength, feminism and femininity, individualism and communality. Each sheroe has diverse ways of bringing together these various components and her negotiations can take the form of an unproblematical alliance of opposites (advanced by a *choiceoisie* ideology) or a painful and alienating struggle between binaries. I maintain that the female action heroine has to be conceptualized from the outset as an inherently ambiguous persona who walks a tightrope as she attempts to achieve an impossible balance. She is situated between the *either/or* categories of a repressive binary structure, occupying a problematical social and emotional space defined by a *both/and* logic. In fact, no portrayal of the action-adventure heroine is ever straightforward and unequivocal, allowing a definitive and final resolution of the contradictions surrounding this multifaceted persona. As Sherrie Inness notes, 'ambiguity' is 'an essential element of tough women in the popular media' as 'we are always confronted with a messy and contradictory message about women's toughness' (Inness 1999: 49). Inness reveals that female action heroes can 'offer women new role models, but their toughness may also bind women more tightly to traditional feminine roles' (Inness 1999: 5). The action-adventure heroine is either portrayed as a semi-tough pretender to male power who is ultimately too feminine to be as effectual as her male

counterpart or she is depicted as a de-feminized male impersonator, reinforcing the link between masculinity and toughness. She performs a paradoxical cultural function as she both contests and reaffirms normative absolutes and stereotypes, simultaneously helping 'to change how people perceive women's gender roles and to support mainstream notions about how women should act and look' (Inness 1999: 49).¹ The sheroe embodies and projects contradictory values and meanings. She is both a feminist icon and a patriarchal token, comprising feminine and masculine, passive and active elements and paradoxically encouraging women to adhere to traditional roles and also to challenge them.

Consequently, as Elizabeth Hills declares, 'action heroines represent something of a methodological crisis': she 'cannot easily be contained, or productively explained, within a theoretical model which denies the possibility of female subjectivity as active or full' (Hills 1999: 39). Hills is adamant that the transgressive potential of these female characters cannot be appreciated via binaristic frameworks and conventional theoretical modes that try to 'impose a rigid and habituated explanation onto a new and alternative figure' and 'claim to know in advance what female bodies are capable of doing' (Hills 1999: 39; 44). She reveals that 'the assemblage of the terms "action" and "heroine" alters the nature of both structures' to 'become something beyond both' (Hills 1999: 46). In this way, the sheroe epitomizes the multiple female subjectivities that become available in a postmodern age of confusion. The concepts of subject and object, man and woman (among others) are deconstructed and reinterpreted and it is this resignification of accepted terms and identities that can be witnessed through the figure of the action heroine. The male warrior-hero material is reconstituted in an attempt to fracture and reinvent the gendered identity of the action hero, 're-examine the past' and find 'there

images whose meanings are less simple than they might once have appeared' (Tasker 1993: 110). Accordingly, the female action hero has to be theorized outside a binary rationale that produces an overly simplistic and dualistic interpretation and cannot account for the changing representations of active women. The critical discussion cannot restrict itself to the polarized oppositions that have framed images of female strength and activity but has to examine the action heroine as a multivalent and complex figure that can be decoded in numerous ways and that is positioned between and across different understandings.

I contend that postfeminism represents this new mode of conceptualizing the action-adventure heroine as a composite character that exceeds the logic of non-contradiction in order to affirm the plurality of signification and identity. As I have argued, the postfeminist frontier discourse is characterized by a double gesture whereby it eschews the *either/or* binary in favor of a paradoxical *both at once*. Postfeminism exploits the in-between spaces as it undermines totalizing dichotomies and absolute oppositions in order to establish a pluralistic landscape that compiles incongruous and contradictory theories and ideas. By operating in the middle ground between polarities, postfeminism provides an alternative way of comprehending the figure of the female action heroine as an 'open image' that can be 'interpreted, read and to an extent repopulated' (Macdonald 1987: 22-23).² Within the postfeminist realm, the action-adventure heroine can be discussed as a polysemic character who is engaged in a perpetual struggle that generates multiple meanings, readings and uses. Postfeminism does not attempt to resolve the heroine's inherent contradictions but, instead, creates an ambiguous and inharmonious space where differences co-exist.

Moreover, I assert that the new breed of action-adventure heroines finds its postfeminist expression in the 'supergirl' who not only destabilizes the hierarchal structure of dualistic constraints but crosses and transcends these binary formulations altogether. In particular, I argue that the postfeminist supergirl reshapes and transforms the *either/or* distinctions between masculinity and femininity, human and monster, good and evil, feminism and femininity, singularity and collectivity, conformity and resistance. The supergirl displays a feminine body along with a feminist consciousness and a masculine assertiveness and power. She is set up and set apart as different by her superhuman/supernatural abilities but, at the same time, she longs to be part of a community and be normal. She fights the forces of evil and darkness (variously manifested by crime, terrorism, vampires and beauty queens) by internalizing them, understanding and tasting what she is supposed to battle and destroy. Paradoxically, she 'protects the line which separates good from evil by crossing it, by becoming more and more other' (Petrova 2003: 10-11). The postfeminist supergirl can be understood as a liminal or marginal character who evades categorization through her hybridization of conventional gender roles and human norms, her moral and ethical ambiguity and her ambivalent interpretative potential. She combines qualities associated with masculinity and femininity and she exists across supposedly opposed categories, revealing the artifice of that opposition and undermining the boundaries that safeguard dualistic theories. The supergirl refuses to be contained within these simplistic and totalizing classifications as she sabotages and collapses the barrier between them, moving *across* binaries in order to establish an impure and ambiguous 'in-betweenness'.

This multifaceted and heterogeneous persona has been translated in popular culture both in cinematic and literary works and she is exemplified by the figures of Stephanie Plum, a lingerie shop assistant come bounty hunter, Olivia Joules, a beauty journalist come spy and Gracie Hart, a tough and tomboyish FBI agent who turns into a beauty queen.³ These supergirls proudly and confidently proclaim their intention to embrace and construct a contradictory and pluralistic subjectivity that cannot be explained by a monological framework. As Olivia Joules declares,

I'm all I've got. [. . .] I'm going to be complete in myself. I'm not going to give a shit about anything anymore. I'm going to work out my own good and bad. [. . .] I'm going to search this shitty world for some beauty and excitement and I'm going to have a bloody good time. (Fielding 2003: 14; emphasis in text)

In this way, she sheds her old self and body, Rachel Pixley, and reinvents and renames herself as the glamorous Olivia Joules who has her own 'Rules for Living' (Fielding 2003: 93). As Olivia, she arms herself with 'a great body as a useful tool in life' and changes her 'old plump self' into her 'new thin self' (Fielding 2003: 36). Olivia consciously manipulates her new image in order to achieve professionally and socially what may not have been accessible to her in her previous embodiment. At the same time, she insists that she has transgressed the traditional binary gender codes that equate femininity with helplessness and passivity. In fact,

she had painstakingly erased all womanly urges to question her shape, looks, role in life, or effect upon other people. She would watch, analyse and conform to codes as she observed them, without allowing them to affect or compromise her own identity. (Fielding 2003: 12)

Olivia regards femininity as a means to empowerment and she deliberately ‘use[s] tears to get her own way’ and extract information from the suspected al-Qaeda terrorist Pierre Feramo (Fielding 2003: 215). In a similar manner, she decides that, on her secret mission to track Osama Bin Laden, a ‘hairdryer is a more important tool than the nerve-agent dispenser’ (Fielding 2003: 263). Olivia’s unashamed mix of femininity and power make her a ‘natural spy’ and ultimately help her to avert a bomb attack that threatens the annual Oscar ceremony (Fielding 2003: 249).

This supergirl expresses and lives by the popular postfeminist belief that women can “control” and celebrate their own objectification’ and they ‘can handle the tools of patriarchy and don’t need to be shielded from them’ (Harris 1999: 166; Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 141). The postfeminist action heroine insists that the cultural and social weapons that have been identified by second wave feminists as instruments of subordination are no longer being exclusively wielded against women but are sometimes wielded by them. Her ability to be both beautiful and strong, a ‘perfectly accessorized and feminine killing machine’, make the supergirl an embodiment of what Baumgardner and Richards call ‘Girlie’ feminism, the ‘intersection of culture and feminism’ that claims femininity as a source for power (Karras 2002: 7, 4; Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 136). Accordingly, women can be successful and strong on their own terms, by ‘holding

tight to that which once symbolized their oppression' and infusing the old and vilified signifiers of helpless femininity with a new meaning of strength and agency (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 137). This appropriation of traditional feminine stereotypes represents a deliberate choice and a feminist statement to grasp the 'pink things' from the clutches of patriarchal enculturation and regain the textual and social power to signify and use them (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 136). Thus, postfeminist supergirls 'are not just convinced [that] they can act out their "choices" through individual (heroic) effort', they also want to 'recuperate the "choice" of wearing high heels [. . .] and makeup to achieve their success' (Helford 2000: 296).

In the Hollywood blockbuster Miss Congeniality (2000. Warner Bros), the tough and masculinized FBI agent Gracie Hart (Sandra Bullock) is forced to re-evaluate her dismissal of beauty queens as 'air-head bimbos' and 'performing monkeys in heels' who are 'catering for some misogynistic Neanderthal mentality' when she is forced to go undercover at the Miss United States pageant and save it from a bomb attack. The film's central plot device resides in Gracie's Pygmalion-like transformation from 'Dirty Harriet', 'a woman without a discernible smidgeon of oestrogen' into a 'unique' 'lady' and 'the nicest, sweetest, coolest girl at the pageant'. Her initial rugged uncouthness and aggressiveness mark her as a 'make-a-man of yourself' action heroine who believes that in order to function effectively within the threatening macho world of the action scenario (or, in this case, the FBI), she must be masculinized (Stables 2001: 20). In this way, Gracie believes that her inability or refusal to 'dress' and 'brush' is part of being a 'real agent' who works '24/7' and, in effect, '[is] the job'. However, she gradually comes to realize that her complete dedication to her masculine federal agent persona makes her an

‘incomplete’ person who, ‘in place of friends and relationships’, has ‘sarcasm and a gun’. Her introduction to the world of feminine beauty proves to be an educational and psychological journey, ‘one of the most rewarding and liberating experiences of [her] life’. In Baumgardner and Richards’ terms, Gracie learns to accept and embrace her newly discovered Girlie-ness as a source of personal fulfillment and power and she recognizes that

believing that feminine things are weak means that we’re believing our own bad press. Girlies say, through actions and attitudes, that you don’t have to make the feminine powerful by making it masculine. [. . .] It is a feminist statement to proudly claim things that are feminine, and the alternative can mean to deny what we are. (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 135)

Girlies’ feminine/feminist stance is seen to react against an ‘antifeminine, antijoy emphasis’ that has alienated women from their own femininity and that is perceived as the legacy of ‘second wave seriousness’ and elitism (Baumgardner and Richards 2000: 80). The previous feminist wave is said to have created ‘a whole-hearted condemnation of every aspect of culture that reproduced sexist ideas and images of women and femininity, all of which came to seem in some sense “violent” and “pornographic”’ (Wilson 1995: 230). By contrast, Girlie postfeminism strives to resignify these once slandered and defamed objects, stereotypes and conventions and utilize them for its own purposes. In this way, sexualization remains a central element of postfeminism’s definition of womanhood and is heralded as an important component of female heroic

representation. As Helford notes, postfeminism's image of the empowered woman displays an 'increased emphasis on traditional femininity in looks and behaviour (in various combinations and to various degrees)' (Helford 2000: 296). Yet, within the postfeminist framework, the sheroe's sexualized depiction is not portrayed as a disempowering denigration as it is always combined with a demonstration of her agency, strength and self-reliance.

The postfeminist supergirl does not assume a masculine identity in her active/heroic role but she remains garbed in the signifiers of stereotypical feminine attractiveness. In Jeffrey Brown's words, the notion of a 'petite, pretty woman in a dress kicking ass' denies the narrative logic that 'allows viewers to deride the heroine as a butch or as a woman trying to be a man' (Brown 1996: 63). The feminine supergirl is a reaction against the prevalence of the 'hardbody, hardware, hard-as-nails heroine' who dominates the action scenario in the late 1980s and early 1990s and who is positioned as 'phallic' or 'figuratively male' (Brown 1996: 52; Hills 1999: 40). Famously personified by the characters of Ripley in *Aliens* (1986. Fox) and Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991. Universal), the hardbodied heroine has been perceived as a man in a woman's body or a woman trying to be a man, as she rejects all her feminine attributes to build up a muscular/masculine body and a macho posturing. The postfeminist supergirl confuses the dualistic gender codes that assume that, since the action role has always been male, to put a woman into it, she too is really or wants to be a man. She undermines the reasoning of a gendered binary that locks together the terms 'masculine' and 'strong', 'feminine' and 'weak'. Importantly, the supergirl unites femininity and strength and she revises both concepts by creating a new signifying link between them. The traditional

stereotypes and tropes of gender persist but they become dissociated from their previous significations and correlations to physical sex, so that they interrogate rather than support gender conventions.

The postfeminist logic rejects previous conceptualizations of the action heroine as either too tough or not tough enough, as butch 'pseudo-males' who refuse and expunge femininity as a female weakness, or as 'battling, lip-glossed Barbies' whose femininity ultimately compromises their feminist potential and active heroine status (Stables 2001: 20). Postfeminism's supergirl resists dualistic formulations that seek to define her as either feminist or non-feminist/feminine, subversive or conservative, female or male. She is conceived outside the terms of gender hierarchies and the rhetorics of transgression/containment as she opens up new, alternative ways to construct and depict female subjectivity. However, the supergirl's contradictory in-between status also ensures that, to a varying degree, she is engaged in a social and emotional struggle as she tries to accommodate her own ambiguity and complexity. In her most challenging incarnations, the supergirl does not inhabit a harmonious space of plurality and pure difference, a fictional *choiceoisie* in which women can achieve whatever they want. Rather than celebrating an unproblematical alliance of opposites, the supergirl endeavors to find a way to negotiate between binaries and balance her inherent paradoxes. She seeks to come to terms with her own heterogeneity that ultimately leaves her ostracized from the very community she protects and without the security of fixed boundaries and standards.

The presence of this troubled and tormented supergirl points to the more ambiguous aspects of postfeminist discourse that ultimately does not dissolve conventional gender positions but rather hybridizes and resignifies them. This re-

appropriation technique has to account for the fact that 'the images that the [action] form has generated are very far from being the transparent signifiers of a simplistic [. . .] hierarchy' and do not operate on 'some blank page but within cultural contexts which are crowded with competing images and stereotypes' (Tasker 1993: 165; 152). Thus, the signifiers of strength and power that have traditionally been associated with masculinity cannot simply be written over onto the female/feminine body. As Sara Buttsworth suggests, the 'tensions between exploring new character constructions and societal norms continue – even, or perhaps especially, in the figure of the female warrior hero' (Buttsworth 2002: 190). Critics as well as characters are caught in a dilemma to apply postfeminism's *both/and* logic and they remain perplexed by the slippage between the action heroine as a self-reliant character and a sexual object, an empowered feminist role model and an agent employed by patriarchy. The postfeminist supergirl contains and advances both readings/meanings and in her most daring and provocative personifications, she battles on the boundary between feminist transgression and patriarchal containment. She can be discussed as a site of intense cultural negotiations where competing definitions are tested and juxtaposed. The sheroe occupies and epitomizes the postfeminist frontier as she disrupts dualities and wrestles with her own 'monstrous' impurities and ambivalence. In the following, I examine this postfeminist blur of the binary in relation to L. K. Hamilton's Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter novels as well as the television series Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003, Fox) and I argue that both supergirls, although starting their journeys from different positions within the polarized gender structure, end up in a contested middle space between dualities.

In fact, Buffy the Vampire Slayer enacts in its title the foundational myth and the premise of the entire series as it reflects on this microcosmic scale the chiasmic relationship between the twin components, 'Buffy' and 'Vampire Slayer'. As the show's creator Joss Whedon reveals, 'I made the title very specifically to say, "This is what it is". It wears itself on its sleeve. [. . .] It's all there in the title' (quoted in Siemann 2002: 129). The "'joke" of the cheerleading demon hunter' is not a 'one-line throwaway gag' but encapsulates Buffy's ongoing struggle with her composite character and fragmented identity as the 'Chosen One' who 'alone will stand against the vampires, the demons and the forces of darkness' and as a sixteen-year-old teenager who wants to do 'girlie stuff' (Pender 2002: 42; *Welcome to the Hellmouth*, 1001; *Faith, Hope and Trick*, 3003).⁴

Whedon sets up a deliberate contrast between Buffy's girlhood and her heroism and superhuman strength as he consciously (re)employs a number of preconceptions and clichés. As has been noted, 'the name "Buffy" suggests the lightest of lightweight girls of stereotypical limitation – thoughtless, materialistic, superficial' (Wilcox and Lavery 2002: xvii-xviii). Yet, this is the name of the heroine who will repeatedly risk and even give her life in her fight against evil demons and inhuman monsters. The show relies on the horror movie convention that sees a 'bubblehead blonde' wandering into a dark alley and getting killed but it reverses and resignifies this scenario whereby the blonde 'takes back the night', 'takes care of herself and deploys her powers' (quoted in Bellafante 1997: 83; Chandler: 1). Whedon points out that 'the idea of Buffy was to [. . .] create someone who was a hero where she had always been a victim. That element of surprise, that element of genre busting is very much at the heart of [. . .] the series' (quoted in Thompson 2003: 4).⁵ He admits that the image of the blonde victim has always been

'more interesting to [him] than the other women. She was fun, she had sex, she was vivacious. But then she would get punished for it' (quoted in Vint: 2). In effect, the blonde girl 'keeps dying in horror movies' because 'she has no skills' and 'isn't expected to be anything but a bimbo' (quoted in Lippert 1997: 24).

Whedon is determined to 'take that character and expect more from her' as he deconstructs the labels of blondness/femininity and establishes a signifying link that connects them to the notions of power and strength (quoted in Lippert 1997: 25). As he suggestively declares, 'there are a lot of ways to break new ground without having original thoughts' (quoted in Lippert 1997: 25). Buffy the Vampire Slayer relies on the resignification and re-visioning of a given script through a reinterpretation of established concepts and identities. With her long blonde hair and thin, petite frame, Buffy is visibly coded with the conventional signifiers of helpless and vulnerable femininity. She is 'the ultimate femme', 'never disturbing the delicate definition of physical femininity' and 'a girly girl through and through' (Fudge 1999: 3). On her first days in High School and University, Buffy is described by onlookers as 'a major league hottie' as she projects a first impression of feminine prettiness rather than toughness and power (*The Initiative*, 4007). Buffy herself repeatedly declares that she is 'just a girl' but at the same time, she constantly confounds and re-imagines what 'a girl' is capable of (*The Gift*, 5022). The series foils both viewers' and characters' expectations as it portrays this cute cheerleader as far from being anyone's victim but a 'supremely confident kicker of evil butt' (quoted in Krimmer and Raval 2002: 157). According to Whedon, Buffy is intended both to be a feminist role model and to subvert the non-feminine image of the 'ironclad hero – "I am woman, hear me *constantly* roar"' (Harts 2001: 88).⁶ He constructs Buffy as a feminine

warrior whose girlhood is compatible with and even engenders notions of empowerment and activity. Yet, Whedon is also cautious to avoid an optimistic and unproblematical alliance of femininity and heroism propagated by Girlie postfeminism which sees both terms as almost synonymous. He wants to portray 'the weakness and the vanity and the foibles' of the action heroine in order to create a multiple subjectivity that resists categorization (quoted in Harts 2001: 88).

Faced with her fate as the 'Chosen One', 'the one girl in all the world [. . .] born with the strength and skill to hunt the vampires', Buffy reluctantly accepts the demands of her civic role that forces her out of her natural terrain and community into her predestined place in a long tradition of vampire Slayers (*Welcome to the Hellmouth*, 1001). She is the temporary occupant of a firmly established position and the present embodiment of a preternatural power that is automatically transferred onto the next Slayer in line after Buffy's death(s). In her slaying function, Buffy is working for and supervised by the Watchers' Council, a hierarchical and patriarchal command structure that regards the Slayer as 'the instrument by which we fight' (*Checkpoint*, 5012). Buffy is told that 'the Council remains, the Slayers change. It's been that way from the beginning' (*Checkpoint*, 5012). In this way, the figure of the Slayer is ever-changing, ever-singular and forever incarnated in a teenage girl who is supposed to follow blindly the Council's rules and accept her 'sacred duty' (*What's My Line, Part I*, 2009). Central to the law of the Council is the proposition 'kill vampires and demons', a rule that Buffy is unable to obey from the start when she realizes that the vampire Angel has a soul and will never hurt her (*Angel*, 1007). She refuses to be moulded into the Council's image of the perfect Slayer as a regimental soldier and she decides to disregard their orders and 'do things my

way' (*What's My Line, Part 2*, 2010). Buffy is determined to maintain 'a normal social life as a Slayer' and thus, she does not want her 'night' job to interfere with her girly existence (*Never Kill a Boy on the First Date*, 1005).

In effect, Buffy's girlhood and 'emotions' are depicted as inherent and empowering elements of her personality, as 'total assets' (*What's My Line, Part 2*, 2010). This supergirl's strength is not only related to her supernatural and otherworldly self but it also resides to a large degree in her being-in-the-world as a middle-class, teenaged American girl who is able to identify vampires by their lack of fashion sense (*Welcome to Hellmouth*, 1001). Buffy's Watcher Giles has to admit that she does not fit the Slayer profile and that 'the Slayer handbook' is of no use in her case (*What's My Line, Part 2*, 2010). Buffy's successful but unconventional approach to her slaying profession is due to her very 'Buffy-ness', her involvement in adolescent life and girly activities and her disregard for tradition and stereotypes. Being 'girly' is as much part of her character as being the Slayer is and she is simultaneously young and pretty as well as empowered and strong. This supergirl combines a delicate feminine and sexualized physicality with an uncompromising demonstration of her power and strength. She fights as a girl in high-heeled boots and fashionable clothes, without ever assuming that this display of femininity jeopardizes her role as the Slayer and her ability as a warrior. Buffy never denigrates herself, nor is her girlhood ever depicted as a debilitating detraction or vulnerability. On the contrary, it is the very source of her empowerment, what differentiates her from other Slayers and helps her to survive and win where others failed and died. Without any doubt, as Sherryl Vint notes, she is 'more than a sex object, but she doesn't have to deny being sexy in order to be a strong woman' (Vint, 2).

Moreover, Buffy rejects her lonely and isolated Slayer position as she fights evil on her own terms and with the help of her teenage friends and her Watcher Giles. Her enormous and lasting success as a Slayer is directly attributable to her relationships with the ‘Scooby gang’ or ‘Slayerettes’, Willow and Xander (*The Witch*, 1003). As Joelle Renstrom notes, ‘one of the clearest lessons imparted on’ Buffy the Vampire Slayer is that ‘emotional connections [. . .] are necessary – not just for Buffy the person, but also for Buffy the Slayer’ (Renstrom: 1). Most problems and challenges are evaluated and solved through shared responsibility and cooperation, literally exemplified by the figure of the ‘Superslayer’ who conjoins Buffy, Giles, Xander and Willow into a “we” in order to defeat the ‘kinematically redundant, biomechanical demonoid’, Adam (*Primeval*, 4021; *Goodbye Iowa*, 4014). The group becomes a tightly knit and self-declared family that makes use of each member’s special talents in their combined fight against the adversities of the Hellmouth (*Family*, 5006). Buffy’s extraordinary status as ‘a Slayer with family and friends’ establishes ‘narrative momentum toward collectivity and away from the individualist quest narrative’ typical of the action-adventure genre (*School Hard*, 2003; Owen 1999: 27). Buffy’s attachments to a home and family re-imagine and reconstruct the stereotype of the individual action-adventure hero who is a ‘tragic figure’, ‘an outsider, often a loner, a drifter’, characterized by ‘loneliness, rootlessness, and homelessness’ (Marchetti 1989: 194; 195). Buffy’s friends represent an important emotional anchor that binds the Slayer to her humanity and life itself. As the vampire Spike tells her, ‘the only reason you’ve lasted as long as you have is you’ve got ties to the world’ (*Fool for Love*, 5007).

Initially, Buffy displays a Girlie optimism and confidence that she can juggle her multiple subjectivities and balance her personal and professional personae, her slaying mission and her desire to 'have a life' and 'do something normal', 'something safe' (*The Witch*, 1003). Buffy conceptualizes her Slayerdom as something akin to a career choice, a 'night' job, and she maintains an ironic distance from her warrior role and duties.

'Destructo Girl, that's me', she declares and flippantly concludes that 'I kill vampires, that's my job' (*Teacher's Pet*, 1004; *Ted*, 2011). Buffy believes that she can live up to her 'superhero' identity while also pursuing teenage pastimes like shopping, cheerleading and dating (*The Harvest*, 1002; *The Witch*, 1003). As she tells Giles, 'this is the 90s [. . .] and I can do both. Clark Kent has a job. I just wanna go on a date' (*Never Kill a Boy on the First Date*, 1005). Buffy attempts to deal with her dual position as Buffy Summers, the archetypal California girl, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer by keeping these disparate elements of her character separate. Giles warns her not to 'let your life interfere with your slaying' and in this way, Buffy has 'at least three lives to contend with, none of which really mesh' (*School Hard*, 2003). She is 'sixteen, and a girl, and the Slayer' and she struggles to resolve the chiasmic tensions between these various parts of her self (*Reptile Boy*, 2005).

However, Buffy has to realize that she cannot 'take the Slayer out of the girl' as 'the two halves can't exist without each other' (Pender 2002: 43; *The Replacement*, 5003). Throughout seven seasons, her fight is not only directed against an external threat that seeks to corrupt the order of the world but becomes more internalized when she is forced to admit the complex interaction between her heroic and girly components, the erosion of a 'black and white space' and its replacement with ambiguity (*New Moon*

Rising, 4019). She has to accept that, although she tries hard to be just like other girls, she sometimes is 'just one of the troops', 'a real soldier' who thinks about 'ambush tactics' and 'beheading' instead of 'dates' like 'normal girls' (*Enemies* 3017; *Halloween* 2006). Buffy is unable to unite and combine her ostensibly split selves and instead, she thinks that she has to choose between them. She cannot comprehend that she is *both* the Slayer *and* a girl and she is convinced that she has to sacrifice one for the other. Even though Buffy exists across binary distinctions between masculine toughness and feminine weakness, human collectivity and supernatural singularity, she does not embrace her position between dualities. On the contrary, she is overwhelmed by her own contradictoriness as she strains to find a balance, deploring that 'I don't have to be the Slayer. I could be dead' (*What's My Line, Part 1*, 2009).

Buffy's internal struggle between her Slayer and girly selves initially takes the form of a social crisis as the former cheerleader and 'Prom Princess' has to relinquish her popularity and become the quintessential outsider in the High School scene (*Homecoming*, 3005). As Buffy tells the consummate High School social queen, Cordelia, all she ever wanted was 'to be Homecoming Queen' (*Homecoming*, 3005). Instead, Buffy is stigmatized as a 'crazed' 'psycho loony' with whom 'nobody cool wants to hang out' (*The Harvest*, 1002; *The Pack*, 1006). Buffy expresses her disillusionment with her 'unique condition', moaning that her Slayer identity turns her into a 'hideous dateless monster', a 'freak' who will never have 'a happy, normal relationship' (*Never Kill a Boy on the First Date*, 1005; *What's My Line, Part 2*, 2010; *I, Robot – You, Jane*, 1008). Buffy is 'stuck in this deal' and her 'future is pretty much a non-issue' as it is 'sealed in fate' that she is 'never going to get the chance to find out' what she could have

become and achieved outside the dark alleys and graveyards (*What's My Line, Part 1*, 2009).

In this way, Buffy wants to escape her calling and she constantly looks for opportunities to rid herself of her Slayer persona and/or play out the fantasy of being a damsel in distress. During Halloween, she becomes trapped in the image of helpless femininity when she is transformed by her costume into an eighteenth-century noblewoman (*Halloween*, 2006). As she tells her vampiric boyfriend Angel, 'I just wanted to be a real girl for once' (*Halloween*, 2006). In similar acts of evasion, Buffy leaves Sunnydale and assumes a new identity after her Slayer self is forced to kill Angel while, during a brief spell of invisibility, Buffy happily 'tak[es] a vacation from me', noting that 'for the first time', she is 'free of rules and reports', 'free of this life' (*Anne*, 3001; *Gone*, 6011). Moreover, Buffy deliberately wants to date a 'nice, solid guy' in order to 'get [her] life back' and 'do normal stuff' (*Homecoming*, 3005). While in the third season, Buffy is briefly involved with ordinary high school student Scott Hope, by the time Buffy enters university, she has a relationship with fellow demon hunter Riley who is 'supposed to be Mr. Joe Guy', a 'dependable' and 'boring boyfriend' who 'wouldn't cause [her] heartache' (*Goodbye Iowa*, 4014; *Into the Woods*, 5010; *Hush*; 4010). Buffy's dividedness is almost literalized when she faces a demon who can 'split one person in half, distilling personality traits into two separate bodies' (*The Replacement*, 5003). While Buffy does not experience the actual identity split (Xander is hit instead), she nonetheless reflects on her own internal disunity, noting that there could be 'two Buffys', 'one with all the qualities inherent in Buffy Summers, and the other one

with everything that belongs to the Slayer alone, the strength, the speed, the heritage' (*The Replacement*, 5003).

Buffy's identity crisis reaches an existential turning point after her encounters with the First Slayer and Dracula who change and broaden her understanding of the Slayer's nature. When the First Slayer speaks to her through Tara, she presents a stark contrast to Buffy's own conception of Slayerdom:

I have no speech. No name. I live in the action of death, the blood cry, the penetrating wound. I am destruction. Absolute. Alone. [. . .] No friends. Just the kill. We are alone. (*Restless*, 4022)

Buffy learns that her Slayer component, her 'truest strength', is in part demonic and has been created at the expense of her humanity (*Get It Done*, 7015). Both Dracula and Spike confirm the Slayer's inherent ambiguity, revealing that 'every Slayer has a death wish' as her 'power is rooted in darkness' (*Fool for Love*, 5007; *Buffy vs. Dracula*, 5001). The Slayer is depicted as an isolated warrior and a suicidal loner who 'breeds' and 'lives' 'death' and for whom 'the mission is what matters' (*Potential*, 7012; *Lies My Parents Told Me*, 7017). Buffy is confronted with her own irrational, dangerous and inhuman side as she recognizes that evil is an integral part of fighting evil. Her dark and supernatural roots make it impossible for her to connect and 'be with someone who can take [her] into the light' (*The Prom*, 3020). Buffy is attracted to 'wicked energy' and she needs 'some monster in her man' (*First Date*, 7014; *Into the Woods*, 5010). She admits that, for her, a 'safe relationship' cannot be 'that intense' as 'real love and passion have to go hand in

hand with pain and fighting' (*Hush*, 4010). More disturbingly, her Slayer self is also pulling her away from human contact and emotion and 'is turning [her] into a stone' (*Intervention*, 5018). Buffy reveals that 'being the perfect Slayer means being too hard to love at all', 'being the Slayer ma[kes] [her] different' as it drives her to 'cut [herself] off' and 'just slip away' (*Intervention*, 5018; *Touched*, 7020).

Yet, at the same time, Buffy's human ties, her friends and family, cause her to battle against her self-destructive personality trait and she continues to long for a stable and secure relationship. Importantly, Buffy's later affair with the vampire Spike leaves her unfulfilled and incomplete as she does not wholly 'belong in the shadows' and she cannot be 'at peace, in the dark' (*Dead Things*, 6013; *Normal Again*, 6017). As she tells her demon lover, 'I could never be your girl. [. . .] There is nothing good or clean in you. You are dead inside' (*Dead Things*, 6013). Being with Spike is 'the most perverse, degrading experience of [her] life', 'it's wrong. I'm wrong', Buffy reveals as 'he's everything I hate. He's everything that I'm supposed to be against' (*Wrecked*, 6010; *Dead Things*, 6013). By the time Buffy finds the strength to break up with him, she is not exaggerating by saying that the relationship is 'killing' her, destroying her sense of who she is (*As You Were*, 6015).

Buffy cannot comprehend her own liminality and multiplicity as she is situated on the edge between light and dark, human and supernatural, girl and Slayer. As she declares, 'nothing's ever simple anymore. I'm constantly trying to work it out. Who to love, or hate, who to trust. It's just like the more I know the more confused I get' (*Lie to Me*, 2007). Buffy has to come to terms with the complexity of her role that positions her as not quite ordinary nor strictly human as well as the moral uncertainty of her world in

which vampires are not necessarily evil and vampire slayers inhabit an ambiguous space between binaries. Her discoveries lead her on a path of psychological and emotional isolation as she realizes the Slayer's burden and rejects the notion that she could have a normal life and be 'a regular kid' (*What's My Line, Part 1*, 2009). Buffy laments that once she 'knew what was right. I don't have that anymore. [. . .] I don't know how to live in this world if these are the choices' (*The Gift*, 5022). This sense of loss and devastation culminates in Buffy's most desperate escape from her clashing selves and the ultimate accomplishment of her Slayer duty as she kills herself in order to avoid the apocalypse. 'The hardest thing in this world is to live in it', Buffy proclaims as she jumps to her death and surrenders her fight against her warring personae (*The Gift*, 5022).

However, Whedon is not content with this capitulated and beaten heroine and he resurrects her by tearing her out of 'heaven' where she was 'finished', 'complete' and 'at peace' and bringing her back to everyday 'hell' where 'everything [. . .] is hard, and bright, and violent' (*After Life*, 6003). Unable to resume the endless struggle of life, Buffy can only deal with her regained identity crisis by turning into the Slayer, a 'reckless' 'general' who wants to win the final battle against the First Evil (*Lies My Parents Told Me*, 7017). In order to shield herself from the pain of losing her friends, Buffy distances herself emotionally from those around her. She 'sleepwalk[s] through [her] life's endeavor', 'walk[s] through the part' and 'go[es] through the motions' without letting anything 'penetrate [her] heart' (*Once More, With Feeling*, 6007). To Buffy, 'making the hard decisions' means giving up part of her humanity and sacrificing the life of others to safeguard the mission (*Empty Places*, 7019). Increasingly, Buffy claims a peremptory right to 'draw the line' as she decides that 'human rules don't

apply', 'there's only me. I am the law' (*Selfless*, 7005). In so doing, Buffy alienates her friends/family and in the end, she is expelled from her house and finds herself without her social support group (*Empty Spaces*, 7019).

Ultimately, Buffy comes to realize that she cannot continue to disallow her inherent contradictions if she wants to win her last fight. She acknowledges that she is the most effective Slayer only because she is simultaneously a girl who is connected to people with unique gifts and strengths. Buffy decides to 'make some changes from the inside' and create her own *choiceoisie* that will accommodate her ambiguous and pluralistic wholeness (*This Year's Girl*, 4015). She is determined to 'find a way' and thus, she 'redefin[es] the job' and forces herself 'to do what can't be done' (*Showtime*, 7011; *Get It Done*, 7015). Buffy questions the heroic conventions that structure her universe and resignifies the Slayer position by creating a very different environment for her superhero persona. With the help of her friend and witch Willow, she 'change[s] the rule' that was made by 'a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago' and prescribes that 'in every generation, one slayer is born' (*Chosen*, 7022). Buffy's Slayer strength is magically diffused and displaced onto 'every girl who could have the power', so that 'from now on, every girl in the world who might be a Slayer, will be a Slayer' (*Chosen*, 7022). Thus, Buffy actively manufactures a choice and future for herself that will no longer leave her isolated and alone. She accepts her heterogeneous subjectivity that is in a constant state of flux and change. As she describes herself metaphorically to Angel,

I'm cookie dough. I'm not done baking. I am not finished becoming to wherever
[. . .] it is I'm gonna turn out to be. [. . .] Maybe one day I'll turn around and

realize I am ready. I am cookies. [. . .] I am not really thinking that far ahead.

(*Chosen*, 7022)

Commentators have criticized this magic creation of a *choiceoisie* in which contradictions can be resolved and opposites can be combined and united. They take issue with Whedon's optimistic *both/and* utopia and instead, they adopt an *either/or* logic to analyse Buffy's split selves. Critics are engaged in a search for the 'real Buffy' as they try to unravel 'the ambivalent position Buffy occupies between authentic adolescent and supernatural Slayer' (Pender 2002: 36). They describe the series' 'mixed messages about feminism and femininity' and they uphold a dualistic rationale that defines 'Buffy's form and Buffy's content' as 'distinct and incompatible categories' (Fudge 1999: 1; Pender 2002: 43). In this way, Anne Millard Daughtery condemns the Slayer's feminine exterior, stating that 'for all the efforts taken to negate the traditional male gaze, Buffy's physical attractiveness is, in itself, objectifying' (Daughtery 2002: 151). Buffy's 'girl power' is said to represent 'a diluted imitation of female empowerment' that promotes 'style over substance' and ultimately lacks a political agenda (Fudge 1999: 3). Buffy is censured for being a 'hard candy-coated feminist heroine for the girl-power era' whose 'pastel veneer' and 'over-the-top girliness in the end compromise her feminist potential' (Fudge 1999: 3).⁷ Sarah Curtis-Fawley concludes that 'replacing Barbie with Buffy is clearly not the victory that feminism hoped for' (quoted in Karras 2002: 6). Ultimately, 'the series plays at transgression' but 'it remains to be seen whether transgressive play can challenge institutional relations of power' (Owen 1999: 31).

This form of criticism relies on a binary framework that opposes feminine powerlessness/oppression to feminist power/critique. This polarized viewpoint defines action heroines by either their adoption or their refusal of femininity and it is forced to conclude that 'Buffy cannot be a feminist because she has a cleavage' (Pender 2002: 43). Buffy the Vampire Slayer has been discussed as a contemporary version of the 1970s 'pseudo-tough', 'wanna be' action heroines exemplified by Wonder Woman and Charlie's Angels (Inness 1999: 27). As Sherrie Inness has convincingly argued, femininity was used in this context as a way to allay the heroine's toughness, tone down and compensate for her assertiveness and display of strength (Inness 1999). The threat that the tough woman poses to the hegemonic order is reduced by this connection between women, sexuality and femininity and by the suggestion that a woman's sexual availability and physical attractiveness are in no way diminished by her power. The heroine's actions are explained away and her toughness is undercut in an attempt to mitigate, if not resolve, the uncertainties posed by the strong and self-reliant woman.

This mode of understanding depends on a dichotomy that constructs femininity as both antifeminist and non-tough and thus, it reaffirms essentialist stereotypes of female vulnerability and inaction. Toughness and strength remain associated with masculinity and a strong woman ultimately has to be seen as masculine. In effect, the figure of the hardbodied, butch action heroine of the 1980s and early 1990s represents the flip side of the same coin that depicts the feminine heroine as a masquerader who plays at being tough. This polarized logic can only conceive of physically strong and powerful female protagonists as 'pseudo males' who are really "'boys" in "girls" clothing', rather than a legitimate role for women (Brown 1996: 53). Femininity and masculinity are constructed

through a process of mutual exclusion that upholds the connection between maleness and toughness and, thus, works to ensure male privilege and authority. The critical suggestion that action heroines are female 'men in drag' or 'Femboes' represents an attempt to secure the masculine/feminine binary in a way that facilitates the dominance of gender absolutism and retains the notions of appropriate behavior and appearance for men and women. As Jeffrey Brown states, 'rather than aggressiveness being deemed legitimate for women', the non-feminine hardbody is suspected of 'transvestism' which reinforces rather than destabilizes the idea of mutually exclusive gender categories (Brown 1996: 60). Moreover, 'if a female character seen as kicking ass must be read as masculine, then women are systematically denied as a gender capable of behaving in any way other than passive' (Brown 1996: 63). Ultimately, the action heroine's masculine coding leads to a reification of masculine power and feminine weakness, thereby negating the transgressive potential of placing a woman in an empowered and heroic position in the first place. Contrastingly, I assert that the postfeminist supergirl transcends these binary formulations as she subverts the gender framework that underlies the conceptualization of masculine activity and feminine passivity. Postfeminism creates a site of interaction between previously antagonistic elements and establishes a paradoxical space between masculinity and femininity.

Laurell K. Hamilton's protagonist Anita Blake starts her journey towards a postfeminist in-betweenness from the masculinized end of the spectrum as a 'tough-as-nails vampire slayer' and 'a coldhearted bitch' in her own words (Hamilton 2000a: 149; Hamilton 2000b: 33). Dividing her professional life between her jobs as an animator and a special advisor to the police and later a federal marshal, Anita wants to be 'a female one

of the guys' and she admits that being 'macho [is] the only way I got this far' (Hamilton 2001a: 335; Hamilton 2000c: 189). According to Anita, there is only one 'rule for playing with the big boys': you have to beat them at their own game and 'be tougher than the men, stronger, better, or they held it against you. Or they treated you like a girl' (Hamilton 2000b: 116; Hamilton 2000d: 46). Consequently, Anita tries to rid her life of what she considers to be feminine weaknesses, dismissing shopping as 'one of life's necessary evils' along with 'high-heeled shoes' and refusing to let a man open the door for her or let him pay for her meal (Hamilton 2000a: 125; Hamilton 1995: 33). This rejection of stereotypical femininity is not the result of a feminist consciousness as Anita does not believe in 'the universal sisterhood appeal' but she adopts a patriarchal and dualistic view of female inferiority/powerlessness and male activity/strength (Hamilton 2000f: 173). In fact, she even notes that she is 'a female chauvinist piglet' as she underestimates one of her attackers because she is small and pretty (Hamilton 2000e: 174). Anita assumes the so-called masculine privilege of active subjectivity and there is a general consensus among her friends and enemies that she 'would have made a good man' (Hamilton 2001a: 565).

Yet, at the same time, Anita has to recognize that, even though she is not 'comfortable with [her] feminine side', femininity is an inherent but repressed part of her (Hamilton 2000f: 216). Anita reveals that she can look 'downright cute', 'delicate, dainty' and 'petite' and that she is 'after all a girl, whether [she] like[s] to admit it or not' (Hamilton 2000a: 178; Hamilton 2000b: 15; Hamilton 2000c: 14). Her feminine exterior and 'china doll' looks often mislead her opponents to belittle and misjudge her fighting ability (Hamilton 2000a: 9). Anita is not considered 'big enough to be The Executioner'

as ‘this little bit of a girl’ could not have ‘over a dozen vampire kills under her belt’ (Hamilton 200a: 73; Hamilton 2000c: 52). She decides not to let her ‘packaging’ hinder her fight against monsters and demons, declaring that women ‘can be great warriors’, ‘we’ve just got to pack the equipment a little differently’ (Hamilton 1995: 145; Hamilton 2003: 266). Occasionally, Anita even uses her femininity as a masquerade when she manipulates her frail and helpless image to gain advantage of a situation. In this way, she successfully escapes death by stimulating a sexual interest in her aggressor, noting that ‘the trick is to get the man thinking more about sex than violence, so he’s a little confused’ (Hamilton 2001a: 497). Anita does not question the binary gender codes that equate femininity with vulnerability and passivity but she exploits cultural perceptions of gender. Describing an unchangeable status quo, she points out that

no matter how many times you saved their lives, and they saved yours, no matter how much you could bench-press, no matter how tall, or strong, or competent – you were still a girl. And the fact that you were a girl overshadowed everything else for most men. It wasn’t good or bad, it just was. [. . .] Most of the time it bugged [. . .] me, but today we’d use it against the bad guys, because they’d see all that hair, those breasts, and they’d underestimate [me], because [I] was a girl. (Hamilton 2003: 272-273)

Anita confirms the vampire Jean-Claude’s belief that she ‘think[s] [. . .] like a man’ as she adopts an essentialist view of womanliness as harmlessness while simultaneously abusing this stereotype for her own purposes (Hamilton 2003: 338).

Initially, Anita's repressed femininity does not emerge as an adult and mature womanhood but as a nostalgic return to an almost childlike girlhood. She virtuously reveals that she has always been 'a good girl' who never slept around, always said her prayers before bed and grace over her food (Hamilton 2000c: 142; Hamilton 2000b: 153; Hamilton 2000a: 106). 'I was pink once', she tells bounty hunter Edward, explaining that, when she was a little girl, she would 'have given a small body part to have a pink canopy bed and ballerina wallpaper' (Hamilton 2001a: 442). However, Anita has had to give up this 'softer more romanticized view' of life and, in Edward's words, turn herself into 'one of the least pink women [he has] ever met' (Hamilton 2003: 195; Hamilton 2001a: 442). In particular, she has become cautious of the 'happy-ever-after' when her college fiancé dumped her because of her Mexican ancestry and she promised to let herself never 'get hurt like that again' (Hamilton 2000c: 16; 142). In this way, she has abandoned the fantasy 'to live in some Ozzie and Harriet world' and be rescued by a 'white knight' (Hamilton 2000e: 71; Hamilton 2000c: 197). The only remnant of her innocent and 'naïve' past is her stuffed toy penguin Sigmund that shares her bed after a troublesome and dangerous experience and that Anita reluctantly admits to being her 'weakness' (Hamilton 2000g: 80; Hamilton 2000a: 85). The other 'comfort object' that Anita relies on and sometimes even sleeps with, is her gun, a 9 mm Browning (Hamilton 2000g: 167). She constantly touches and uses her weapon in order to secure and protect her identity as the Executioner and repel any feelings that might compromise her role. As she comments, 'the tightness of the shoulder holster, the digging of the [gun] in its inner-pants holster made me feel more like myself' as 'guns, this particular brand of violence, was all mine' (Hamilton 2000g: 383). Thus, Anita's personality is split between the girly

child and the macho heroine as she admits that 'I wasn't sure which was more comforting, the penguin or the gun. I guess both were equally comforting, for very different reasons' (Hamilton 2000b: 153).

Anita has divided her own being into a secret and largely unacknowledged feminine self (or rather Other) and a tough public and professional persona through which she wants to define herself. As she proclaims, 'I raised the dead and laid the undead to rest. It was what I did. Who I was' (Hamilton 2000a: 79). At the beginning, her emotions towards the monsters are clear-cut and straightforward and she declares that 'I know who and what I am. I am the Executioner, and I don't date vampires. I kill them' (Hamilton 2000a: 266). Anita resists her feelings towards the master vampire Jean-Claude, insisting that 'a girl's got to have some standards' and not date anything non-human or dead (Hamilton 1995: 292). However, as her life gets more entangled with the world of the undead and as Anita develops her own supernatural abilities as a necromancer, she comes to realize that she is not 'lily-human', not sufficiently human to be fully accepted among the civilians she protects and the policemen she works with (Hamilton 2003: 155). Anita has to admit that she is an outcast, 'a triple threat if ever there was one. I was a civvie, a woman, and a freak' (Hamilton 2001a: 71). The prejudice and even hatred she exhibits towards the monsters in the early novels are frequently questioned as her relationships with both human and non-human creatures cause her to re-examine the validity and mutual exclusivity of the two categories. Anita has to rethink 'exactly what made you human, and what made you one of the monsters. Once I'd been very sure of myself, and everyone else. I wasn't so sure anymore' (Hamilton 2000d: 145).

However, Anita does not welcome this erosion of her once stringent morality and worldview, maintaining that 'life had been simpler when I believed in black-and-white absolutes' (Hamilton 2001b: 41). She sees her immersion into the non-human realm and her surrender to Jean-Claude as a devastating and almost fatal 'fall' into 'the well of moral decay', revealing that 'the monsters had finally gotten me. Seducing me was almost as good as killing me, and nearly as crippling' (Hamilton 2003: 37, 195; Hamilton 2000e: 128). As the shapeshifter Nathaniel tells her, Anita hates 'being different' and the reason she is finally seduced by the monsters is that they too are outside the human norm (Hamilton 2001b: 121). Anita cannot comply with what her human friends and colleagues ask of her: 'choose whether you're one of them, or one of us' (Hamilton 2003: 306). Sergeant Storr does not recognize that Anita's freakishness, her inhabiting of both human and supernatural worlds, is part of her ambiguous being, and instead, he blames her in-betweenness on the monsters. As he tells her, 'you've played by their rules so long, sometimes you forget what it's like to be normal' (Hamilton 2000f: 40).

In order to accommodate her non-human self, Anita is forced to live and find love among those who are outcasts. As she reflects, 'Jean-Claude and I deserve each other' as they both 'live in the same world' (Hamilton 2000e: 26). Anita's introduction to the monsters' way of life also triggers the awakening of a mature and highly sexual womanhood. She gives in to her own desires as she comes to terms with the fact that 'maybe' she is not and has never been 'a good girl' (Hamilton 2000d: 277). In the course of eleven novels, Anita not only enters into a sexual relationship with Jean-Claude but she is simultaneously involved with the werewolves Richard and Jason, the wereleopard Micah and the vampire Asher. In fact, sex becomes an important source of Anita's power

as she forms a triumvirate with master vampire Jean-Claude and Richard, the head of the werewolf pack. In the later novels, Anita's life is almost completely ruled by a non-human sexual need, entitled the *ardeur*, which forces her to feed her lust and have sex every twelve hours (Hamilton 2003: 49; 182). Sex comes to be seen as a melting pot of human, supernatural and monstrous selves from which all participants taste and share. 'We all drew power from it', Anita declares, 'the light and the dark. The cold and the hot. Life and Death. As the marks drew us closer, the lines between life and death would blur' (Hamilton 2000g: 293). Anita's sexual relations firmly establish her within the world of the monsters as she becomes Jean-Claude's human servant, Richard's human lupa and Micah's Nimir-Ra, the queen of the werewolves and wereleopards respectively. She even gains a 'pet vampire' through her own abilities as a necromancer and, thus, she forges an emotional if not sexual bond with nearly all the non-humans she encounters (Hamilton 2003: 51). Anita accepts her responsibilities and develops an almost maternal protectiveness to defend the creatures who depend on her. As she ironically declares, 'sav[ing] everyone' is her 'hobby' and she is 'accustomed to riding in on [her] white steed and saving the day' (Hamilton 2000f: 154; Hamilton 2000g: 129).

At the same time as befriending and even loving the monsters, Anita still has to fulfil her public role as the Executioner, 'the scourge of vampire kind' (Hamilton 2000e: 387). Rather than embracing the monstrous world and its ambiguous morality, Anita prefers to hide her feelings for Jean-Claude 'like some guilty secret' and she is 'embarrassed [. . .] that anyone would think [she] might actually date him. That [she] might actually care for a walking dead man' (Hamilton 2000e: 135; 134). She struggles with the fear that her growing attachment to the non-human realm and its inhabitants

endangers and undermines her own humanity and soul. Anita's alienation from her human and moral standards results in an increased toughness and in her ability to kill without remorse. As she realizes in disbelief, 'killing didn't bother me', it 'meant nothing to me. Just good business' (Hamilton 2000f: 81). Anita can 'kill people and not blink. No attack of conscience, no nightmares, nothing. It was like some part of me had turned off' (Hamilton 2000e: 72). She has to face up to 'some dark part of her' that transforms her into a 'sociopath' who 'want[s] to kill. Not for revenge, or safety, or even my word, but just because I [can]' (Hamilton 2000f: 381; 19). Thus, Anita's relationship with the self-loathing werewolf Richard ends because she is not 'human enough for him' (Hamilton 2003: 195). As she tells him, she is never going to 'soften up and become [a] good little girl' and she sees herself for who she is, 'something that would kill you before it would kiss you' (Hamilton 2000e: 271; 311).

In this way, Anita combines a stereotypical feminine exterior with a ruthless assassin persona, a supernatural affinity with the dead and a moral commitment to defend those under her protection. As Edward declares, underneath 'the surface', 'the small attractive packaging' 'is someone who thinks like a killer, and a cop, and a monster. I don't know anyone else who bridges all three worlds as well as she does' (Hamilton 2001a: 157). While admitting that she 'can't unmake' her multiple and contradictory self, Anita does not fully accept or embrace her position between binaries (Hamilton 2001a: 444). Instead, she prefers to view her own monstrosity as a self-sacrifice to secure the status quo and protect the human community that has exiled her. As she states, 'I was always willing to compromise my soul if it would take out a great evil' (Hamilton 2001a: 380). She cannot 'let the monsters win, not even if it mean[s] becoming one of them' and

thus, she becomes ‘a monster, but it’s for a good cause’ (Hamilton 2001a: 381; Hamilton 2000g: 400). Paradoxically, Anita tries to maintain the boundary between human and monster, good and evil, self and Other by crossing the line that separates them and becoming more ‘other’ herself. Importantly, Anita has not abandoned her own dualistic, black-and-white worldview and she considers her own ambiguity and promiscuity as abnormal and monstrous. She is ‘embarrassed’ by her conduct and describes herself as an ‘inhuman’ ‘freak’ and a ‘whore’ (Hamilton 2000g: 269; 193). She feels ‘guilty’ not only because she has ‘turned into coffin bait’ but also because she might ‘be in love with four men at once’ (Hamilton 2003: 69; 191; Hamilton 2000f: 177). Anita believes that she has ‘lost it big time. From celibacy to fucking the undead. If I’d still been Catholic, it would have been enough to get me excommunicated’ (Hamilton 2000f: 247).

In fact, Anita is ‘deeply moral’ and she has ‘problems with premarital sex’ (Hamilton 2001b: 338; Hamilton 2000g: 268). After she starts dating and having intercourse with more people, she laments that

my one comfort had been that I was monogamous. Now I didn’t even have that. Whoredom had finally arrived just as my Grandmother Blake had always warned. [. . .] Once you have sex with anyone, sex becomes more of a possibility with others. (Hamilton 2000g: 268)

Anita’s sexual behavior does not undermine her belief in the rightness of religious rules and commandments but it means that, in her own mind, she is a ‘fallen Catholic’ who has lost her virtue and fails to live up to her ‘own moral code’ (Hamilton 2001a: 445;

Hamilton 2001b: 339). 'My faith was still pure', she notes, 'I never doubted God. I doubted me' (Hamilton 2000g: 411). Similarly, she tells the remorseless killer Edward that 'I do believe in marriage, but not for people like us' (Hamilton 2001a: 258). Anita is convinced that she does not 'make [a] good significant other' and that her future does not hold the possibility of marriage and domestic bliss, 'not in this lifetime' (Hamilton 1995: 281; Hamilton 2000c: 254).

Ultimately, Anita straddles both human and monstrous worlds, without ever fully committing to either. Jason rebukes her for having 'divided [her] world up into different parts' without ever giving herself over 'heart and soul to anybody' (Hamilton 2003: 192; 191). This is reinforced by Asher who tells her that 'something will not allow you to give yourself completely [. . .] to that shining thing called love. You hold yourself back, and you hold back those who love you' (Hamilton 2003: 263). Anita admits that she does not want to 'belong to just one person' and always withholds 'a piece of myself for myself' (Hamilton 2003: 192). As she states, 'if I belong to anybody, I belong to me' and 'no one gets all of me [. . .] no one, except me' (Hamilton 2000f: 315; Hamilton 2003: 193). Thus, she does not want to be 'Mrs. Jean-Claude' and insists that he only gets her 'libido' but not her 'heart' (Hamilton 2000e: 176; Hamilton 2000f: 392). As she proclaims, 'a girl's got to have some standards. I don't let the vamps fuck with my mind, they just get my body' (Hamilton 2003: 264). Anita cannot resolve her own internal paradoxes and struggle between her highly sexual supernatural self, her cold-hearted and tough professional identity and her 'good girl' upbringing. Even though she lives *beyond the binary*, Anita is not able to combine these different parts, concluding that she is 'a mess of contradictions' (Hamilton 2003: 342).

Anita's pluralistic in-betweenness does not conflate into a harmonious unity in diversity. She cannot 'love' and accept herself 'just as [she] [is]', 'small, dark, hard, bloody, thick with metaphysical shit' (Hamilton 2003: 196). Instead, she divides and splits her self between her conflicting characteristics in an attempt to keep them separate and confined. Her tough killer persona is in stark contrast to the mother-like protector and saviour who passionately cares for the monsters that she has taken into custody. Importantly, in the last novel Cerulean Sins, Anita rejects all her lovers for her favorite toy Sigmund because he 'never told me I was being silly, or bloodthirsty' (Hamilton 2003: 466). She does not believe that anyone, either monstrous or human, can accept the paradoxical complexity of her character and love her for who she is: 'a kindhearted [. . .] powerful, ruthless and pretty [. . .] sociopath who happens to have magical abilities', 'a mind and a heart' (Hamilton 2001b: 214).

Unlike Whedon, Hamilton does not release her heroine from her problematical heterogeneity as Anita does not reconcile her life's contradictions by deterritorializing her constraints and transcending into a realm of self-creation and choice. Yet, Whedon and Hamilton alike present their slayers as inherently pluralistic and paradoxical figures who battle with their existence across essentialized concepts of Woman and Man, human and monster. Anita and Buffy have to recognize the complexity of their roles as they are confronted with a world in which ambiguity is inevitable, 'good' and 'evil' are slippery concepts while 'right' and 'wrong' are equally obscure. Their existence on the postfeminist frontier is not depicted as a harmonious dispersion of dualistic restrictions and linear thinking. On the contrary, their position between polarities is a contested site of permanent struggle rather than an embrace of plurality and an alliance of oppositions.

These pioneer active heroines experience that *blurring the binary* is a lonely and alienating task, a burden that they have to carry and a stroke of fate that they have to endure. Thus, the postfeminist supergirl illustrates postfeminism's contentious intersection and exploitation of the in-between space as she endeavors to carve out a new subjective stance between previously antagonistic categories of identification. This postfeminist landscape crosses *either/or* distinctions and offers a model of negotiation to account for the overlap between activity and passivity. It is in this gap between dualities that a new context can be opened up that resignifies and reinscribes the norms of power and resistance, complicity and critique.

4. Conclusion: Towards a Postfeminist Politics of Resistance

I began this analysis of postfeminist contexts and texts with an examination of the foundations and resignifiable boundaries that delimit postfeminism's domain of meanings and possibilities. I have sought to take account of how a paradox recurrently structures postfeminist debates and how it is played out in the middle space between dualistic formulations and categories. In fact, I have suggested that the multivalent and pluralistic postfeminist spectrum exceeds the binary frame itself in its reworking of the logic of non-contradiction and its displays of ambivalence. Postfeminism depicts the complex crossings and interchanges between previously antagonistic stances and it is caught in a struggle of signification whereby the binary sides are depolarized and brought into contact/conflict. This interrogation of the *either/or* is manifested in postfeminist practice and theory by a non-dichotomous understanding of complicity and critique, feminism and femininity, power and disempowerment. The postfeminist frontier discourse relies on a process of resignification and iterability that provisionally circumscribes and defines the postfeminist site, endowing it with contextualized and temporalized meanings. This positional definition makes postfeminist significations relative to a constantly shifting network of power/discourse, a constitutive constraint that produces as well as constrains postfeminism's realm of possibilities.

In this way, postfeminism becomes a site for the construction of meaning, a contested location that lacks a stable and fixed referent and instead houses an ongoing internal negotiation of the usage and meaning of the term. Postfeminism is constituted by its contextual surroundings but not determined, where determination forecloses the

potential of a 'break with context' and the assumption of a new meaning. Thus, to take up the postfeminist signifier implies being inserted into a chain of significations that operates through a compulsive repetition and cannot be comprehended in linear terms. Postfeminist meanings are regulated contextually, never reaching an absolute certainty and only positing ideas that cannot be secured as 'truths'. In this dialectical model, the significative resolution or synthesis is not final but provides the basis for further resignifications and recontextualizations. Catachresis is a perpetual risk or indeed a founding feature of postfeminism, eschewing rigid designations in favour of, what Judith Butler calls, an 'economy of difference' that allows for incoherent and paradoxical significations (Butler 1993a: 118). The postfeminist landscape gives rise to a number of discursive convergences that signify in excess of their originating contexts and produce the opportunity for a complex reconfiguration and redeployment. Accordingly, I maintain that postfeminism cannot be understood in terms of clear origins or ultimate goals as no monological conclusion necessarily follows from these processes of resignification and reterritorialization. Instead, it is necessary to release the term from a predetermined referent and challenge the foundationalist premises that constrain in advance our practices of reading and comprehending postfeminism. This implies reworking the historicity of the postfeminist signifier in order to emphasize the conflicts of interpretation and signification that arise between contexts.

While stressing postfeminism's resignifiability and polysemy, I also insist that its meanings do not float freely in an inexhaustible ocean of information but they are constructed within a given horizon of possibilities that are already established and demarcated by contextual/discursive foreclosures. These delimitations delineate what is

imaginable and intelligible on the postfeminist landscape, creating a domain of possible meanings that are contextually contingent. Moreover, I suggest that postfeminism does not effect a radical unmooring, a complete break with its previous contexts, as it creates a terrain of exchange between its various positionings. Consequently, it is important to question what of a prior context is brought forward and how this trace continues to haunt the new context/meaning. This contextual residue makes the postfeminist site an inherently 'impure' space that incorporates the old into the new, preserving what it seeks to superimpose. I have sought to describe this specter by underlining the varied and even contradictory interpretations that emerge within the parameters of textual/discursive constraints. I have tried to highlight the interconnections between postfeminist contexts and the interplay of significations that draw on a *both/and* dynamic in order to undermine an exclusionary logic of antithesis. My purpose has been to understand how an internal postfeminist echo acts as a remainder, reverberating in new contexts and disrupting any sense of monosemy, any notion of a uniform ground.

This multiple positionality and signifiability are at the basis of the transgression/containment debates that have split contemporary critics and feminist theorists with regard to postfeminism's political capacities, its affiliations and affinities that are seen to be oppositional and incongruous. These critical attempts to produce a non-contradictory coherence can only be achieved at the cost of postfeminist complexity, the discursive crossings that generate paradoxical meanings and positions. My own approach to the postfeminist problematic has not been led by a desire to resolve the struggles of translation and construct a foundationalist frame in which postfeminism is always articulated. Instead of determining a universal postfeminist ground/meaning, I

have endeavored to interrogate the construction of pregiven premises, highlight their resignificatory potential and locate possible interventions into the citational chain. Rather than trying to align postfeminism with either patriarchy or feminism, popular culture or academia, I want to affirm the movement's postfoundational usefulness whereby it brings into question and (mis)appropriates these 'foundations'. I propose that there is no opposition between postfeminism's reactionary and progressive usage as these layers of signification interact and indeed depend upon one another. In this way, postfeminist progressiveness requires and repeats its conservative meaning in order to effect a subversive recontextualization. In my discussion of postfeminist texts, this double move is exemplified by Weldon's she devil and Whedon's Supergirl who both have to be subjectivated by a restrictive power structure (as a Cinderella/vampire slayer respectively) in order to redefine their subject positions and resignify the norm.

In Butlerian terms, the 'post-sovereign' subject's liberating determinism is expressed by the notion that 'agency . . . is an effect of power', emerging from a founding limitation or foreclosure that first makes this agency possible (Butler 1997a: 139). The interdependency of power and agency has important consequences for our understanding of contemporary politics and critical theory as it depicts opposition working *from within* the very terms by which power is elaborated. I propose that this primary complicity with power structures does not necessarily lead to a vicious circle in which any effort to oppose subordination necessarily re-invokes it. My inquiry has attempted to uncover the political and critical dimensions of postfeminism in the practices of resignification that contextualize and decontextualize postfeminist meanings. Resignification opens up a domain of possibilities immanent to power and thus, creates a site for agentic

interventions. This resignifiable potential does not position postfeminism's political promise in a utopian beyond but at the center of a politics of hegemony that takes the risk of employing the terms that we simultaneously question. The goal of this political critique cannot be pure subversion as it has to take into account the interarticulation of relations of domination and resistance. In fact, any attempt at subversion is potentially recuperable and cannot be calculated or planned in advance as it demands to be investigated in context. Thus, postfeminism offers a set of challenges that are historically provisional, readable only within specific contextual surroundings and resignifiable in new contexts. The notion of postfeminism as both contingent and delimited situates power and resistance within the terms of reiteration as active/productive structures. Importantly, this conclusion is not to be understood as a conflation of resistance and recuperation (i.e. as a resistance that is really a recuperation of power or as a recuperation that is really a resistance). It is both at once, blurring the binary between these dichotomies and modifying the foundationalist frame that positions them in a relation of antithesis. As I have endeavored to demonstrate throughout this study, postfeminism's blur of the binary does not represent an avoidance of a critical viewpoint or a disavowal of politics. On the contrary, postfeminism pursues those moments when, as Butler notes, 'we're standing in two different places at once; or we don't know exactly where we're standing' in order to effect a degrounding and produce a resistance to recuperation (quoted in Osborne and Segal 1994: 38). This new postfeminist space challenges our modes of knowledge and our capacities to read, prompting us to renegotiate the ways in which we make sense of the contemporary age of confusion. Risk will always be an unavoidable component of this procedure as postfeminism comes to serve progressive

and conservative, feminist and anti-feminist purposes. This inherent paradox requires a rethinking of the in-between as a necessary and valid position in its own right, a new space of complex identifications and incoherent configurations that exceed and undermine the injunctions by which they are generated.

Endnotes

1.1 On Shaky Ground: Defining Postfeminism

¹ Works suggestive of these different definitions of postfeminism would be: Susan Faludi Backlash The Undeclared War against Women (1992), Naomi Wolf Fire With Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century (1993), Ann Brooks Postfeminisms Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms (1997), Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake eds. Third Wave Agenda Being Feminist, Doing Feminism (1997).

² Moreover, Butler insists that ‘a fundamental mistake is made when we think that we must sort out philosophically or epistemologically our “ground” before we can take stock of the world [. . .] or engage in its affairs actively with the aim of transformation’ (Butler 1995: 129).

³ Jackie Stacey employs the term ‘politics of location’ to refer to ‘some fundamental changes within feminism during the 1980s and 1990s’ (Stacey 1994: 257). She reveals that

typically it is associated with an emphasis on specificity, rather than generality. It has emerged from both a political challenge made by black feminism to the oppressive generalizations made by white feminists [and] a postmodernist/feminist theoretical disenchantment with universal theories in favour of theories located historically, culturally and geographically. (Stacey 1994: 257)

See Jackie Stacey 1994. Star Gazing Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship. London and New York: Routledge.

⁴ The term ‘interdiscursivity’ is used by Linda Hutcheon to broaden the scope of intertextuality which is considered to be ‘too limited a term’ for ‘the collective modes of discourse from which the postmodern parodically draws’ (Hutcheon 1989: 12).

See Linda Hutcheon 1989. ‘Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History’, in Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction, (eds) O’Donnell, P. and Davis, R. C., Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 3-30.

⁵ Hutcheon reveals that the doubleness of parody and the dispute about its political direction stem from the term’s etymological root, the Greek prefix ‘*para*’ that has two meanings. In its more widely known translation, ‘*para*’ means ‘counter’ or ‘against’ and thus, parody becomes ‘an opposition or contrast between texts [. . .] one text is set against another with the intent of mocking it or making it ludicrous’ (Hutcheon 1985: 32). However, in Greek, ‘*para*’ also carries the meaning of ‘beside’ or ‘near’ and therefore, ‘there is a suggestion of an accord or intimacy instead of a contrast’ (Hutcheon 1985: 32). This second, neglected meaning of the prefix broadens the pragmatic scope of parody that

encompasses both a subversion of authority and a conservative re-inscription of the latter. Hutcheon concludes that ‘the ethos postulated for parody probably should be labeled as *unmarked*, with a number of possibilities for marking’ (Hutcheon 1985: 60). In accord with the oppositional meaning of ‘*para*’ (as ‘counter’), one can posit a challenging or contesting form of parody whereas the other meaning of the prefix (as ‘close to’) accounts for a more respectful and reverential ethos (Hutcheon 1985: 60).

⁶ In a similar manner, Jameson reveals that there is no ‘conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists’ (Jameson 1993: 74).

⁷ As Todd Gitlin and Simon Dentith point out, ‘we have [. . .] a cultivation of surfaces endlessly referring to, ricocheting from, reverberating onto other surfaces’, ‘in an interminable recycling which mirrors the unending commodity circulation of an absolutely extensive capitalism’ (Gitlin 1989: 350; Dentith 2000: 155).

⁸ Dentith notes that ‘there is no general politics of parody; you cannot decide in advance whether it seeks to contain the new or deflate the old’ (Dentith 2000: 185).

⁹ As Hutcheon reveals, nostalgia is ‘less a matter of simple memory’ than an ‘invocation of a partial, idealized history’ (Hutcheon 1998: 3). In this sense, ‘nostalgia is less about the past than about the present’ (Hutcheon 1998: 3). Moreover,

[it] may depend precisely on the *irrecoverable* nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia’s power. [. . .] This is rarely the past as actually experienced [. . .] it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire. (Hutcheon 1998: 3)

¹⁰ In particular, parody involves ‘the entire *énonciation* of discourse’, a wide context that includes ‘an addresser of the utterance, a receiver of it, a time and a place, discourses that precede and follow’ (Hutcheon 1985: 23). Thus, parody relies on the active participation of and the contractual agreement between encoder and decoder as well as on a structural and discursive contextualization that frames the production and the reception of parodic texts.

1.2 Beyond the Binary or Theorizing on the Postfeminist Frontier

¹ Harris refers to Derrida in order to explain that a politics of undecidability ‘does not mean that decisions cannot or should not be made’ but it highlights ‘the process of negotiation by which they are and *must* be made’ (Harris 1999: 180). As Derrida points out, undecidability is always a ‘determinate oscillation between possibilities, possibilities which themselves are highly determined in strictly defined situations’ (Derrida 1990: 148). Thus, the politics of undecidability does not offer absolutism from the

responsibility of making decisions and creating meanings but it accepts that these cannot be made by applying a pre-existing law and they cannot be made once and for all time.

² According to Ang, 'it is important to properly theorize "chaos"' and she dismisses a negative theory of chaos as a 'loss of control' and a 'lack of order' (Ang 1996: 174). Her positive reading of chaos implies the 'transvaluation of chaos as having primacy over order' (Ang 1996: 175). However, Ang also asserts that chaos is not opposed to order. Drawing on N.K. Hayles' chaos theory, chaos can be seen as 'the engine that drives a system toward a more complex kind of order' (Hayle 1990: 23). Chaos can be described as 'an exhaustible ocean of information' rather than a lack, 'a void signifying absence' (Hayle 1990: 8). Thus, as Ang suggests, 'the more chaotic a system is, the more information it contains, and the more complex the order established out of it' (Ang 1996: 175).

See Ien Ang 1996. Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World, London and New York: Routledge.

N.K.Hayles 1990. Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

³ According to a Foucauldian analysis of power, resistance or a challenge to power does not come from the outside but is produced within power structures. In this way, where there is power, there is also resistance as dominant forms and institutions are continually being penetrated and reconstructed by values, styles and knowledges that have been developing and gathering energy, strength and distinctiveness 'at the margins'. Foucault's concept of power as both productive and pluralistic can be seen as supportive of different forms of power while at the same time producing sites of resistance, struggle and change.

⁴ As Foucault notes, 'we can never be ensnared by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to a precise strategy' (Foucault 1988a: 123). The result is that

more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across the individuals themselves. (Foucault 1978: 96)

⁵ For further reading on this attack on the Cartesian subject and the *constituting/constituted* dichotomy, see Susan Hekman 1991. 'Reconstituting the Subject: Feminism, Modernism and Postmodernism', Hypatia, 6 (2), 44-63.

⁶ In Judith Butler's words, the 'ambivalent scene of agency' relies on a seemingly paradoxical conception of the subject as 'the condition for and instrument of agency' and simultaneously, 'the effect of subordination, understood as the deprivation of agency' (Butler 1997b: 15; 10).

⁷ As Judith Butler argues, agency is not a transcendental category nor ‘an attribute of persons, presupposed as prior to power and language’ and ‘inferred from the structure of the self’ (Butler 1995: 137). On the contrary, it ‘is the effect of discursive conditions’ and therefore, ‘it is implicated in what it opposes’ (Butler 1995: 137).

⁸ Butler notes that ‘whether by interpellation, in Althusser’s sense, or by discursive productivity in Foucault’s, the subject is initiated through a primary submission to power’ (Butler 1997: 2). In this way, ‘Althusser’s doctrine of interpellation clearly sets the stage for Foucault’s later views on the “discursive production of the subject”’ and both theorists ‘agree that there is a founding subordination in the process of *assujettissement*’ (Butler 1997: 5).

⁹ Butler continues to say that subjection consists in ‘this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency’ (Butler 1997b: 2).

¹⁰ In addition, Butler also states that

one is [. . .] in power even as one opposes it, formed by it as one reworks it, and it is this simultaneity that is at once the condition of our partiality, the measure of our political unknowingness, and also the condition of action itself. (Butler 1993a: 241)

¹¹ Art critic Craig Owen expresses a similar idea when he characterizes ‘post’ movements by a sense of ‘impossible complicity’, noting that ‘it is only through complicity that [the] postmodern [. . .] can execute its deconstructive strategies’ (quoted in Augsburg 1998: 302).

¹² Similarly, Page du Bois reveals that ‘efforts of subversion [. . .] are conceived within culture, within the languages which speak us, which we must turn to our own purposes’ (du Bois 1988: 188). This deconstructive strategy of inside subversion has been theorized by Derrida in a statement that is worth quoting at length:

the movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside [. . .] borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work. (Derrida 1974: 24)

See Jacques Derrida 1974. *Of Grammatology*, (trans.) Spivak, G. C., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹³ Patricia Yaeger concurs, revealing that ‘a reinscription of phallogentrism may be a sign [. . .] of woman’s own ability to signify, that is, her ability to play with, to control, and to restructure patriarchal traditions’ (quoted in Kastelein 1994: 169).

¹⁴ Julie Burchill is most widely known for her work as a journalist and columnist for The Guardian (until 2003). Noted for her acerbic writing and controversial views, she has been described as the ‘Groucho Marx of feminism’ and a ‘lipsticked feminist’ whose political positioning is confusing and contradictory (Frost 2002: 1; Brabazon 1997: 1). ‘Tory but working class, a woman yet misogynistic’, Burchill characterizes herself as a ‘Thatcherite bitch’ who ‘refuse[s] to be anyone’s hard-luck story’ and sees ‘fame [as] the most pleasurable and profitable shortcut to both’ ‘love and money’ (Brabazon 1997:1). This focus on personal fame and achievement is contained within the title of her novel Ambition (1989) that became one of the 1980s defining blockbusters.

¹⁵ In a similar manner, Judith Butler locates the political in ‘the very signifying practices that establish, regulate and deregulate identity’ and she adamantly asserts that ‘the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics’ (Butler 1990a: 147; 148).

1.3 Modern Janus or the Different Faces of Postfeminism

¹ For the purpose of this study, it is important to note the definitional ambiguity of the term ‘feminism’. Any definition of feminism is notoriously difficult as it has never encompassed a uniform set of ideas or beliefs. It may very generally be categorized as the struggle to intervene in and transform the unequal power relations between men and women but there has never been a universally agreed agenda for feminism. Any view or explanation of the term is context-specific and thus, in relation to postfeminism, ‘feminism’ is understood to be synonymous with the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, commonly referred to as second wave feminism. The feminism of women’s liberation distinguishes itself from the ‘old feminism’ of equal rights by a sharper and far more radical feminist consciousness. It is the product of a changed social and political context in the ‘60s and ‘70s and it is characterized by the double focus on women as an oppressed social group and on the female body with its need for sexual autonomy as a primary site of that oppression.

See for example, Sue Thornham 2001. ‘Second Wave Feminism’, in The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism, 29-42.

² In fact, postfeminism may even be identified as a cyclical process of rejuvenation whereby it occurs whenever feminism is perceived to be out of touch and limited in its analyses of women’s lives. As Nancy F. Cott reveals in her historical exploration The Grounding of Modern Feminism (1987), the term ‘postfeminist’ made its first appearance in the 1920s press after the vote for women had been gained by the suffrage movement. As she explains,

already in 1919 a group of female literary radicals in Greenwich Village [. . .] had founded a new journal on the thinking, “we’re interested in people now – not in men and women”. They declared that moral, social, economic, and political standards “should not have anything to do with sex”, promised to be “pro-woman without being anti-man”, and called their stance “postfeminist”. (Cott 1987: 282)

³ As Sarah Gamble points out, 'it is important to understand that there are different ways of seeing which are all feminist, allowing for diversity within disciplines and within the feminist movement itself' (Gamble 2001: 231).

⁴ As Cott explains,

women [. . .] are the same as men in a species sense, but different from men in reproductive biology and the construction of gender. Men and women are alike as human beings, and yet categorically different from each other; their sameness and differences derive from nature *and* culture, how inextricably entwined we can hardly know. (Cott 1987: 5)

⁵ Given the statistical evidence, it is clear that the claims of popular/media feminism cannot be sustained. As Coppock notes, 'this is not to say that nothing has changed for women and some aspects of women's daily experiences can be defined as "progressive". [. . .] While things may be different for women, this does not guarantee, nor translate into equality or liberation' (Coppock 1995: 180).

See for example, Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon and Ingrid Richter 1995. The Illusions of 'Post-Feminism' New Women, Old Myths, London: Taylor & Francis.

Liz Davies 1996. Feminism after Post-feminism Socialist Renewal European Labour Forum Pamphlet No. 10, Nottingham: Russell Press.

⁶ Similarly, Elayne Rapping reveals that the implication of postfeminism 'certainly' is that 'the basic system and its values are just fine and all we need to do is reach out and grab a piece of the pie' (Rapping 1996: 267).

⁷ Following Steven Best's and Douglas Kellner's Postmodern Theory (1991), I will interpret poststructuralism as a subset of a broader range of theoretical, cultural and social tendencies that constitute postmodern discourses. Poststructuralism forms part of the matrix of postmodern theory and it is described as 'a critique of modern theory and a production of new models of thought, writing, and subjectivity, some of which are taken up by postmodern theory' (Best and Kellner 1991: 25). Indeed, 'postmodern theory appropriates the poststructuralist critique of modern thought, radicalizes it, and extends it to new theoretical fields' (Best and Kellner 1991: 25-26).

See Steven Best and Douglas Keller 1991. Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations, London: Macmillan.

⁸ As Toril Moi declares, 'it still remains politically essential for feminists to defend women as women in order to counteract the patriarchal oppression that precisely despises women as women' (quoted in Waugh 1989: 25).

⁹ Christine di Stefano expresses similar doubts about the supposedly destructive encounter of feminism and postmodernism, declaring that 'the postmodernist project, if

seriously adopted by feminists, would make any semblance of a feminist politics impossible' (quoted in Cacoullos 2001: 92-93).

¹⁰ Jane Flax concurs that 'the way(s) to feminist future(s)' cannot lie in reviving and appropriating normative absolutism and totalizing concepts of knowledge (Flax 1990: 42). Instead, feminist theories 'should encourage us to tolerate and interpret ambivalence, ambiguity and multiplicity' (Flax 1990: 56). Flax even adds that '[i]f we do our work well, reality will appear even more unstable, complex, and disorderly than it does now' (Flax 1990: 56-57).

¹¹ This exemplifies an instance of, what I have earlier related to as, political postmodernism. As Fredric Jameson points out, such a new form of critique must be dialectical, understanding 'the cultural evolution of late capitalism [. . .] as catastrophe and progress all together' (Jameson 1993: 86). The "'moment of truth" of postmodernism' is found in an acknowledgement and affirmation of the 'original new global space' that is 'no longer endowed with the relative autonomy it once enjoyed' (Jameson 1993: 87; 86). Thus, the 'dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture' is to be understood 'positively and negatively all at once', 'at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race, and the worst' (Jameson 1993: 86).

¹² As Siegel explains, 'just as the same water reforms itself into ever new waves, so the second wave circulates in the third, reproducing itself through a cyclical movement' (Siegel 1997a: 61).

¹³ Susan J. Douglas examines the contemporary motto of 'I'm not a feminist, but . . .', revealing that

the comma [. . .] is the fulcrum of the whole statement, which marks the divisions – and, more important, the profound connections – between the disavowal of feminism in the first part of the phrase and its embrace at the end. The comma says that the speaker is ambivalent, that she is torn between a philosophy that seeks to improve her lot in life and a desire not to have to pay too dearly for endorsing that philosophy. [. . .] This conversational gambit [means] that the speaker probably supports some combination of equal pay for equal work. [. . .] It also means that the speaker shaves her legs, bathes regularly, does not want to be thought of as a man-hater, a ball-buster, a witch, or a shrew. [. . .] Most of all, it means that the possibility of having, inside you a unified, coherent self that always believes the same things at the same time is virtually zero. (Douglas 1995: 270-273)

See Susan J. Douglas 1995. Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media, London: Penguin.

¹⁴ In a similar vein, Deborah L. Siegel notes that 'the "third wave" is a response to what one might call the cultural dominance of postfeminism', 'a welcome voice of contention

for many second wave feminists, for whom the threat of “postfeminism” [. . .] is particularly resonant’ (Siegel 1997a: 52).

2.1 Situating the Context

¹ As Amelia Jones maintains, ‘interestingly [. . .] while the postfeminism of popular culture works to deny the continuing empowerment of feminist discourse [. . .] the postfeminism of academic criticism works simultaneously to celebrate and absorb feminism and feminist theory’ (Jones 1994: 23).

² The second wave slogan ‘the personal is political’ describes women’s relation to patriarchy and it encapsulates the idea that what women viewed as personal, individual problems could be traced to their political living in a male-dominated and male-defined society. The adage sums up the way in which second wave feminism did not just strive to extend the range of social opportunities open to women, but also, through intervention within the spheres of reproduction, sexuality and cultural representation, to change their domestic and private lives.

³ In fact, Douglas notes that

instead of group action, we got escapist solitude. Instead of solidarity, we got female competition over men. And, most important, instead of seeing personal disappointments, frustrations and failures as symptoms of an inequitable and patriarchal society, we saw these [. . .] as personal failures, for which we should blame ourselves. (Douglas 1995: 265)

⁴ Dana Cloud reveals that ‘a token is a cultural construction of a successful persona who metonymically represents a larger cultural grouping’ (Cloud 1996: 122). As she notes,

in popular culture [. . .] a token can be defined as a persona who is constructed from the character and life of a member of a subordinated group, and then celebrated, authorized to speak as proof that the society at large does not discriminate against members of that group. (Cloud 1996: 123)

Moreover, J.L. Laws provides an insightful definition of tokenism, noting that

tokenism is the means by which the dominant group advertises a promise of mobility between the dominant and excluded classes. By definition, however, tokenism involves mobility which is severely restricted in quantity, and the quality of mobility is severely restricted as well. [. . .] The institution of tokenism has advantages both for the dominant group and for the individual who is chosen to serve as Token. These advantages obtain, however, only when the defining constraints are respected: the flow of outsiders into the dominant group must be restricted numerically, and they must not change the system they enter. (Laws 1975: 51-52)

See Dana Cloud 1996. 'Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in "Oprah" Winfrey's Rags-to-Riches Biography', Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 13, 115-137.

J.L. Laws 1975. 'The Psychology of Tokenism', Sex Roles, 1, 51-67.

⁵ As Denise Riley has forcefully argued,

"women" is historically, discursively constructed, and always relatively to other categories which themselves change; "women" is a volatile collection in which female persons can be very differently positioned, so that the apparent continuity of the subject of "women" isn't to be relied on; "women" is both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity, while for the individual, "being a woman" is also inconstant, and can't provide an ontological foundation. (Riley 1988: 1-2)

See Denise Riley 1988. 'Am I That Name?' Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan.

⁶ Whelehan pointedly reveals that 'being a feminist' does 'not immunize one from being racist' and heterosexist and she states that any degree of unity within the women's movement has been achieved 'at the expense of black, lesbian and working-class women' (Whelehan 1995: 110; 121).

⁷ Yet, postmodernism should not be represented as a natural ally of minority feminisms. Anne Koenen reveals that feminists' adoption of a poststructuralist framework 'in a mostly unquestioned binary reflex' has created 'an opposition between theory and practice in which the theories of women of color were suppressed and silenced or rejected as too "essentialist" or "naïve"' (Koenen 1999: 132). She continues to say that

increasingly, posttheories and black feminist criticism were perceived as antithetical, with posttheories supposed to be more sophisticated and black feminist criticism trapped in an old-fashioned political essentialism. White postfeminism elevated the traditional center of "male, pale, Yale" over the periphery of black and female, thus unwittingly duplicating a much-criticized hegemonic strategy of studying and canonizing white male master texts [. . .] while relegating the contributions of women of color to the margins. (Koenen 1999: 132)

According to Koenen, 'one answer to this dilemma – the tension between minority discourses and posttheories' is to question 'the insight into the disintegration of the subject as a new universal truth' (Koenen 1999: 133). In effect, this means that 'when feminist and black theory are "learning the master's tongue" [. . .] they have to check whether the theories of the center make sense to them' (Koenen 1999: 133-134). In other words, one has to historicize and situate postmodernism's disintegrating subjectivities as 'it may well turn out that it means different things for white men than for black women

who start from a position of fragmented subjectivity and of “generic” rather than individual identity’ (Koenen 1999: 134).

See Anne Koenen 1999. ‘The (Black) Lady Vanishes: Postfeminism, Poststructuralism and Theorizing in Narratives by Black Women’, in Explorations on Post-Theory: Toward a Third Space, (ed.) de Toro, F., Frankfurt am Main: Vervuert; Madrid: Iberoamericana, 131-143.

⁸ As Gunew and Yeatman maintain, there is a need ‘to dismantle once again the universal models which however benign they may appear, work ultimately to confirm the old power structures’ (quoted in Brooks 1997: 2).

⁹ As Joanne Hollows points out,

we not only need to consider feminist cultural politics, and the ways in which it seeks to transform power relations between men and women, but also the cultural politics of feminism and the extent to which they reproduce other modes of power relations between women. The politics of feminist cultural criticisms, therefore, needs to be understood not only in relation to the ways in which masculinities and femininities are bound up with power relations in different historical contexts, but also in relation to the ways in which different feminine identities (including feminist identities) are bound up with power relations in different historical contexts. (Hollows 2000: 36)

2.2 Postfeminist Locations: Feminism and Postmodernism

¹ Similarly, Amelia Jones points out that the positioning of ‘feminism as a strategy within a larger postmodernist project ha[s] unwittingly contributed to the incorporation of feminism into postmodernism as [. . .] an “instance” of the latter’ (Jones 1990: 15).

² Patricia Waugh notes that the first phase of post-1960s feminism was characterized by a desire to experience a ‘whole’, ‘unitary’ or ‘essential’ subjectivity. In fact, ‘if women have traditionally been positioned in terms of “otherness”, then the desire to become subjects [. . .] is likely to be stronger than the desire to deconstruct, decentre, or fragment subjectivity’ (Waugh 1989: 12). Thus, feminism passed through ‘a *necessary* stage’ of pursuing a unitary essential self in order that women ‘might fully understand the historical and social construction of gender and identity’ (Waugh 1989: 13). As Waugh argues,

Certainly, for women in the 1960s and early 1970s, “unity” rather than dispersal seemed to offer more hope for political change. To believe that there might be a “natural” or “true” self which may be discovered through lifting the misrepresentations of an oppressive social system is to provide nurturance and fuel for revolutionary hope and practice. (Waugh 1989: 13)

In this way, feminist thinkers endeavored throughout the 1960s and 1970s to produce expansive social theories that could explain the basis for male/female inequalities. In the process, they often reified female differences through essentialist (or universal) categories that excluded the determinants of race, class, or sexual preference.

See Patricia Waugh 1989. Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern, London and New York: Routledge.

³ As Fredric Jameson explains, 'the luxury of the old-fashioned ideological critique [. . .] becomes unavailable' as 'distance in general (including "critical distance" in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism' (Jameson 1993: 85; 87). Accordingly, the position of 'the cultural critic and moralist' is interrogated and dismissed with the realization that 'we [. . .] are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which [. . .] [we] might well be considered a part, since [. . .] [we] can achieve no distance from it' (Jameson 1993: 85; 87).

⁴ In a similar manner, Ferguson notes that, in conjunction with postmodern theory, feminism has to sacrifice 'the wisdom of identity politics to the postmodern skelter of ineffectual fragmentation' (Ferguson 1997: 5).

⁵ According to di Stefano, this 'postfeminist tendency' is a problematic side-effect of feminist postrationalism or postmodernism. In her discussion of the debates on gender differences, di Stefano distinguishes three strategic forms for posing the relationship between contemporary Western feminism and the Enlightenment legacy of humanistic rationalism: (1) feminist rationalism, (2) feminine anti-rationalism and (3) feminist postrationalism. (1) Feminist rationalism uses a minimalist notion of gender difference and in this way, it enables a critique of sexism as an irrational and hence illegitimate set of beliefs and practices. (2) Feminine anti-rationalism, committed to a stronger version of difference, levels its protest against the rational/masculine and irrational/feminine construct and attempts to revalorize, rather than to overcome, traditional feminine experience. Di Stefano criticizes both rationalist and anti-rationalist frameworks: With regard to rationalism, equality is constituted within a set of terms that disparage things female or feminine. '*She*' dissolves into '*he*' as gender differences are collapsed into the (masculine) figure of Everyman. Anti-rationalism, on the other hand, attempts to revalorize the feminine but fails to criticize it, sliding into anti-feminism. (3) Feminist postrationalism seems to provide the only way out as it rejects the terms and strategies of the previous two stances and argues that feminism must initiate a break with the rationalist paradigm. Eschewing a position either within or outside of the rationalist framework, for or against difference, postrationalism attempts to transcend the discourse of rationalism and to offer new, decentered narratives of opposition. Hence, difference is simultaneously upheld and deconstructed as a proliferation of differences is counterposed to the singular difference of gender. While this strategy is theoretically appealing, di Stefano notes that it is also complex and unnerving, inhabiting a constantly shifting ground of emerging and dissolving differences. With postrationalism, '*she*' dissolves into a perplexing plurality of differences, none of which can be theoretically or politically privileged over others.

See Christine di Stefano 1990. 'Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity, and Postmodernism', in Feminism/Postmodernism, (ed.) Nicholson, L. J., New York and London: Routledge, 63-82.

⁶ As Bordo explains,

any attempt to do justice to heterogeneity [. . .] devours its own tail. For the appreciation of difference requires the acknowledgement of some point beyond which the dancer cannot go. If she were able to go everywhere, there would be no difference, nothing that eludes. (Bordo 1993: 228)

⁷ Similarly, Charles Russell defines postmodernism as 'an art of criticism' and 'unrest', revealing that the postmodern interrogatory stance has 'no message other than the need for continuous questioning' and 'no clearly defined audience other than those predisposed to doubt and search' (Russell 1981: 58).

⁸ As di Stefano reveals,

the postmodernist prohibition against subject-centered inquiry and theory undermines the legitimacy of a broad-based organized movement dedicated to articulating and implementing the goals of such a constituency. (di Stefano 1990: 76)

Similarly, Judith Butler declares that

without a unified concept of woman [. . .] it appears that feminist politics has lost the categorial basis of its own normative claims. What constitutes the "who", the subject for whom feminism seeks emancipation? (Butler 1990b: 327)

⁹ According to Jean Baudrillard, postmodernity signifies the state of contemporary culture which exists as a simulacrum of signs and where the information age has dissolved identity. Baudrillard claims that in the postmodern world, the boundary between image and reality implodes and with it, the very experience and ground of the 'real' disappears. In fact,

for us the medium, the image medium, has imposed itself between the real and the imaginary, upsetting the balance between the two, with a kind of fatality which has its own logic. [. . .] The fatality lies in this endless enwrapping of images [. . .] which leaves images no other destiny than images. [. . .] In the absence of rules of the game, things become caught up in their own game; images become more real than the real. (Baudrillard 1993: 194-195)

Baudrillard uses the term 'hyperreality' to refer to the blurring of distinctions between the real and the unreal whereby the real is produced according to a model. In this way, the real is no longer simply given but it is artificially (re)produced as 'real', becoming 'not unreal, or surreal, but realer-than-real, a real retouched and refurbished in "a

hallucinatory resemblance with itself” (Best and Kellner 1991: 119). With the advent of hyperreality, simulations or models replace the real and come to constitute reality itself. The reality of simulation becomes the criterion of the real. Baudrillard’s ‘universe of simulacra without referents’ can be read as an effect of the poststructuralist critique of meaning and reference ‘taken to an extreme limit where the effluence of simulacra replaces the play of textuality and discourses in a universe with no stable structures in which to anchor theory and politics’ (Best and Kellner 1991: 121). The very idea of resistance and opposition becomes an absurdity as the subject becomes a simulating machine and ‘human beings are left with no capacity to reshape their world’ (Waugh 1992: 198).

¹⁰ Accordingly, an effective feminism could only be a wholly negative feminism, ‘deconstructing everything and refusing to construct anything’ (Alcoff 1987-88: 418). The French poststructuralist Julia Kristeva is an influential proponent of this view, famously noting that

a woman cannot be; it is something which does not even belong in the order of being. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say “that’s not it” and “that’s still not it”. (Kristeva 1981: 137)

See Julia Kristeva 1981. ‘Woman Can Never Be Defined’, in New French Feminisms, (eds) Marks, E. and de Courtivron, I., New York: Schocken.

¹¹ As Cathy Schwichtenberg points out, ‘male philosophers and cultural theorists’ can ‘freely relinquish mastery, foundational truths and unified conceptions of the self’ while women have to ‘question such relativistic thinking because they [have] yet to establish an adequate foundation for feminism’ (Schwichtenberg 1993: 131).

¹² Similarly, Nancy Fraser reveals that ‘we are not for “anything goes”’ and she stresses that ‘feminists do need to make normative judgments’ in order to offer emancipatory alternatives (Fraser 1995: 71).

¹³ In a similar manner, Angela McRobbie reveals that

what is at stake in abandoning modernity as an enabling structure is the fear of losing the notion of the women’s movement, losing the idea of what it is to be a woman, and losing with this a politics of representation, that is able to speak on behalf of “women”. (McRobbie 1994: 7)

¹⁴ As Cressida Heyes reveals, an alternative theory has to be designed that does not ‘throw the baby of political efficacy out with the bathwater of essentialism’ and in this way, ‘the task we have inherited is to take seriously the commitments entailed in anti-essentialism but to find ways effectively to incorporate them into resistive political projects’ (Heyes 1997: 146).

¹⁵ As Benhabib summarizes her argument, there are ‘weak and strong versions’ of the thesis of ‘the Death of Man’, revealing that

whereas the weak version [. . .] entail[s] premises around which critical theorists as well as postmodernists and possibly even liberals and communitarians can unite, their strong versions undermine the possibility of normative criticism at large. [. . .] The traditional attributes of the philosophical subject of the West, like self-reflexivity, the capacity for acting on principles, rational accountability for one’s actions [. . .] in short, some form of autonomy and rationality, could then be reformulated by taking account of the radical situatedness of the subject. (Benhabib 1994: 79)

See Seyla Benhabib 1994. ‘Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism’, in The Polity Reader in Gender Studies, Oxford: Polity Press, 76-92.

¹⁶ Following on from her assertion that ‘there need not be a “doer behind the deed”’, Judith Butler notes that ‘the category of “intention”, indeed the notion of the “doer” will have its place, but this place will no longer be “behind” the deed as its enabling source’ (Butler 1990a: 142; Butler 1995: 134). In this way,

there is no “bidding farewell” to the doer, but only to the *placement* of that doer “beyond” *or* “behind” the deed’. [. . .] In this sense, the “doer” will be produced as the effect of the “deed”, but it will also constitute the dynamic hiatus by which further [. . .] effects are achieved. (Butler 1995: 135; emphasis in text)

2.3 Postfeminist Locations: Feminism and Popular Culture

¹ Hinds and Stacey point out that ‘what is striking about the persistence of this icon is that bra-burning seems never to have happened’ (Hinds and Stacey 2001: 157). In fact,

bras were not burnt, but were just one of many items – including corsets, suspender belts, high heels and hair rollers – to be cast into the “freedom trash can”. This famous symbolic rejection of all feminine accoutrements was part of the women’s liberation protest against the sexism and racism of beauty contests staged the day before the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City in 1968. (Hinds and Stacey 2001: 157)

² This is exemplified by an article from the Guardian of 21 November 1970 where protesters are contrasted to the contestants at the Miss World contest under the headline ‘Beauty O’ershadowed by the Women’s Lib’ (quoted in Hinds and Stacey 2001: 171). Similarly, a Times article from 1971 laments that

some women’s liberation girls decide against caring for their looks. The movement rejects the artificiality of bras, deodorants, depilatories and other wonders of twentieth-century technology which they feel exploit women

commercially and debase them into sex objects. (quoted in Hinds and Stacey 2001: 161)

³ Susan Faludi uses the term 'macho feminism' to describe these 'hard-faced women' who are determined to carve their place in the world, 'no matter whose bodies they have to climb over to do it', even if it turns out to be their own (Faludi 1991: 277-278).

⁴ In the feminist classic A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft remarks that 'taught from infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison' (Wollstonecraft 1958: 113). Similarly, in 1991, Naomi Wolf declares that 'we are in the midst of a violent backlash to feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement: the beauty myth' (Wolf 1991: 10).

See Mary Wollstonecraft 1958. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), in The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, (eds) Todd, J. and Butler, M., vol.5, London: Pickering and Chatto.

Naomi Wolf 1991. The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women, London: Vintage.

⁵ Sandra Lee Bartky associates the cultivation of femininity with 'repressive narcissistic satisfactions' that 'fasten us to the established order of domination', for the same system which produces 'false needs' also controls the conditions under which such needs can be satisfied (Bartky 1990: 42). As she describes, a woman achieves gratification through becoming a sexual object for herself and taking toward her own person the attitude of a patriarchal Other. In this way, she takes an erotic and narcissistic satisfaction in her own self, simultaneously inhabiting the positions of objectifier and objectified. Narcissism, then, is seen as a necessary feature of femininity whereby women embrace and find satisfaction in what seems to be the most alienating aspects of her existence.

See Sandra Lee Bartky 1990. Femininity and Domination Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression, London and New York: Routledge.

⁶ In Discipline and Punish (1977), Michel Foucault describes a 'docile body' as 'a body [. . .] that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved' (Foucault 1977: 136). In his critique of modern society, Foucault outlines the emergence of a new and unprecedented discipline that invades the body and seeks to regulate its forces and operations. The disciplinary practices he describes are tied to peculiarly modern forms of the army, the school, the hospital, the prison and the aim of these disciplines is to increase the utility of the body. Thus,

what was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A "political anatomy", which was also a "mechanics of power", was

being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies [. . .]. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies. (Foucault 1977: 138)

See Michel Foucault 1977. Discipline and Punish The Birth of the Prison, London: Penguin.

⁷ Analogously, Mary Daly distinguishes between 'real' females whom she approvingly describes as 'witches, nags and hags' and 'plastic', 'mutant', feminine 'painted birds' and she champions women to free the hag within and become a 'wild woman' (Daly 1979). In other words, Daly inscribes feminist identities through a rejection of conventional femininity in her privileging of the untamed hag as a powerful and liberated woman and her dismissal of the feminine 'man-made' women who comply with hegemonic ideals and popular gender stereotypes.

See Mary Daly 1979. Gyn/Ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism, Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press.

⁸ Betty Friedan employs the term 'feminine mystique' to describe the *raisonnement* whereby 'the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity' (Friedan 1963: 37).

See Betty Friedan 1963. The Feminine Mystique, London: Routledge.

⁹ Joanne Hollows notes that the opposition between feminist and feminine identities can be related to 'certain philosophical discourses [that] produce their own identity by projecting an image of an Other who lacks the same identity' (Hollows 2000: 17). In this way, the 'feminine anti-heroine' is constructed as an antithetical Other in an attempt to distinguish and demarcate a feminist consciousness and subject.

See Joanne Hollows 2000. Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

¹⁰ Fiske maintains that a popular text should be *producerly* and, in order to explain the term, he refers to Barthes's distinction between *readerly* and *writerly* tendencies in texts and the reading practices they invite. As he notes,

a *readerly* text invites an essentially passive, receptive, disciplined reader who tends to accept its meanings as already made. It is a relatively closed text, easy to read and undemanding of its reader. Opposed to this is a *writerly* text, which challenges the reader constantly to rewrite it, to make sense out of it. It [. . .] invites the reader to participate in the construction of meaning. (Fiske 1989: 103)

In this way, the term *producerly* describes 'the popular *writerly* text' that 'has the accessibility of a *readerly* one, and can theoretically be read in that easy way [. . .] but it has also the openness of the *writerly*' (Fiske 1989: 104). The *producerly* text 'offers itself

up to popular production', it 'has loose ends that escape control' and 'its gaps are wide enough for whole new texts to be produced in them' (Fiske 1989: 104).

¹¹ For de Certeau, the cultural field is a site of continual conflict between the strategy of cultural imposition (production) and the tactics of cultural use (consumption or 'secondary production'). De Certeau makes a case for 'adaptation' or '*ways of using* imposed systems', arguing that

innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game [. . .] characterize the subtle, and stubborn resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have. In these combatants' stratagems, there is a certain art of placing one's blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining space [. . .] even in the field of manipulation and enjoyment. (de Certeau 1984: 18)

See Michel de Certeau 1984. The Practice of Everyday Life, Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹² Fiske emphasizes that 'the politics of popular culture is micropolitics, for that is where it can play the greater part in the tactics of everyday life' (Fiske 1989: 56). As he reveals,

the politics of popular culture has often been misunderstood and its progressiveness unrecognized by theories that fail to take account of the differences and the relationships between the radical and the progressive, and between the micropolitics of everyday life and the macropolitics of organized action. The absence of the radical, and of direct effects at the macro level, does not mean that the popular is reactionary, or quiescent, or complicit, or incorporated but it does point to a major problem facing [. . .] theorists whose focus upon the macro and the radical has led them to neglect, or worse still to dismiss, the micro and the progressive. (Fiske 1989: 161)

¹³ McGuigan defines 'cultural populism' as a consumptionist perspective based on 'the intellectual assumption, made by some students of popular culture, that the symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people are more important analytically and politically than Culture with a capital C' (quoted in Storey 1997: 203).

¹⁴ In a similar manner, Joanne Hollows expresses her doubts that 'consumer culture is a playground for everyone', a utopian site and a cultural democracy of active consumers, busily producing their own meanings and undermining those on offer in hegemonic society (Hollows 2000: 129). In fact, the notion of consumer choice and productivity runs the risk of 'slipping into an imaginary world of equal opportunities, and thus of becoming a rhetoric that all are equal, even if some remain more equal than others' (Hollows: 2000: 133).

¹⁵The concept of articulation refers to the process of 'establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice' (Ang 1996: 122). Stuart Hall develops the theory of articulation in order to account for the double way in which texts work in popular culture: a text-centered way and a reader-centered way. As John Fiske summarizes the argument:

to articulate has two meanings – one is to speak or utter (the text-centered meaning) and the other is to form a flexible link with, to be hinged with (the reader-centered meaning in which the text is flexibly linked with the reader's social situation). (Fiske 1989: 146)

The theory of articulation maintains a balance between seeing the text as a producer of meaning and seeing it as a cultural resource, open to a range of creative uses. The notion of articulation discusses the way in which 'meaning is a social production, a practice' that arises from 'a struggle to articulate, disarticulate and rearticulate cultural texts and practices for particular ideologies, particular politics' (Storey 1997: 128-129). In other words, no articulation is ever definitive or absolute but it is always unfinished and subject to continual rearticulation and reproduction. This dynamic process of fixing and fitting together is never final or total but always 'inexorably contextual' (Ang 1996: 122).

See Stuart Hall 1986. 'On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall', Journal of Communication Inquiry, 10 (2), 45-60.

¹⁶ Black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde famously declared in 1975 that

the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. (quoted in Frueh 1994: xii)

See Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer and Arlene Raven (eds) 1994. New Feminist Criticism Art Identity Action, New York: Icon Press.

¹⁷ In this way, Joanne Hollows notes that the problem with this focus on individualism is that, while it 'can be positive with its emphasis on entitlement, independence and sexual power', it also 'detaches feminism from the social and systemic' that are fundamental to the feminist project (Hollows 2000: 195).

¹⁸ In fact, as Vicki Coppock declares, 'the political ideology of freedom is incongruous with the reality of a social order characterized by domination and subordination' (Coppock 1995: 183). Similarly, Charlotte Brunsdon claims that the effects of this translation of feminism into an individualist rhetoric can be misleading as 'not only do the oppositional ideas and practices lose their bite, but they can function to make it appear as if change has been effected' (quoted in Macdonald 1995: 92).

¹⁹ This idea is reinforced by Susan Douglas who proclaims that

one of capitalism's great strengths – perhaps its greatest – is its ability to co-opt and domesticate opposition, to transubstantiate criticism into a host of new, marketable products. (Douglas 1995: 260)

²⁰ Nancy Cott discusses the historical dimensions of this popular co-option technique, noting that, already in the early 1920s, 'feminism supplied a resource drawn on by many takers' as 'women were lulled into forgetfulness of their contemptible economic status and into complacency over their "new freedom", by women's magazines' (Cott 1987: 174; 173). In this way,

modern merchandising translated the feminist proposal that women take control over their own lives into the consumerist notion of choice [. . .]. Advertisers hastened to package individuality and modernity for women in commodity form [. . .] [and] popular media and advertising took the upper hand in prescribing models for fulfilment of womanhood [. . .]. Women's household status and heterosexual service were now defended – even aggressively marketed – in terms of women's choice, freedom and rationality [. . .]. The culture of modernity and urbanity absorbed the messages of Feminism and re-presented them. Feminist intents and rhetoric were not ignored but appropriated. Advertising collapsed the emphasis on women's range and choice to individual consumerism [. . .] [and] these adaptations disarmed Feminism's challenges in the guise of enacting them. (Cott 1987: 172-174)

See Nancy F. Cott 1987. The Grounding of Modern Feminism, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

3.1 The Postfeminist Singleton and the Dilemma of *Having It All*

¹ Lee notes that the image of the 'new woman' assumes various and contradictory personifications. In this way,

during the Second World War the propaganda machine got women to work by celebrating the "new woman" as one who could labour and love in perfect unison. And when the war was over, that very same "new woman" was the one who preferred housework to paid work. Similarly, in the sixties, the enjoyment of sex was presented as yet another role for women. The advent of "the Pill" meant that women were suddenly being encouraged from almost every direction to have more sex. (Lee 1988: 168)

² Ally McBeal's fantasy interludes express Ally's tensions in life and at work and the sequences include: being pursued by an imaginary baby (intended as a manifestation of her biological clock), shrinking to a child-like size when being accused of professional incompetence, being crushed by a giant ball when she is shocked to find out that her former lover Billy has joined her firm and growing large breasts in front of a mirror when she is unsure about her physical attractiveness.

³ Bridget can be discussed as a postfeminist embodiment and reinvention of Jane Austen's nineteenth-century character Elizabeth Bennet. As Helen Fielding admits in an interview introducing the film adaptation, 'the plot of Bridget Jones's Diary was actually stolen from Pride and Prejudice' (Bridget Jones's Diary 2001. Working Title). Fielding's novel acknowledges its 1813 predecessor in a number of ironic allusions, exemplified by Bridget's observation on her first meeting with Mark that 'it struck me as pretty ridiculous to be called Mr. Darcy and stand on your own looking snooty at a party' (Fielding 1996: 13). Commentators have criticized Bridget Jones's Diary's romance element, noting that

as Bridget gets her Darcy at the end of the book, we are not only given a narrative with some structural similarities to Jane Austen's work, but some of its dominant values as well. (Whelehan 2000: 138)

Fielding takes up the Jane Austen connection in her sequel Bridget Jones The Edge of Reason (1999) which mirrors elements of Austen's later work Persuasion (1818) and which sees Bridget and Mark pulled apart by misunderstandings and flawed advice.

⁴ In this way, the film de-emphasizes the fact that Dan instigates the key events by asking Alex out for a drink, trying to cover up his affair by suggesting an abortion, threatening to kill her and physically attacking her.

⁵ This dichotomy is undermined by the film's undercurrent that constantly hints at a breakdown in differences between the two principle women. In fact, it has been suggested that Alex and Beth, businesswoman and housewife, can be discussed in terms of their closeness and overlap. As Kerstin Westerlund-Shands reveals,

they inhabit different spaces. But the borderline between those spaces is precarious: the two women also mirror each other and can be seen as two sides of the same woman, or as two sides of Woman. (Westerlund-Shands 1993: 114)

⁶ As Faludi records, original screenings of the film were interrupted by moviegoers shouting verbal abuse at Glenn Close's character and encouraging Michael Douglas to 'beat that bitch! Kill her off now' (Faludi 1992: 140). The audience's intensely violent feelings towards the single woman were also made explicit by the fact that the film's original ending (which sees Alex committing suicide in a white dress and Dan being arrested for her murder) was deemed too tame by preview audiences as Alex was not sufficiently brought to justice.

⁷ In a similar manner, Carrie in Sex and the City (1998-2004. HBO) offers a poignant description of the feminine masquerade. Reflecting on her relationship with her love interest Big, she reveals to her friends that

I think I'm in love with him, and I'm terrified in case he thinks I'm not perfect. [. . .] You should see what I'm like round him – it's like – I wear little outfits. I'm

not like me. Sexy Carrie. Casual Carrie. Sometimes I catch myself actually posing – it's exhausting! (Season 1, *The Drought*)

⁸ This is also exemplified by Bridget's adoption of Jane Austen's nineteenth century couple 'Darcy and Elizabeth' as her 'chosen representatives in the field of [. . .] courtship' and her simultaneous skepticism and doubts regarding 'the archetypal fairy tale' that sees the heroine 'marry a handsome prince' (Fielding 1996: 246; Fielding 1999: 326). Accordingly, she embraces and designates 'Princess Diana' as the 'patron saint of Singleton women' because she 'was honest enough' to distrust this romance ideal and 'to say that life is not like that' (Fielding 1999: 326). In her eulogy to the late Princess of Wales, Bridget praises her for her persistent endeavor to 're-invent herself', 'sort out her problems' and 'just try so hard like modern women' (Fielding 1999: 327).

⁹ Bridget employs the term 'emotional fuckwittage' to describe the evasive behavior of men in their thirties who embark on a liaison with a woman with the clear intention of avoiding a long-term relationship.

¹⁰ Marriage counsellor John Gray uses the metaphor that 'men are from Mars' and 'women are from Venus' to illustrate commonly occurring conflicts between men and women and explain how these differences can come between the sexes and prohibit mutually fulfilling relationships. As he notes,

imagine that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. One day long ago the Martians, looking through their telescopes, discovered the Venusians. [. . .] They fell in love and quickly invented space travel and flew to Venus. [. . .] The Venusians welcomed the Martians with open arms. [. . .] Though from different worlds, they revelled in their differences. They spent months learning about each other, exploring and appreciating their different needs, preferences, and behaviour patterns. [. . .] Then they decided to fly to Earth. [. . .] One morning everyone woke up with a peculiar kind of amnesia-selective amnesia! Both the Martians and Venusians forgot that they were from different planets and were supposed to be different. [. . .] And since that day men and women have been in conflict. (Gray 1992: 1)

3.2 The Postfeminist Cinderella and the Paradox of Choice

¹ As de Certeau argues,

the intextuation of the body corresponds to the incarnation of the law; it supports it, even seems to establish it, and in any case it serves it. For the law plays on it: "Give me your body and I will give you meaning, I will make you a name and a word in my discourse". The two problematics maintain each other, and perhaps the law would have no power if it were not able to support itself on the obscure desire to exchange one's flesh for a glorious body, to be written, even if it means dying, and to be transformed into a recognized word. (de Certeau 1984: 149)

See Michel de Certeau 1984. The Practice of Everyday Life, (trans.) Randall, S., Berkeley: University of California Press.

² Anti-hierarchical thinkers such as Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola presented individual autonomy as the central quality of the human being. In his Oration on the Dignity of Man (1486), Pico has God say to his Adam:

The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will [. . .] *trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature*. [. . .] We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the *free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer*. (quoted in Gilman 1999: 70-71; my emphasis)

See Sander L. Gilman 1999. Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

³ As Gilman reveals, ‘passing’ was the nineteenth-century term for disguising one’s ‘real’ (racial) self, noting that

“passing” is [. . .] moving into and becoming invisible within a desired “natural” group. The model of “passing” is the most fruitful to use in examining the history and efficacy of aesthetic surgery. Taken from the history of the construction of race [. . .] it provides the most comprehensive model for the understanding of aesthetic surgery. (Gilman 1999: 22)

⁴ Historically, aesthetic surgery has been employed as a normalizing practice, allowing people of ‘difference’ to fit in. Thus, the first ‘beauty doctors’ at the end of the sixteenth century offered the means of masking illnesses such as syphilis and making the diseased faces pass as healthy.

⁵ As Bartky reveals, in contemporary society, femininity is no longer equivalent to women’s requirements to ‘be chaste or modest, to restrict their sphere of activity to the home, or even to realize their properly feminine destiny in maternity’ (Bartky 1997: 148). In fact, images of normative femininity have replaced the religious tracts of the past, exemplifying ‘the growing power of the image in a society increasingly oriented toward the visual media’ (Bartky 1997: 149).

⁶ One can argue that the socially constructed notions of femininity and beauty are held in a relationship of interdependency in patriarchal culture. London socialite Elizabeth Rigby emphasizes the intrinsic connection between womanliness and beauty in her essay on physiognomy for the Quarterly Review (1851), noting that ‘it is a woman’s business to be beautiful’ (quoted in Zetzel Lambert 1995: 99). In this way, it is not beauty per se that confines women but the assumption that beauty is imperative to femininity.

⁷ As Monique Wittig suggests, 'false consciousness' involves being 'entrapped in the familiar deadlock of "woman is wonderful"' (Wittig 1997: 312). In fact,

false consciousness [. . .] consists of selecting among the features of the myth (that women are different from men) those which look good and using them as a definition for women. What the concept "woman is wonderful" accomplishes is that it retains for defining women the best features (best according to whom?) which oppression has granted us, and it does not radically question the categories "man" and "woman", which are political categories and not natural givens. (Wittig 1997: 312)

See Monique Wittig 1997. 'One Is Not Born a Woman', in Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory, (eds) Conboy, K., Medina, N. and Stanbury, S., New York: Columbia University Press, 309-317.

⁸ This is reminiscent of Teresa de Lauretis' Woman/women distinction whereby the term 'Woman' is used to designate 'a fictional construct, a distillate from diverse but congruent discourses dominant in Western cultures' whereas 'women' are 'the real historical beings who cannot as yet be defined outside of those discursive formations, but whose material existence is nevertheless certain' (de Lauretis 1982: 5). Similarly, Monique Wittig declares that

"woman" does not exist for us: it is only an imaginary formation, while "women" is the product of a social relationship. [. . .] "Woman" is not each of us, but the political and ideological formation which negates "women". [. . .] "Woman" is there to confuse us, to hide the reality "women". In order to be aware of being a class and to become a class we first have to kill the myth of "woman" including its most seductive aspects. (Wittig 1997: 313-314)

Wittig argues that, as feminists, 'our first task [. . .] is to always thoroughly dissociate "women" (the class within which we fight) and "woman", the myth' and thus, 'we have to destroy the myth inside and outside ourselves' (Wittig 1997: 313).

See Teresa de Lauretis 1982. Alice Doesn't. Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema, London: Bloomington.

Monique Wittig 1997. 'One Is Not Born a Woman', in Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory, (eds) Conboy, K., Medina, N. and Stanbury, S., New York: Columbia University Press, 309-317.

⁹ Accordingly, Margaret Marshment criticizes the beauty lure employed by patriarchal structures, lamenting that

women may themselves be seduced into accepting such images, both because patriarchal ideology has achieved a general hegemony, and because, however much they work against women's interests in the long term, in the short term they

may offer what benefits are available to women in a patriarchal society. [. . .] [I]f definitions of femininity and heterosexuality demand that women wear make-up and high heels in order to be attractive to men, then not only might women wear them for this purpose, they may well come to feel more confident, more beautiful when wearing them. If, in this way, women come to be subordinated – even in their definitions of themselves and their desires – to the needs of patriarchy, it may be argued that this is because definitions of femininity appear to offer solutions to their material problems. (Marshment 1993: 126)

See Margaret Marshment 1993. 'The Picture is Political: Representation of Women in Contemporary Popular Culture', in Thinking Feminist: Key Concepts in Women's Studies, (eds) Richardson, D. and Robinson, V., New York: Guilford Press, 125-51.

¹⁰ Riviere describes the cases of three educated and professional American women who 'wish for masculinity [and] put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men' (Riviere 1986: 35). She examines one female lecturer who, after a public exhibition of intellectual proficiency, adopts a behavior of compulsive flirtation and coquetry in order to pre-empt and propitiate paternal punishment or vengeance and gain reassurance and sanction through flattery of those members of her audience she perceives as father figures. As Riviere argues, the patient's successful performance in public 'signified an exhibition of herself in possession of the father's penis, having castrated him', so that 'the coquetting' can be understood as 'an unconscious attempt to ward off the anxiety which would ensue on account of the reprisals she anticipated from the father-figures' (Riviere 1986: 37). In disguising herself as 'merely a castrated woman' and 'masquerading in a feminine guise', Riviere's patient seeks to 'evoke friendly feelings toward her in the man' and chiefly 'make sure of safety' (Riviere 1986: 38; 41).

See Joan Riviere 1986. 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', in Formations of Fantasy, (eds) Burgin, V., Donald, J. and Kaplan, C., London and New York: Methuen.

¹¹ As Butler notes, 'the parodic repetition of "the original" [. . .] reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original' (Butler 1990a: 31; emphasis in text). In this way, 'gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin' (Butler 1990a: 138).

¹² Contrastingly, Butler argues against a Cartesian voluntarism, stating that

there is no volitional subject behind the mime who decides, as it were, which gender it will be today. [. . .] Coherent gender produces as its *effect* the illusion of a prior and volitional subject. (Butler 1993b: 314)

In this way, "the doer" is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything' (Butler 1990a: 25).

¹³ In fact, Butler emphasizes that this performance is not a deliberate or volitional act by a free-willed agent, noting that

performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act”, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. [. . .] [It] is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation [. . .] [but it] consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s “will” or “choice”. [. . .] The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake. (Butler 1993a: 2; 95; 234)

¹⁴ As Tennant reveals, ‘my books have run alongside the women’s movement’, always providing a critical commentary on the various manifestations of feminism throughout the decades (Tennant 1989a: 189). In this way, it is interesting to note that Tennant’s previous novel *The Bad Sister* (1978) portrays a physical transformation that is in effect diametrically opposed to the metamorphosis described in *Faustine* (1992). In her nocturnal wanderings, Jane Wild carries out a ritualistic massacre of her carefully constructed feminine image in her quest to escape patriarchal conditioning and return to a state of undifferentiation and wholeness. She first cuts off her long, dyed blonde hair and then, she feels her breasts shrinking and her hips becoming narrower. This incident is the climax of Jane’s identity crisis, the war between her submissive, feminine self and a burgeoning alter ego, fuelled by a militant rage that has come with her feminist consciousness. By demolishing the traditionally feminine persona she has built up, Jane expresses her spiritual change and her new, feminist self that forcefully refuses to be reduced to an object of male desire.

¹⁵ Barbara Kastelein refers to this paradoxical combination as the ‘Janus face of modern women as seen from outside’, recalling the image of Margaret Thatcher coined by François Mitterand as ‘the eyes of Caligula and the mouth of Marilyn Monroe’ (Kastelein 1994: 96).

¹⁶ In an interview, Green emphasizes her postfeminist convictions, stating that

I don’t believe for a second that being successful in your career precedes wanting a relationship. Part of the problem now is that as children of feminism, we take equality for granted. Women are fully emancipated, independent, and able to achieve whatever they wish for. And for a while we went to the other extreme – we felt ashamed to talk about marriage, or motherhood, or wanting [. . .] to give up work to be a mother, because we believed we’d be betraying the sisterhood. I believe that it’s only now, as we’re truly learning to live as post-feminists, that we have accepted the two can live side by side: we can be career women. And wives. And mothers. And that having a career doesn’t mean you have to feel guilty about wanting to fulfill the other parts of your life as well. (quoted in Wells 2000: 3)

¹⁷ Dancing with her plastic surgeon Mr. Ghengis after her surgery, Ruth notes that ‘with every step it was as if she trod on knives’ (Weldon 1983: 254).

¹⁸ In an interview, Weldon describes her awareness that 'releasing the potential of women into society' is not going to transform the social order instantly (quoted in Kenyon 1989: 198). Instead, 'now we see that the picture is more confusing than we realized – or hoped' (quoted in Kenyon 1989: 198). Noting that 'I don't feel imprisoned by feminism', Weldon defends her protagonist's actions and her recourse to cosmetic surgery:

I'm glad she did it. I'm on Ruth's side though I get a lot of tuttutting from the right-minded readers. Irresponsible. Dangerous. Ruth should have done what she ought, faced up to things, not what she wanted. [. . .] But that's always said of women, isn't it. (quoted in Kenyon 1988: 120; quoted in Newman 1993: 199)

The writer notes that inconclusiveness is a major part of her writing strategy as she deliberately withholds closure and resolution. As she declares, 'I don't make a moral judgment but hand it over to the reader who is expected to come to their own conclusion. [. . .] It requires a personal response' (quoted in Gholson 1990: 47).

¹⁹ In fact, Ruth and Mary Fisher can be discussed as complementary figures who are set up as exact opposites and change place, character and face in the course of the narrative. While Ruth is engaged in the endeavor to take over the life of the glamorous, rich and selfish author, the original version of this feminine stereotype has to disappear or rather be transformed herself. Thus, Ruth's psychological and bodily metamorphoses are mirrored by the trajectory of her double as the more power the cheated wife gains by getting rid of her traditional feminine obligations, the more 'real' her opponent becomes. Mary Fisher loses her idealized status as 'the material world surges in' and she is forced to turn into a suburban housewife, becoming a mother to Ruth's children, a daughter caring for her senile mother and ultimately, a betrayed wife to Bobbo (Weldon 1983: 109). As Pamela Katz suggests, Ruth takes 'Mary's "ruthlessness" away from her' while Mary 'becomes as much "ruth" as Ruth ever was' (Katz 1994: 121). On a more physical level, there is a similar exchange as Ruth's beautification is diametrically opposed to and countered by Mary's bodily deterioration that results in a painful death caused by cancer, the degenerative complement to Ruth's reconstruction.

3.3 The Postfeminist Supergirl and Living in the In-Between

¹ According to Inness, the tough heroine's paradoxical role exemplifies the contradictions inherent in popular culture. In fact, 'the popular media are never feeding their audience a single message about women's roles; instead, the media convey countless different messages, with some contradicting others' (Inness 1999: 49).

² The notion of 'open/closed images' is taken from the literary scholar Sharon Macdonald. According to Macdonald, imagery is by no means a purely superficial phenomenon but rather, it is the means through which we articulate and define the social order and nature. She identifies closed images as analogous to symbols and ideals that appear fixed in public consciousness. By contrast, open images 'are to be interpreted,

read and to an extent repopulated' in an attempt to expose coded symbols and chart new meanings for stereotypes (Macdonald 1987: 22-23).

See Sharon Macdonald 1987. 'Drawing the Lines – Gender, Peace and War: An Introduction', in Images of Women in Peace & War: Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives, (eds) Macdonald, S., Holden, P. and Ardener, S., Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1-26.

³ See Janet Evanovich 1994. One for the Money, London: Penguin; Helen Fielding 2003. Olivia Joules and the Overactive Imagination, London: Picador; Miss Congeniality (2000. Warner Bros).

⁴ All dialogue is taken from the website
<<http://uk.geocities.com/slayermagic/Scripts.html>>

The episode numbering system I employ here and throughout indicates season and episode. Thus, 1002 means first season, second episode.

⁵ Whedon declares that Buffy the Vampire Slayer is his 'response to all the horror movies [he has] ever seen where some girl walks into a dark room and gets killed' (quoted in Early 2002: 13). As he states,

I saw so many horror movies where there was that blonde girl who would always get herself killed, and I started feeling bad for her. I thought, you know, it's time she had a chance to take back the night. The idea of Buffy came from just the very simple thought of a beautiful blonde girl walks into an alley, a monster attacks her, and she's not only ready for him, she trounces him. (quoted in Chandler: 1).

⁶ Whedon wants to avoid preachiness and 'coming off as dramatized infomercials of the National Organization for Women' (Bellafante 1997: 83). As he notes,

if I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of a situation without their knowing that's what's happening, it's better than sitting down and selling them on feminism. (quoted in Bellafante 1997: 83)

⁷ The dichotomy between Buffy's femininity and feminism is further problematized by the actress Sarah Michelle Gellar who plays the character of Buffy in the series. In an interview with *Detour Magazine*, she controversially proclaims that she is not a feminist. In fact, she reveals that

I hate the word "feminist". It has a bad connotation of women who don't shave their legs or under their arms. [. . .] There's no femininity in feminism, which is really weird because it's technically the same word. (quoted in Woodlock: 1)

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