

BOOK REVIEW

Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood, by Alison Winch, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, x + 222 pp., AU\$91.62 (ebk), ISBN 0230348750

Alison Winch's monograph *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood* is a thoughtful and wide ranging critique of US and UK media cultures of neoliberal postfeminism. Its particular focus is on bonds of female friendship and sisterhood, and how they are configured, made legible and imbued with political charge in these cultural landscapes. It is an immensely valuable contribution to feminist media studies, and in particular to the growing body of scholarship on postfeminist media culture.

It joins a raft of relatively new publications at the vanguard of the new wave of feminist criticism of postfeminist culture to emerge in recent years from disciplines spanning media studies, cultural studies, film studies, sociology, literary studies and beyond. And which so far includes, but is not limited to, Stephanie Harzewski's *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2011), Anthea Taylor's *Single Women in Popular Culture* (2012), Jessica Ringrose's *Postfeminist Education?* (2013), Joel Gwynne's *Erotic Memoirs and Postfeminism* (2013), Bronwyn Polaschek's *The Postfeminist Biopic*, and Gwynne and Nadine Muller's *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood* (2013). Winch's book also sits particularly well alongside Kathleen Rowe Karlyn's *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers* (2011) and Sarah Projansky's *Spectacular Girls* (2014), as part of a key cluster of recent volumes that hone in on the relationship between postfeminist discourse, contemporary girl cultures and female friendship. And which interrogate the discursive articulation of these dynamics in spheres of popular

media. With her timely and welcome contribution to this area of study, scholars like Winch are thus building productively and solidly upon foundations laid by the formative work of key figures like Angela McRobbie (2004), Rosalind Gill (2007), Diane Negra (2007, 2009) and Yvonne Tasker (2007), the likes of which now constitutes the academic canon of this field.

Winch's main intervention lies in the new light she sheds on the intersection between postfeminism and neoliberalism by viewing it through the lens of female friendship and sisterhood as they are configured in this cultural climate - what she calls 'girlfriendship' (2). And the crux of her argument is that neoliberal postfeminism 'penetrates the intimate relations between women' (2) in a number of differently invidious ways across the spectrum of contemporary media culture. The cultural imperatives around 'girlfriendship' in postfeminist culture are, she demonstrates, mutually constitutively bound up with those of the neoliberal economy. And at different points she highlights the extent to which this has heightened in the aftermath of the global recession as space has opened up 'in the face of precarity' (94) for a renewed emphasis on female social dynamics alongside the manifest destabilization of pre-recession priorities.

She also largely successfully moves the conversation about postfeminist femininity beyond the bounds of where it often tends to reside (and not without reason) in discursive formations and texts that deal with the concerns of moneyed heterosexual white women. Instead, she strives to adopt an intersectional approach, embedded in each chapter, which understands female subjectivities across multiple axes of identity and socio-economic positions including class, age, ethnicity and sexuality, while continuing to acknowledge and account for the ongoing discursive dominance of the straight white woman in

cultural formations of normative femininity. And this is notwithstanding the particularized focus on race in Chapter 5, discussion of which is by no means ghettoized as a result. In fact this chapter does important work in underscoring some of the newly prominent strategies and means - such as through the (white) nostalgic affective register of series like *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2014) and films like *The Help* (2011) - by which white hegemony is being negotiated in a neoliberal postfeminist culture that adopts a post-racial cultural logic at odds with the realities of classed and raced inequalities.

With respect to the sites of analysis singled out for particular critical attention, Winch's coverage is also rigorously wide and impressively up to the minute, dealing as she does with a cross media abundance of material ranging from iconic staples of postfeminism and its criticism like *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), *What Not to Wear* (BBC, 2001-2007) and *Mean Girls* (Mark Waters, 2004), to the new cultural touchstones of recessionary postfeminism like *Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig, 2011) and *Girls* (HBO, 2012-). As well as engaging with the converged media branding of female friendship, and how the discourses of postfeminist sisterhood she is concerned with manifest in online spaces like *Facebook* and *mumsnet.com*.

From the annals of contemporary Hollywood and US independent film, Winch also interrogates new formations of the 'chick flick'. She draws principally on Ferris and Young (2008) to qualify her use of this term, but Negra's usage (2004, 2008, 2009) is also highly applicable in the context of the groupings of films for women that Winch discusses in Chapter 4 in particular. Here she coins the neologism 'womance' (riffing on the better known 'bromance') to describe these films, and to mark what she views as a pronounced shift in their focus,

which has accompanied the dramatically heightened precarity of the economy in the last decade (92). These films, she argues, re-prioritise the social dynamics of the romantic comedy and romantic drama genres, to shift discursive and narrative emphasis away from the goal oriented coupling of the boy/girl duo, and onto the bonds of sorority between depicted pairs of female friends.

She tackles a plethora of phenomena that characterize the latter day mediation of the cultural politics of gender through the lens of 'girlfriendship' with what has come to be highly predictable regularity. These include 'slut-shaming', 'toxic sisterhood' (or 'frenemies' (56)), and the ubiquitous 'catfight' trope. Feminist critics have long since identified these phenomena as problematically politically charged and thus gestured towards popular media's articulations of relations between women as fraught, competitive, combative, aggressive, hierarchical and judgmental. But few delve as deeply as Winch in her thick theorizations and incisive analyses of what is really at stake here.

Since the publication of this work in November 2013, nothing has drawn a line under the timeliness of Winch's argument, or indeed her point about the discursive shift in mainstream romance narratives towards relationships between women, more starkly than the runaway success of Disney's *Frozen* (Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, 2013). For an apparent variety of reasons, and notwithstanding its contestable cultural politics of sisterhood, this fairy tale princess narrative that charts the changing relationship between two sisters stands as one of the major popular cultural flashpoints of 2013-14. Its release, which coincided with that of this book, and the subsequent phenomenon of its success, brings the topicality and cultural resonance of Winch's discussions into startlingly vivid view. And makes clear the extent to which *Girlfriends and*

Postfeminist Sisterhood should be considered essential reading for today's scholars and students of cultures of girlhood and postfeminist femininities.

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