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From Jane Austen to Meghan Markle: The Persistence of British Imperialism in White Popular Feminism

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DISSERTATION
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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts & Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

From Jane Austen to Meghan Markle: The Persistence of British Imperialism in White Popular Feminism

This dissertation traces the persistent threads and values of white womanhood from the nineteenth-century British Empire to modern American popular culture. The figure of the white woman was significant to upholding colonialism and empire in the literary mass media and culture of the nineteenth century, and I argue that this figure continues to be used in popular media and online content today to surreptitiously uphold white supremacy and obscure race and gender inequalities. This dissertation will explore the overlaps between nostalgia, historical revisionism, white womanhood, white supremacy, and white feminism in modern American popular culture. The connections between, and the popularity of this broader media is not accidental but part of a longer history of white supremacy using culture and women to surreptitiously reinforce hierarchies and establish white-centered norms. This dissertation builds on work on white popular feminism, white womanhood, and cultural ideologies from scholars like Sarah Banet-Weiser, Koa Beck, Jessie Daniels, and Rafia Zakaria, while reflecting on how Black and intersectional feminisms, articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, and Audre Lorde among others, offer more revolutionary and effective forms of feminism and empowerment.

From the prolific and consistent remediation of Jane Austen and her centurial contemporaries to the obsession and controversies surrounding Meghan Markle's inclusion in, and subsequent exclusion from, the British Royal Family, this dissertation takes seriously the often overlooked and dismissed media and popular culture made for and by women to trace the histories of empire and their entanglement with a white popular feminism and white supremacy. Chapter one analyzes the popularity and reception of period media from 2020, *Bridgerton*, *Emma.*, and *Enola Holmes*, to explore how period media, even those that attempt to be diverse and more progressive, still cultivate a white nostalgia for a past that aligns with a popular, white feminism that is non-threatening towards capitalism and white supremacy. Chapter two uses two popular remediations of Jane Austen's novels, *Clueless* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*, to trace the combination of Jane Austen and period media with postfeminism. This fusion embedded nineteenth-century values of white womanhood into popular feminist media that continues to have influence today. Chapter three will use the media surrounding Meghan Markle's in/exclusion from the British Royal Family as demonstrating the promise and influence of a white popular feminism beyond fictional narratives, but also its limitations and failures when it goes against white supremacist patriarchal systems. The conclusion will then briefly extend the argument made throughout the chapters into social media spaces to connect how historical fantasy, urban homesteading, and constant cycles of trendy femininity reflect the white popular feminism and romanticization of imperial womanhood online. This dissertation takes seriously the narratives of idealized white womanhood that extend through recent

centuries, and while media like *Bridgerton* and *Enola Holmes* may make it seem like a distant past, these imperial values of white womanhood are very much still present and influential within white popular feminism that guides larger discussions of inequality, justice, and white supremacy in our present moment.

KEYWORDS: White Feminism, White Supremacy, British Imperialism, Popular Culture, Social Media, White Womanhood

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: FROM JANE AUSTEN TO MEGHAN MARKLE: THE PERSISTENCE OF BRITISH IMPERIALISM IN WHITE POPULAR FEMINISM

In their 2021 interview with Oprah Winfrey, Meghan (née Markle) and Prince Harry, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, are shown introducing Winfrey to their chickens on their property in Montecito, California. The chicken's enclosure features a small chicken coop with a sign that says "Archie's Chick Inn — established 2021." In this segment, they are all wearing their "wellies," crouching down, looking relaxed and content. It is a very picturesque scene that works to juxtapose Harry and Meghan's new California life with the more serious, one might suggest uptight, life and expectations of being part of the British Royal Family. While chicken-rearing may seem surprising for a prince and princess to embrace, the Sussexes are part of a larger trend of "the pandemic chicken craze" (Hosken). During the pandemic, "there was increased enthusiasm for ornamental fowl among those with ample backyards and newly free hours at home," and when wealthy people began to post about their new fowl on Instagram (gifted to them by Martha Stewart of course), it inspired many to adopt chickens, geese, ducks, and more. This "aspirational agriculture" was embraced by celebrities and regular people alike (Hosken), and we can connect this pandemic trend beyond just the fowl to the rising popularity of urban homesteading and traditional domestic duties across social media sites. "Glamour chicken houses" and aestheticized domesticity dominate social media spaces like Instagram and TikTok (McConnell Parsons); accounts like @ballerinafarm, @jill.winger, @the.farm.at.berry.lane, and @motherhenshomestead on Instagram (and most of them have TikTok accounts) have anywhere from Berry Lane's 2400 followers

to Ballerina Farm's 4.9 million followers.[1] While they vary widely in follower counts and thus in popularity and impact, these accounts, and so many more, are united by an aestheticized nostalgia for the past and historical ways of running the home. For example, one of Ballerina Farm's most popular TikTok videos with 151.3 million views (as of late 2023) is of Hannah, the mother and wife who runs the account, making mozzarella and meatballs from scratch with her green cast iron stove that costs approximately $20,000 (Florio).[2] The realization that the stove was this expensive caused a minor controversy when followers researched and found out that Ballerina Farm's creator, Hannah, was married to the son of Jet Blue's former founder and CEO. Their rustic and pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps aesthetic obscures the millions of dollars of family wealth backing them (Florio). Ballerina Farm, like so many of these accounts, project a rustic, old-fashioned ideal and invokes ideals of white domesticity and child-rearing from decades, or even centuries, past that work to mask their wealth and how that wealth was obtained. What unites Meghan and Harry's own glamour chicken house to the greater aspirational agriculture and domesticity trends on social media is a nostalgia that taps into white supremacy, white feminism, and historical rememory.

This nostalgia for the past extends even further in popular culture with popular fashion and social media trends like the viral Selkie dresses with empire waists and puff sleeves and the home style and fashion aesthetic trends of cottagecore, dark academia,

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[1] These follower counts were from late May 2023.

[2] Because this dissertation is so concerned with the modern moment, the chapters and the content they consider are often dependent on the time I was writing them. The chapters were written in order from 2021 to early 2023 with the Introduction and Conclusion being written in Spring 2023. While I have attempted to go back and include relevant content and discussions from the time after I initially wrote the chapters, there may be gaps or newer relevant content not used or omitted because of this.

hobbitcore, among others that invoke aestheticized ideas of the past and simplified

living.[3] We also see it in the popularity of *Bridgerton*, Netflix's Regency romance series,

and other period romances that are experiencing a kind of resurgence in the 2020s.

Through all of these trends, genres, and aesthetics, we can track this collective historical

remediation playing with popular memories of the past that revise the past to fit a

narrative that is more pleasing to creators and target audiences who are often white. They

invoke similar visuals that often emphasize sepia tones, long skirts/dresses with stays and

corsets, nature scenes with gardens or woods, and often draw on cottage-y, cozy ideas.

They feel historical and also like the places where fairy tales are made, and I argue it is in

this overlap of history and fantasy where revisions to history get made and an idealized

whiteness and femininity get created. Some creators in this space do recognize the actual

histories of oppression and that they do not want to actually live in the past (Kelly and

Glaser [@naomiloveshistory]), but that nuance and recognition is not always, or even

often, present. Or perhaps even more complicit in their impact are those, again primarily

white, creators that recognize historical oppressions in passing or vaguely, but still

consistently invoke the nostalgia for the past and emphasize the power in choosing to live

and dress in this way.[4] The creators' personal intent, to some extent, becomes irrelevant

as their greater impact in popular culture and their appeal to that dangerous nostalgia and

white supremacy surpasses their personal motives. They become part of bigger systems

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[3] We see overlaps in many of the social media-based aesthetic trends. While the ones I list above idealize ideas of the past mainly through fashion, trends like balletcore, vanilla girl, and more invoke similar feelings of appealing aesthetics, romanticized ideals, and, most importantly, an often-overwhelming whiteness. These will be discussed more in the conclusion of this project.

[4] While diversity is growing in these subgroups and media, it is still very much white-dominated and my critique is primarily aimed at white creators and audiences.

and cultural trends that will ignore their nuances and exceptions to instead play

"innocently" in the past and continue to ignore systematic inequality and oppression.

This dissertation will explore these overlaps between nostalgia, historical

revisionism, white womanhood, white supremacy, and white feminism in modern

American popular culture.[5] The connections between, and the popularity of this broader

media is not accidental but part of a longer history of white supremacy using culture and

women to surreptitiously reinforce hierarchies and establish white-centered norms. I trace

this history back to the British nineteenth century where domesticity, capitalism, and

womanhood intertwine to support the British Empire. Anne McClintock, a scholar who

studies the intersections between gender, race, British imperialism and mass media,

argues that "imperialism cannot be understood without a theory of domestic space and its

relation to the market" and that the Victorian "cult of domesticity" was used as a key to

structuring colonialism in relation to the imagined white motherland (17 & 5). This

project will trace the ongoing influence of imperial ideals of womanhood, motherhood,

and whiteness in modern popular culture; the aesthetics of the Victorian cult of

domesticity is drawn on for inspiration throughout these modern media examples. We see

the persistence of British imperial white womanhood in modern American popular

culture in the period settings of 2020's *Bridgerton*, *Enola Holmes*, and *Emma.*, in the

1990s/early 2000s postfeminist Jane Austen created in *Clueless* and *Bridget Jones's*

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[5] Throughout the dissertation, I use woman, womanhood, female-focused media, and more to refer broadly to the phenomena I am discussing. For clarity, I intend for these terms to include trans women and feminine presenting nonbinary people when I use them. While white supremacy would exclude non-cis-women from these labels, feminine-presenting people, no matter if we are cis or trans, can experience similar cultural expectations for how we should present our femininity, and those expectations are, at least partly, inherited from colonialism and centuries past.

Diary, and, more implicitly, in the example of Meghan Markle, her feminism, and the media drama with the British Royal Family. These three case examples will be the focus on the three main chapters of this dissertation. British imperial white womanhood continues to have influence on modern American standards of femininity and, more importantly, feminism, at least the feminism that most easily circulates in popular culture. This dissertation works to trace these connections and impacts to better understand how (1) British nineteenth-century ideals are impacting our present media, (2) how ideas that supported white supremacist colonization then continue to support white supremacist goals now, and (3) how white popular feminism hides this white supremacy with a progressive, female-empowered facade.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, historically-inspired media has been a dominating force in popular culture. Remediations of nineteenth century British literature and culture are popular inspirations for American media; Jane Austen, the Brontës, Charles Dickens, and Arthur Conan Doyle are some of the most adapted authors with prominent places in American pop culture, rivaled only by William Shakespeare, another English author, or Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain (American authors who are also typically adapted with a period setting). Since 1990, more than ninety films and television/streaming series have used nineteenth-century Great Britain as their inspiration. Beyond the costume and historical productions, there have been over thirty literary-inspired webseries and sixteen series and films that have taken British nineteenth-century novels and modernized them. In total, this constitutes almost 150 visual remediations of nineteenth-century Great Britain's literature and culture within the past

thirty-ish years alone (Appendix A).[6] Many of these are marketed toward women, specifically white women, as period dramas have become associated with chick lit and the romance genre. Jane Austen, specifically, has become almost synonymous with the genre. In the 2020s alone, we have Netflix's and producer Shonda Rhimes's postracial regency fantasy, *Bridgerton* (2020-present) series and its 2023 spinoff, *Queen Charlotte*; Netflix's *Enola Holmes* film franchise about Sherlock Holmes's younger sister (2020-2022), HBO's *Gentleman Jack* (2019-2022) series that dramatizes the life of nineteenth-century British landowner and lesbian, Anne Lister; and the continued adaptations of Jane Austen with 2020's *Emma.*, 2022's *Persuasion*, and the *Sanditon* series (2019-present). And these remediations do not account for the impact this genre has had on women's media more broadly, particularly from the 1990s romantic comedies like *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996/2001) and *Clueless* (1995) adapted from Jane Austen's work that continue to influence chick media and modern fantasy and fairytale "-core" trends that dominate social media, noted earlier.[7] Chapter one will go into more depth on the existing scholarly work on Austenmania, NeoVictorianism, and the larger period media trend, but for this introduction, it is important to note that scholars have overwhelmingly agreed that this media inspires nostalgia for greater stability and certainty, especially as a

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[6] Through my own knowledge and through searching online lists, I have created a list of films, television shows, and literary-inspired web series produced in England or the United States and distributed within the United States since 1990, which is how I arrived at the numbers listed above. From my searching, there is not a master list already in existence, and I acknowledge that the list may not be exhaustive due to the limitations of my own knowledge and research. The list doesn't consider textual adaptations, continuations, and modernizations. While the list may be incomplete, the current numbers convey the prevalence of this genre.

[7] "-core" is used to signal a stylized aesthetic on social media. Cottagecore is one of the most popular signaling an aesthetic that romanticizes rural, cottage living combining fairy-tale and homesteading aesthetics. There are also aesthetics like "dark academia" that rely on books, white collared shirts, tweed, and a mid-century idea of a professor's wardrobe; ala *Dead Poets Society* (1989).

response to changing modern ideas about race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. (Pucci and Thompson 2; Primorac 57; Monk). What is not often made as explicit in this research is how this nostalgia for a comforting and familiar past often supports and aligns with conservative ideals of whiteness, heteronormativity, and patriarchy. Relatedly, the historically inspired media often have feminist messaging or at least invoke a female empowerment sentiment, which will be discussed in more detail later, which also obscures this media's commitment to oppressive, colonial-inspired systems.

White womanhood is the focus of this project because of its importance in justifying racist and sexist hierarchies and because of white women's own complicated relationship with empire and white supremacy. Throughout the past two hundred years and even longer, white women have often aligned their oppression with the enslaved and the colonized as peoples considered lesser to white men, but at the same time, white women have also reaped the benefits of being white and turned on their allies of color when it suited them (Davis and Fletcher et. al.). Antoinette M. Burton, Anne McClintock, and Radhika Mohanram among others have historicized and theorized about British white femininity's agency and contributions to racism and colonialism during the nineteenth century. Burton, specifically, notes that Josephine Butler and other British feminists' "commitment to India was part of [their] larger sense of Britain's responsibility for the peoples of its empire" (140). Ruth Frankenberg, Tara McPherson, Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers among others have conducted similar studies on the complicity of American white women in maintaining Jim Crow and white supremacy in the United States. White women perform similar ideological functions in both settings to justify racism and maintain societal hierarchies; one example is the way in which white

women are imagined as potential victims of sexually aggressive men of color as a means

of justifying white men's surveillance and control of all people of color (Mohanram). In

both the British and American contexts, white women have been used by white men to

uphold white supremacist ideologies, but white women have also been active in

upholding both empire and segregation, often through their roles as mothers, educators,

and community organizers. The idea of the benevolent white woman was used and

continues to be used to distract from how white women, despite their lack of equality

with white men, also actively uphold white supremacy. Today, in the twenty-first

century, white women are still crucial to the construction of racialized hierarchies and for

undermining more progressive action against inequalities.

Key to modern white womanhood and white supremacy is the proliferation and

evolution of feminism in popular culture, specifically a white (supremacist) feminism.[8]

Ideally, feminism should signal an anti-racist, inclusive progressivism that is committed

to dismantling the hierarchies and societal expectations that privilege whiteness,

heteronormativity, wealth, ableness, and masculinity.[9] Instead, the feminism that most

easily circulates and is invoked in popular culture is a white-focused feminism that values

"the accumulation of individual power rather than the redistribution of it" and "that takes

up the politics of power without questioning them– by replicating patterns of white

supremacy, capitalistic greed, corporate ascension, inhumane labor practices, and

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[8] I put supremacist in parentheses because the white supremacy hides within white feminism as this project
will work explain.

[9] The feminism I use as the standard to measure the media in this project against is inspired by scholars and
activists like bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, among others. It is an
intentional intersectional/Black feminism that holds gender inequality as connected to racism, classism, and
more. Feminism that refuses to consider or is ignorant of the intersections of identity or how gender
inequality works within larger systems, is a feminism that is not only ineffectual but harmful.

exploitation, and deeming it empowering for women to practice these tenets as men always have" (Beck xvii). Because it is not disruptive and aligns with a neoliberal, capitalistic ideology, this white feminism easily circulates through culture and is easy to monetize. Throughout this project, I will repeatedly cite Sarah Banet-Weiser's definition of popular feminism, a feminism that circulates easily in and through popular culture because it "consents to heteronormativity, to the universality of whiteness, to dominant economic formations, to a trajectory of capitalistic success" (16). It is shallow, feminine empowerment messaging that "manifests in discourses and practices that are circulated in popular and commercial media" thus "these discourses have an accessibility that is not confined to academic enclaves or niche groups" so it has power through that accessibility and popularity (Banet-Weiser 1). I will also combine it with Rafia Zakaria's definition of white feminism and white feminists: "A white feminist is someone who refuses to consider the role that whiteness and the racial privilege attached to it have played and continue to play in universalizing white feminist concerns, agendas, and beliefs as being those of all of feminism and all of feminists" (1). This white popular feminism can be identified by its vague claims of feminine "empowerment" and the freedom to "choose" the life you want, often superseding collective socio-political action. This white popular feminism may superficially align with the ideas of feminism, but it is an ideology that is committed to maintaining the status quo.

This dissertation, particularly in Chapter Two, will detail the evolution of white popular feminism in American popular culture. For most of the twentieth century, feminism and feminists were outliers. Feminism, particularly second-wave feminism that overlapped with the Civil Rights Movement, was villainized and characterized as "rigid,

serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult and extremist" (Negra 2), but with the evolution

to the postfeminism of the 1990s and early 2000s, postfeminist media co-opted the ideas

of female empowerment and equality to sell media, merchandise, and more to younger

female audiences.[10] Postfeminism projected that the need for feminism was over, and that

society had reached the moment where women could have it all and be who they wanted

to be. It stressed personal choices and individualism over collectivism and fighting unjust

systems (Wilkins 149-150). Then in the 2010s we see a shift to the outward embrace of

feminism by celebrities and politicians like Beyoncé and Hillary Clinton, but this popular

feminism of the 2010s still championed "undertak[ing] private initiatives and self-

improvement over collective efforts to deal with challenges emerging systemic societal

issues of inequity, oppression, and exclusion" (Sharma). Again, this evolution of

postfeminism to popular feminism will be explored more in Chapter Two, but it is critical

to note this evolution to see the conservative and capitalistic co-opting of women's media

and feminism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Feminism, at least

popularly conceptualized, shifts from a socio-cultural critique and political movement to

a vague, feel-good commercialized aesthetic.

    This project traces the historical values and ideals of white womanhood,

specifically those in Imperial Britain, and how they have been enveloped within modern

white popular feminism. Instead of this popular cultural feminism dismantling systems of

oppression that we have inherited from colonialism and slavery, popular feminism is

complicit in maintaining those racist, sexist, and other oppressive ideals. And with the

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[10] This is not a claim that second-wave feminism did not have its own problems and complicity with
racism, classism, and other bigotries by white feminists, just that we see a greater embracing of female
empowerment ideas as time progresses.

power of digital media, those standards gain new life, new circulation, new power. While many would like to imagine that the internet and modern media is more democratic and progressive, and to be fair it is in many ways, it is also still determined by those with power who are overwhelmingly white, straight, male, and wealthy. Scholars like Ruja Benjamin, Adam Banks, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Anna Everett, Rukmini Pande, and Safiya Noble (among others) have detailed how new media continues to use colonial scripts to reaffirm social inequalities. These new technologies and new media are not drastically different from the past: "Acts of writing, the social networks and cultural contexts in which they occur, and the technological networks in which they take place and are disseminated still involve systems of power, still reflect the relationships between individuals and groups within those systems" (Banks). While the internet and its digital media are considered "new" in the context of history, there is nothing new about how the internet and new media reflect and perpetuate historical inequalities and oppressions. So this project will use films, television shows, and other internet media from the last thirty years to connect those imperial standards of white womanhood to modern popular feminism to show the evolution of white supremacy and white womanhood.

Throughout this dissertation, I use "white supremacy" to talk back to the British empire and presently to the current culture. Some may push back at using such a serious and powerful term. In popular conception, white supremacy often invokes images of the Klu Klux Klan, lynching, and media like *A Birth of a Nation*. It is rarely associated with the fun, light-hearted pop culture that entertains so many of us that will be analyzed in this project. I take my use of the term from Eduardo Bonilla-Silva who defines white supremacy:

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When race emerged in human history, it formed a social structure (a racialized

social system) that awarded systemic privileges to Europeans (the peoples who

became "white") over non-Europeans (the peoples who became "non-white").

Racialized social systems, or white supremacy for short, became global and

affected all societies where Europeans extended their reach. (9)

While Bonilla-Silva's explanation can be extended to a multitude of movements and

power structures, we can infer colonialism and its continued influence on the world as a

key part of white supremacy. And according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "white

supremacy" was first used to describe the motivations of the British Empire in 1824 and

1839, so its use seems an apt description of the British Empire. The hesitancy to use the

term white supremacy extends even in our modern moment and inspires some

controversy even when applied to someone like Donald Trump who clearly mobilized

racism to appeal to his base (Newkirk II). "Racism," "white supremacy" and related

terms are so contentious that they often shut down conversations and are perceived to

condemn in a way that cannot be recovered from, so many are still hesitant to use the

terms even in the 2020s. This hesitancy to call things white supremacist in American

culture stems from a well-played political game. Vann R. Newkirk II in "The Language

of White Supremacy" details the political and social moves that repackaged Jim Crow as

"race neutral" policies and was a "half-century-long project forged by thousands of

lawyers and mainstream political leaders that cost millions of dollars." Newkirk also cites

Nikole-Hannah Jones's *New York Times Magazine* investigation that illustrates the race

neutralizations that happened in education, housing, public health, criminal justice, and

voting rights. This decades-long project led to convincing white people (and a lot of

people of color) "that [naming] white supremacy was a grievously offensive slander,"
calling something racist or white supremacist was and often still is seen to white people
as more harmful and hurtful than the racist action itself. We see similar moves when we
excuse past racist actions as "as a product of the time." Systems of power from politics to
culture avoid naming racism to uphold niceness and avoid being "divisive" which
amounts to a racial gaslighting, "a denial of what is plainly evident in the world around
us" as Jessie Daniels states in the introduction to her book, *Nice White Ladies* (7-8). This
racial gaslighting, this immediate shut down and refusal to engage with white supremacy
as a concept, further supports white supremacy. If you cannot talk about it, you cannot
grow in understanding, make steps to correct yourself or others, or imagine new ways to
exist in defiance of these racist systems. We have to be willing to name and discuss white
supremacy to begin to rectify it. By refusing to meaningfully engage with white
supremacy in its multitude of forms, we privilege the feelings of white people over the
harm experienced by people of color, and then we too continue to uphold white
supremacy. It is a vicious cycle that must be disrupted.

There are valid concerns about the "flattening" or the loss of power if we use the
same term to describe the KKK and less explicitly harmful cultural pieces (Newkirk II
and Powell). Or even using it retroactively to apply it to history. There are fears of
neutralizing the power of naming white supremacy if almost everything is white
supremacist, but again, this concern works to avoid the actual conversation about white
supremacy. When we can recognize the nuances and not shut down the conversation, we
can name racism and white supremacy and have productive conversations about its
nuances. This is my intent with this dissertation and its efforts to explore American

popular culture and social media. A nation's culture "reflects the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of a group, a community, a town, a state, a nation," and "white supremacy culture is the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not most of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value" (Okun). White supremacy is so good at hiding itself because it is so prevalent and normalized. American culture does not question the high value of natural blonde-ness (McMillan Cottom) nor why black dogs and cats are overlooked at higher rates and are stereotyped to be more aggressive (Jefferson); it is white supremacy and anti-Black racism.[11] The insidious connections to white supremacy are a well-kept secret, normalized to the point to be easily overlooked. Naming how cultural artifacts reflect and push back on white supremacist assumptions and ideals is a necessary process to become better consumers of culture and actively anti-racist citizens. As bell hooks, whose work is so critical in understanding Blackness and womanhood and feminism, affirmed, "we have to constantly critique imperialist white supremacist patriarchal culture because it is normalized by mass media and rendered unproblematic" (65). To do that, we must name white supremacy.

Part of this process of naming and exploring white supremacy and its impact on current culture is to also retroactively look back to see where we inherit from past cultural pieces. As has been established, British nineteenth-century literature and culture is a popular source for modern media, but we do not just inherit the storylines and

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[11] I hope it is clear that I am talking about predominately white American culture in these paragraphs. Black and other communities of color are far better at discussing the nuances of racism that impact their lives and have their own problems that should be discussed by someone more educated on those problems.

aesthetics of the period. The repetition and romanticization of this era's values and social structures continue to shape modern standards. Britain in the nineteenth century was widely defined by an empire so expansive that "the sun never set" on it (Gershon). Racism was key to justifying this empire and the colonizing mission. To be clear, I am not saying that racism was the primary objective of colonization, but that racism and white supremacy became a convenient ideology to justify colonization. Scientific racism was developed during the Enlightenment to justify colonialism as "a biological taxonomy that turns physical difference into relations of domination…[and] as a socio-political order based on the permanent hierarchy of particular groups, developed as an attempt to resolve the fundamental contradiction between professing liberty and upholding slavery" (Bouie). White supremacy was a uniting factor of the European powers that worked to justify their domination, exploitation, and enslavement of other nations. Racism could and was applied to any colonized peoples that needed to be seen as lesser to the white colonizers; English people even claimed that the Irish were descended from Africans (Coates). White supremacy is inextricably tied to colonialism and persists in structuring our current culture, and this project intends to elucidate those connections and sinister echoes.

Related to the conversation of white supremacy and the surreptitious ways it influences us is how non-white people get referenced. This project has tried to avoid missteps and harm in how I have described different people and groups. This project uses the terms, "non-white peoples," along with "people of color," "Black people," "Indigenous people," and more to refer to those targeted by white supremacy. If I am talking about a specific ethnic or racial group, I use that group's name, but often I am

talking in more general terms so I want to use a more encompassing term like non-white peoples. I am aware that this term can suggest a white norm with Black and brown others, but since I am discussing white supremacy and white-dominated culture, I found non-white people to be the most succinct term that also signals that I am talking about the groups and communities considered non-white at that particular moment in history. I briefly considered and decided against using BIPOC or even spelling out Black Indigenous and other People of Color every time. First because BIPOC has become a shorthand that collapses differences and nuances, similar to how People of Color is now being used (Grady), and second, that term is very modern and did not feel appropriate to use to talk back to history because what groups were considered non-white has evolved so much. As stated earlier in the white supremacy discussion, I note how even the Irish were racialized when they were being colonized. Non-white peoples, for me, signal the in and out groups without projecting contemporary race terms onto the past. I do not want this project to convey that racism and white supremacy is felt the same by all ethnic and racialized groups, but because this project is so focused on white supremacy, I do not always have the space or time to break down the specifics. That is for a different project that should be given full space and attention, and not just as a footnote in this project about white supremacy. I want to be intentional with my word choice, and if I have made missteps, they are unintentional.

With that said, it is important to note my own whiteness and positionality when writing this text. I am a white woman who is the ideal audience for most of the content I discuss in this dissertation. I am a millennial who grew up with postfeminist media in the 1990s and early 2000s. I was in college and graduate school during the popular feminist

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#girlboss era of the 2010s. I loved *Bridgerton* during the pandemic, and I am still a loyal fan impatiently waiting for season three, and I really enjoyed the *Queen Charlotte* spin-off. My social media algorithms often push white women's content to me. I see the appeal of wanting to flounce in a high-waisted gown and take pictures for Instagram. I enjoy the glamorous chicken houses from the homesteading accounts (though I don't really like chickens. I grew up near too many so I know how gross they can be). I am the audience for the content I critique, but that is why I wanted to write this dissertation. I was raised to abide by a colorblind racism and to believe that my whiteness was insignificant in defining who I was. I have to constantly double-check my gut reactions because I was raised to be racist. Not intentionally, of course. My parents are lovely people who despite where they live and where I grew up are surprisingly open-minded and even feminist at times, especially my mother. But when you live in an almost all white space and consume almost all white content, racism does seem peripheral. This project comes from a place of self-reflection and self-critique; I take seriously Jessie Daniels's call in *Nice White Ladies* that "white feminists need to find the courage to be critically self-reflective about how whiteness shapes our capacity to think about gender" and the world around us (18). I want to try and hold myself and other white women accountable for the media we consume and how that affects our worldview. White women are powerful but often careless if not outright malicious using our own limited privilege to maintain that privilege at the expense of others. We are fed media that "empowers" us but that also maintains that our happy endings are found in white heterosexual relationships where we are primary caregivers and domestic laborers. And unlike in other cultural and ethics groups, there is not the same respect, love, and agency embedded within that caregiving

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and labor. We are given the same "happy endings" that white women were given in colonialism, and we are being used in similar ways to uphold those hierarchies and harms.

To analyze how imperial British white womanhood influences the American context today, this project will examine explicit and indirect remediations of nineteenth-century British literature and culture. Instead of adaptation, I want to use the term remediation to refer to these texts and phenomena because I want to consider cultural concerns and ideologies that continue to be reformed for new genres and periods. Adaptation often signals a specific text being adapted into another form, and remediation, more so than adaptation, acknowledges a genealogy of form, technology, and culture (Bolter & Grusin 21).[12] In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, novels and newspapers reflected and produced culture and national identity (Anderson); these texts helped to reinforce the colonizing mission and women's roles in supporting that mission, as seen in novels like Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* and the naturalization of wealth gained from empire in Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Today, film, television, and digital media do similar work. These remediations are a popular culture phenomenon that deserve critical attention for how they construct (and reconstruct) ideas of history, empire, whiteness, and femininity. I situate this project within ongoing conversations in cultural and media studies, empire and postcolonial studies, and critical race studies to trace the transatlantic cultural productions of white womanhood and the revisioning of historical memory via

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[12] My use of remediation here is based on Bolter and Grusin's *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999). For Bolter and Grusin, remediation is the process of newer media forms building from previous ones: for example, how twentieth-century film builds from nineteenth-century photography. Remediation allows for a greater acknowledgement and consideration of how British nineteenth-century literature and culture has been recrafted to impact the present, not just directly adapted.

remediations of nineteenth-century British literature and culture and online constructions of white womanhood more generally.

This dissertation relies on a literary and cultural analysis of selected case examples to track from the explicit to more implicit invocations of British imperial womanhood in modern American popular culture. In the British Empire, white women were considered inferior to white men and more easily corrupted, but they were also tasked with the morality and maintenance of the domestic spaces of not only their personal homes but also England as the motherland (David, McClintock, and Mohanram). This was a tenuous position fraught with contradictions but also an important ideological lynchpin that justified the empire. It is essential to historicize the importance of white womanhood to the empire in order to understand how white women are currently depicted in historical films and shows. Furthermore, it is important that we link ideas about white womanhood across centuries and geographies to understand current functions of white womanhood in digital content that supports white supremacy and white nationalism. Like in the British Empire, white nationalists need the buy-in of white women to reproduce white supremacy physically and ideologically. I argue that white women in digital spaces today perform almost identical functions to the white women in the nineteenth-century British Empire: promoting ideals of civilization through white superiority to lead the world, popularizing a mostly mythic white European history, idealizing the naturalness of motherhood, domesticity and morality, and recruiting other women into this "noble" cause. In online content, these women soften the message and appeal to a wider audience by making their ideas more mainstream, especially given that

similar forms of white womanhood are already often portrayed and accepted in popular media.

I will explore these histories and current media by using postcolonial and intersectional feminist lenses to evaluate whiteness and power relations. While this project's focus is on white womanhood, it is indebted to work by Black feminists and scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Roxane Gay, Tressie McMillan Cottom, and Audre Lorde whose work makes clear that a focus solely on race or gender or economic inequality fails to realize the interconnected inequalities, or even privileges, of identity. Using an intersectional approach allows this project to tease out the privileges of whiteness along with the often-subordinate position of being a woman in these remediated narratives and online content. This project is also indebted to critical race theory and whiteness scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Angela Y. Davis, David R. Roediger, Barbara Smith, and Veronica Watson. Along with considerations of the intersections of privilege and inequalities, a postcolonial approach building from work by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Aimé Césaire, Anne McClintock, and Radhika Mohanram adds additional nuance to my analysis of how colonialism continues to shape culture and how the idealization of white womanhood continues to support colonial practices.

The following chapters proceed from the most explicit remediations of nineteenth-century British literature and culture to more abstract connections. I structure this project this way to track how the rhetoric of empire and white womanhood has far reaching implications in supporting white supremacy, white feminism, and undermining collective social justice. As noted earlier, white feminism in its alignment with white

supremacy works to individualize and divide. This white feminism privileges individual choices and success over a collective socio-political movement. The media discussed in this project often aligns with these goals by privileging a white woman protagonist and her journey to personal fulfillment through heterosexual partnering and overcoming personal obstacles. This media prioritizes a neoliberal idea of capitalism and personal responsibility for one's own happiness while co-opting feminist and social justice language and ideas to project a progressive idea. The first chapter will look at recent costume dramas from 2020 that use a nineteenth-century setting to show how the production of revisionist imperial histories comforts white audiences. The second chapter will analyze visual media that places nineteenth-century plots in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and its impact on postfeminism, the romantic comedy genre, and modern ideals of womanhood. The third and final chapter will look at the non-fictional depiction of Meghan Markle's failed attempt to join the British Royal Family and how she abides by a white popular feminist narrative. Meghan projects a white feminist empowerment narrative that she attempts to credit with her success and perseverance, but an exploration of these dynamics reveal the insufficiency of white popular feminism, its commitment to white supremacy, and the attempted sacrifice of the first woman of color within the royal family. While the Regency and Victorian eras may seem distant to the present, I argue they have a significant impact on how gender and race are constructed and prioritized in the present to reaffirm neocolonialist power structures.

Chapter one, titled "'Part-Austen Heroine, Part-#Girlboss': White Escapist Fantasies, Popular Feminism, and Revising Historical Memory," analyzes how recent historical costume dramas and comedies present escapist fantasies that revise historical

memory to comfort white audiences and idealize imperial ideas of femininity and history

that support white supremacy. These costume productions present identifiable conflicts

and social organizations for a modern, white, and mostly female audience. They present a

revised and imaginary fantasy of life in the nineteenth century that focuses either on the

landed gentry or aristocracy, upper classes that do not perform labor that directly serves

someone else. They also typically focus on young women of marrying age and are set in

mostly domestic spaces. Vron Ware argues that colony-based adventure remediations of

work by Kipling, Haggard, and Forster such as "The Man Who Would Be King" (1888),

King Solomon's Mines (1885), and *A Passage to India* (1924) romanticize the colonial

adventure, which usually centers on men, to revise our historical memory and inspire

nostalgia for the empire (229-230). I argue that these domestic-based costume dramas

fulfill a similar function of revising historical memory and fostering nostalgia for the past

for white women.[13] While there are numerous historical and costume films and shows to

choose from, this project will focus on three of the most recent that feature a white

woman as their main protagonist: *Emma.* (2020), *Enola Holmes* (2020), and *Bridgerton*

(2020).[14] These narratives were all received favorably and fulfilled desires for escapist

fantasies during the COVID-19 pandemic, global Black Lives Matter protests, and unrest

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[13] I argue that one of the reasons that British-based remediations have thrived is because plantation romances and Southern aristocracy narratives are no longer culturally acceptable in the same way that European-based narratives are. Unlike in England where the colonies are elsewhere, plantation romances like *Gone With the Wind* are much harder to distance from explicit histories of racism and abuse.

[14] *Emma.* (2020) and *Enola Holmes* (2020) are more obviously remediations of Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), but *Bridgerton* (2020) is a remediation of Julia Quinn's romance novel series of the same name from the early 2000s. The Bridgerton book series is set in the years between 1813-1827 and invokes popular culture's ideas of the Regency period which arguably mostly come from period pieces that remediate Jane Austen. The Netflix series also has multiple potential nods to Austen (Fabrie).

around the 2020 United States general election.[15] The beautiful dresses, the spunky

protagonists, and their barriers to finding love and fulfillment entertained people living

through an overwhelming year; *Bridgerton* alone was watched in 83 million households

worldwide within the first month and became Netflix's top television series to that point

(BBC). Instead of the devastation and instability of reality, *Emma.* (2020), *Enola Holmes*

(2020), and *Bridgerton* (2020) offer a romanticized history that distracts from the present

by making racism and sexism individual failings and providing easy happy endings that

avoid resolving structural inequalities. Because these texts are merely recent examples of

a larger and ongoing phenomenon, this project argues that this romanticized escapism is

one of the most important appeals of this genre. These texts tap into white audiences'

desires for a comforting history that absolves them and their ancestors of racism and

colonialism.

After chapter one's exploration of 2020 period media and its alignment with white

nostalgia, supremacy, and feminism, chapter two, "The Creation of a Postfeminist Jane

Austen: White Feminism in Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novels and Postfeminist

Chick Flicks" looks back to a recent media moment where popular

feminism/postfeminism and period pieces/historical revisionism combined. As noted

earlier, postfeminism of the 1990s and early 2000s is the precursor to popular feminism.

Before the embrace of popular feminism, we had the 1990s media that would not call

itself feminist but did embrace a "girl power, you can have it all" mentality that partially

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[15] While the creators of these films and shows would not have known how tumultuous 2020 would be, their productions all began in 2018 or 2019 which was during Donald Trump's presidency, consistent Black Lives Matter protests, increases in hate crimes, and, overall, a time of increased stress and fear for those who worried about rising racist incidents and rhetoric.

defined postfeminism. Key to postfeminism was popular media like *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996/2001) and *Clueless* (1995) that rebranded Jane Austen's texts and aligned her work with this postfeminist, girl power sentiment. The popularity of these texts also helped establish the commerciality of Austen in popular American culture. This chapter will look back to the 1990s to the Austenmania that revitalized specific British imperial white womanhood ideas in a postfeminist popular culture. Using *Clueless* (1995) and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996/2001), this chapter traces the recent history of white womanhood, Jane Austen, and popular culture. As one of the few genres targeted almost exclusively towards women, predominately white women, the postfeminist "chick lit/chick flick" genre is often dismissed and belittled as being without substance and not worth serious consideration. Elana Levine, Melissa A. Click, and Pamela Bettis & Natalie Adams have argued that these texts and films are important for understanding the socialization of women in the United States. Nineteenth-century narratives work well within this genre because the marriage plot, the focus on middle- to upper-class women, and the slightly rebellious female protagonists could be describing a Jane Austen novel or a popular romcom. The remediation of Jane Austen's popular novels into postfeminist media transforms imperial values and romanticizes them within a modern framework, presenting their values as necessary for finding personal fulfillment. *Clueless* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* were highly influential to postfeminist media generally but also were key in solidifying Austen's presence in modern popular culture. These texts, specifically, and postfeminist media more generally, socialized and continues to socialize women and help set cultural norms that romanticize whiteness and reaffirm racist social ideals. Through the analyses presented in chapters one and two, this project will show how nineteenth-

century culture and ideas of white womanhood are used to revise histories of colonialism and elevate imperial womanhood to support a neocolonial, white supremacist present.

Chapter three, "The Promise and Failure of a Feminist Princess: The White Popular Feminism of Meghan Markle." will move away from explicitly fictional narratives to see how these white womanhood ideals and rememory play out in the media surrounding Meghan Markle's in/exclusion from the British Royal Family. In her and Harry's March 2021 interview with Oprah Winfrey, her 2022 *Archetypes* podcast, and her and Harry's 2022 Netflix docuseries, Meghan presents a narrative of her life that abides by a white popular feminism. Because we can never know the full truth and nuance to what all happened to and between Meghan, her family, and the British Royal Family, I treat this collective media as a kind of memoir from Meghan's perspective, playing with the seams between reality and constructed narrative. This collective media details her popular feminist ideology, its promise to incorporate her as the first non-white member into the royal family, and its eventual failure when Meghan's popular feminism could not sustain itself against the long history of white supremacy and patriarchy. The media surrounding Meghan Markle's inclusion and exclusion from the Royal Family reveals the racism and white supremacy embedded in the British Royal Family and their public image. Despite being a woman who identifies as biracial and a feminist, Markle also invokes a white popular feminist sentiment and ideal. She has and continues to espouse a feminism that advocates for women but it is not radical in imagining a different future. She continually distances individuals from the systems they support and works to excuse those individuals who have caused harm because they have a positive relationship with her. She also seemingly approves of her husband's desire to reconcile with his

family and the larger institution of the royal family despite the lack of protection her and their children received when they needed it most. This chapter uses Meghan Markle as a case example because it shows how appealing white feminism is and how it promises freedom and power to the individual, but how white feminism is also complicit and unable to sustain its female empowerment when faced against white supremacy and patriarchy. Because this version of feminism aligns with exploitative hierarchies and is only interested in maintaining existing power, it quickly reaches its limits and fails. Meghan's various narratives reveal that failure when we look closely, but they also reveal how white popular feminism continues to remake itself as it attempts to reframe the narrative in its favor. Meghan Markle is a complicated but fascinating example because she checks all of the boxes of a white popular feminism (diversity, individualism, and empowerment) and yet it was still not enough to protect her when set against the white supremacy of the Royal Family and the British Empire. This chapter will look at a different kind of media narrative from the first two chapters to extend how white popular feminism plays out culturally and its insufficiency when faced with the real-world problems and power beyond fairytale or romcom narratives.

The conclusion, titled "Cottagecore, Vanilla Girls, and Glamour Chicken Houses: White Popular Feminism on Social Media," returns us to glamour chicken houses and online historical romanticization. While this introduction mentions the proliferation of social media trends that turn the past into a fun aesthetic with surreptitious conservative values, the conclusion will ruminate on their connection to the previous chapters along with their prevalence and impact on and through social media. Urban homesteading, Victorian momfluencers, aestheticized historicism, and trending femininity will be

discussed as part of this greater move to reframe the past and idealize white womanhood

for current white comfort. Taken as a whole, this project intends to make clear how the

phenomenon of remediated nineteenth-century British imperial culture is still a powerful

tool that works to revise historical memory and idealize imperial ideas of femininity that

support neocolonialism and ongoing white supremacy. This popular media has helped

contribute to the normalization of ideas and culture that led to Donald Trump's

presidency and increased visibility and normalization of white nationalism and white

supremacy.

CHAPTER 2. "PART-AUSTEN HEROINE, PART-#GIRLBOSS": WHITE ESCAPIST
FANTASIES, POPULAR FEMINISM, AND REVISING HISTORICAL MEMORY

Nostalgia for a previous decade or century seems to dominate the current media

landscape. Some popular series that represent this widespread desire for nostalgia include

Mad Men (2007-2015), *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015), *Stranger Things* (2016-present),

Outlander (2014-present), *The Crown* (2016-present), and *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019).

Their genres range widely, but they all play into popular ideas of a particular era and

romanticize that past. From the nostalgia for childhood in the 1980s (*Stranger Things*) to

the medieval power fantasy (*Game of Thrones*), nostalgia for the past takes a variety of

forms in media. One of the periods that dominate in this nostalgic media, and that this

chapter will explore, is the nineteenth century in Great Britain. This century has captured

the imagination of film and serial alike; such remediations include Netflix's *Bridgerton*

(2020-present) and the *Enola Holmes'*s (2020) franchise, HBO Max's *Gentleman Jack*

(2019-present)*,* and the ever-present Jane Austen adaptations: *Sanditon* (2019-present),

Emma. (2020), and *Persuasion* (2022).[16][17] This chapter will specifically focus on

remediations released during 2020 with the first season of *Bridgerton* and the films *Enola*

Holmes and *Emma.*. As will be expanded on later, 2020 was a tumultuous year that

forced white Americans to think about racism and white supremacy currently and

historically. While this nostalgia is often seen as a reaction to our current moment where

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[16] As has been established in the introduction, I use the term "remediation" to acknowledge a genealogy of form, technology, *and* culture (Bolter and Grusin 21), and not just the adaptation of a narrative from one form to another.

[17] The title of *Emma.* is stylized with the period because "it's a period film" according to director Autumn de Wilde. The unique styling is based on a pun (Carr).

constantly changing social media and technology, political and human rights crises, and economic disaster lead people to want (and need) an escape (Jameson 27; Primorac 56; Blight 9; and Niemeyer 2), I will argue it is also a comfort-driven white supremacist historical revisionism at work, in the same vein as Donald Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) slogan. While more conservative audiences openly embrace the explicit white supremacist nostalgia of MAGA, other white Americans still desire that escapism and comforting nostalgia but want their escapist media to distance themselves from histories of racism and colonialism. Kristen Kobes Du Mez's book, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation,* explores white American Evangelical men's cultural icons and analyzes the white supremacist and evangelical histories that led to the rise of Donald Trump and our current cultural moment of the rise of white Christian nationalism. In this chapter, I want to take a similar approach to Du Mez to demonstrate how American popular culture's fascination with the long British nineteenth century contributes to a larger cultural nostalgia that embraces white supremacy.

While Du Mez's work traces a white masculine idea of the past, this chapter concerns itself with white ideas of the feminine that also support and maintain white supremacy. John Wayne's cowboy and Mel Gibson's William Wallace are some of the male cultural icons that Du Mez analyzes and each is closely tied to ideas of domination, white male exceptionalism, and Christian nationalism. I argue that we do not find clear counterparts for historical white women icons that are looked to with the same kind of reverence and lasting influence, except maybe Scarlett O'Hara from *Gone With the Wind* (1939). While *Gone With the Wind (GWTW)* has not been remediated into new forms, it

has a lasting power and Scarlett is still a wildly popular fictional figure for white women, even younger white women. Niki Jensen (@nikirjensen) is a TikToker who has over 900,000 followers. She had a custom Scarlett dress made and featured it on her page. Her try-on video where she states "Gone With the Wind is by far my favorite movie" amassed over 150,000 likes in 2021. Many of the comments conveyed envy at the dress or how good Jensen looked, while only a few noted the racism and romanticization of slavery in the film. Multiple commenters also wished they had lived back then or noted how they are named after Tara, the plantation, or Scarlett herself. But Scarlett O'Hara almost stands alone as a historical American white female icon, and her potential contemporaries are arguably found in British and European-based period pieces. I argue that one of the reasons that British-based remediations have thrived in American popular culture is because plantation romances and aristocracy narratives set in the Southern United States are no longer considered culturally acceptable. Unlike in historical England/Europe where the colonies are geographically elsewhere, plantation romances like *GWTW* are much harder to distance from explicit histories of racism and abuse.[18] The "well-meaning" liberal white American audience cannot enjoy the nostalgia or escapism (as easily) if they are too aware of history and its injustices.

Importantly, American white supremacy does not begin with slavery, but with European colonization. While early white Americans attempted to craft their own culture and identity, American culture was, and still remains, bound with European culture, especially English culture: "Given the inception of the United States as a colony settled

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[18] To be clear, colonies inhabited primarily by peoples currently considered to be not white. As peoples like the Irish have more recently become "white" by cultural standards, it is often overlooked that they were some of the first to be colonized. This inclusion has also led to the erasure of that colonial history.

by Europeans, and given continued transnational traffic in modes of knowing associated

with racial domination, there continue to be close ties in the United States between racist

and colonial discourses, as well as between constructions of whiteness and of

Westernness" (Frankenberg 16). As noted earlier, this chapter will analyze three recent

popular remediations of nineteenth-century Great Britain to explore how white femininity

is idealized in an American pop culture context: *Emma.* (2020), *Enola Holmes* (2020),

and *Bridgerton* (2020). Instead of masculine explorers braving the wilderness, white

American women idealize a more domestic-based narrative that romanticizes white

femininity and white women's role as a support for white men. As noted in the

introduction of this project, since 1990, at least ninety films and television/streaming

series have used nineteenth-century Great Britain as their inspiration, and by including

literary-inspired webseries and media modernizations, the total number, by my count, is

almost 150 visual media productions that remediate or modernize nineteenth-century

British literature and culture, and most of these are targeted towards women (Appendix

A). Like MAGA and John Wayne, these period remediations foster nostalgia for a

revisionist history that romanticizes the hierarchies of white supremacy. While white men

may hold the most power in white supremacy, white women–as caretakers, wives, and

mothers–are critical to its physical and ideological maintenance. These costume dramas

and romances align with a white supremacist cultural vision for white women audiences

that idealizes a specific version of the past and distract from the present to keep women in

this subservient (but crucial) role. Critical to note is that this American white supremacist

cultural vision has been built and naturalized from the white supremacist ideologies that

were used to justify colonization. These ideas have become the norm that crafts and

influences standards and expectations that do not require our explicit consent nor conscious contribution, so I do not find these specific creators or media responsible for this white supremacist cultural vision, instead I argue that they are reflections and examples of that culture and those normalized standards.

This chapter will focus on the content and impact of three recent period dramas/comedies that feature a white woman as their main protagonist–*Emma.*, *Enola Holmes*, and *Bridgerton*–as case examples of the larger phenomenon.[19] With the sheer prevalence of period-inspired media and the continued popularity of British nineteenth-century-inspired media, I felt that the release of these three pieces in the same eventful year makes them optimal for comparison. These narratives were all received favorably during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, global Black Lives Matter protests in Summer 2020, and unrest around the 2020 United States presidential and general election. These phenomena forced many Americans to assess the stability of all aspects of their lives including their social and cultural stability, and for many white people who were used to a certain level of comfort and ignorance, these events prompted often uncomfortable realizations and conversations. The histories of white people and the United States' racism are obscured by a "popular forgetfulness" that currently promotes a raceblind meritocracy where racism (as well as other inequalities) are products of the past (Painter xi and 396); the instability of 2020 disrupted that ignorance and brought other

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[19] *Emma.* and *Enola Holmes* are more obviously remediations of Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), but *Bridgerton* is a remediation of Julia Quinn's romance novel series of the same name from the early 2000s. The Bridgerton book series is set in the years between 1813-1827 and invokes popular culture's ideas of the Regency period which arguably mostly come from period pieces that remediate Jane Austen. The Netflix series also has multiple potential nods to Austen (Fabrie).

narratives of the past to public consciousness that contradicted the popular forgetfulness. While the creators of these films and show would not have known how tumultuous 2020 would be, their productions all began in 2018 or 2019 during Donald Trump's presidency, consistent Black Lives Matter protests, increases in hate crimes, and, overall, a time of increased stress and fear for those who worried about rising racist incidents and rhetoric in the United States. These productions then gave white people, used to certain levels of comfortable ignorance, fantasy worlds to escape into.

Beyond the similarities in context, these three case examples represent the standard range in approaches to period media in terms of race. From *Emma.*'s traditional all white main cast, to *Enola Holmes*'s post-racial casting to *Bridgerton'*s consideration of racism and colonialism within its story world, these remediations represent the traditional and newer approaches to racial diversity in period pieces. These productions are also primarily concerned with gender-based inequalities either through their source text (Austen's *Emma*) or through modern interpretations. They all consider gender inequality to varying degrees and have central white women protagonists revealing who this media is primarily made for: white women. This does not mean that audiences of other demographics cannot find enjoyment in this genre or that all white women will identify with these protagonists, but it does indicate that white women continue to be the assumed ideal audience for this genre. White women, whose subservience to white supremacy is critical and also consistently devalued [as will be discussed later in this chapter] can more easily identify with these protagonists and feel good about these conceptions of history. Instead of the devastation and instability of reality, *Emma.*, *Enola Holmes*, and *Bridgerton* offer a romanticized history that distracts from the present and

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reifies white supremacist ideals for white women. By focusing primarily on gender-based inequality, framing racism, and even sexism, as individual failings and providing easy happy endings that avoid resolving structural inequalities, the need for these productions to acknowledge or respond to structural inequalities disappears. Thus even seemingly more progressive narratives and casting, like in *Enola Holmes* and *Bridgerton,* end up contributing to the normalization of white supremacy.

Popular media, whether it be the literature of past centuries or the trending shows on Netflix, not only reflect cultural values but also reinforce those values for their audiences. As Vron Ware argues, popular adaptations of work by Rudyard Kipling and Henry Rider Haggard have helped construct romance and adventure narratives about colonialism (230). I argue that media about the domestic space during the British empire performs a similar function of "fictionalizing or romanticizing the past through film or television [which] inevitably helps to revise the sense of national history associated with empire" (Ware 230). The narratives created during the British empire always contain traces of the empire, even if the empire is not directly referenced (see *Jane Eyre*, Austen's novels, and more) (Spivak 243 and Said xiv and xxii). Additionally, as work by scholars like Nancy Armstrong, Elaine Freedgood, Anne McClintock, and Tricia Lootens on the representation of nineteenth-century British domestic life has shown, the domestic space may be crafted as separate from the outside world where men dominate, but, in actuality, the domestic space is critical for upholding and implicated in the ideologies of empire. Despite ideas of the home being apolitical in nineteenth century literature and culture, "the imaginary 'heart' of 'the private' or 'the domestic sphere' has long been, by definition, to speak as if from the 'heart' of nation and empire" (Lootens 2), so that the

private and public, the home and empire, are inextricably linked. While the private sphere

influences the public sphere, so does empire influence the domestic as we can see in how

the mahogany furniture from the Madeira and Jamaican colonies used to decorate the

domestic space in Jane Eyre (Freedgood 32) or in how soap became an important symbol

for household cleanliness and order as well as the "imperial civilizing mission ('washing

and clothing the savage')" (McClintock 208). Most modern period dramas/comedies,

even those remediations that seem to be more "liberal" or "progressive," romanticize key

aspects of empire that structured hierarchies and justified oppressions of colonialism,

patriarchy, and the aristocracy. Recognizing and understanding how these prolific pieces

of media work to support white supremacy and naturalize it for conservative as well as

more progressive white audiences is critical in the current political and cultural moment

when Netflix's *Bridgerton* is one of the most popular series and when conservatives are

using fear-mongering tactics about Critical Race Theory to revise history classes in K12

public schools and beyond (BBC and Anderson).[20] These are not unconnected

phenomena but connected events that help to instill white supremacist values and

ideologies.

Period and costume dramas and comedies have been studied for how they may or

may not contribute to this revision of historical memory and influence popular cultural

conceptions of the past. Often grouped as studying the rise and prevalence of Neo-

Victorianism and Austenmania, scholars such as Linda Troost & Sayre Greenfield,

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[20] In 2021 and early 2022, conservative across the United States are passing laws that severely limit
teachers' abilities to teach anything related to racism or xenophobia by spreading fear about the evils of
"Critical Race Theory" and imposing bans on almost any discussions of race in the K12, or even college,
classrooms (Anderson).

Elzette Steenkamp, Abigail Burnham Bloom & Mary Sanders Pollock, Devoney Looser, and Jerod Ra'Del Hollyfield tend to focus on specific authors or works and theorize about their nostalgia and impact on current audiences and culture.[21] For example, Steenkamp notes how fans of Jane Austen want their "heroines [to] aspire to a certain degree of independence, but not so much as to be offensive to their male counterparts" so that the woman can fulfill modern conceptions of the self-sufficient woman and still get the rich man/happy ending (Steenkamp 4). While much of this scholarship focuses on specific remediations, Suzanne R. Pucci and James Thompson's anthology does attempt to theorize more broadly about the nostalgia that these remediations elicit and notes how "in the nature of all 'heritage' productions is an attempt to promote a sense of unbroken tradition that confirms national identity and ostensibly works to repeat, to remake the past in film"(2). Primorac echoes this idea arguing that a major appeal of Neo-Victorianism is a perceived greater certainty in race, gender, and class and that this nostalgia is a "defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms and historical upheavals" (57 citing Boym).[22] Most scholars working in this area agree that these kinds of remediations fulfill

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[21] Readers of this project may be aware of the differences between the Regency and Victorian periods, with the Regency lasting from 1811-1830 during the prince regent's reign and the Victorian period lasting Queen Victoria's reign from 1837-1901. While this project makes this distinction when it is relevant, popular cultural conceptions of Great Britain in the nineteenth century often refer to the entire century and beyond as "Victorian." While technically incorrect, this popular assumption persists and "Victoria's 64-year reign is often conflated with the long nineteenth century; and it is this long nineteenth century, with its roots in the revolutionary 1790s and its final expiration point in the postwar 1920s, which dominates the vocabulary of nostalgia, heritage, and a more slippery sense of Victorian 'cultural memory'" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 493). Because this project is primarily concerned with the remediation of this century in popular culture and consciousness, this project intentionally replicates these ideas at times and gestures to this misconception.

[22] Despite the perceived certainty in race and class hierarchies, Victorian social classes were in transition from a class system dominated by the aristocracy and familial-relations to a commercial system that valued middle-class business owners (McClintock 166-167). The expansion of empire led to a need to craft and reify a system that prioritized perceived white Europeans from non-white colonized peoples to justify conquest and exploitation (Mohanram 24-55).

a nostalgic desire for certainty and stability when the present seems to be in upheaval. My argument intends to make explicit what is implied in their work: the distinct appeal of whiteness to not only explicitly white supremacist groups but also to white women and others who sympathize with and appreciate certain ideas of tradition, domesticity, and womanhood/motherhood.

While multiple pieces of scholarship hypothesize about the impact of period costume narratives, Claire Monk's study is one of the few that have collected and analyzed audience data. Survey data was collected from British readers of *Time Out*, a London listings magazine popular with a left-leaning younger audience, and the readers of the *National Trust's UK local Associations and Centres*, which tends to have an older and more conservative readership, to analyze opinions and reactions to heritage films through empirical means (4-5). Much of her findings supported stereotypical ideas of older conservatives openly enjoying heritage films, while younger audiences were self-critical or even embarrassed about their enjoyment because of their awareness of the critical discourse around heritage films and the "cultural cringe" (175). Some of the data did disrupt stereotypes and assumptions which led Monk to the conclusion that, "If (some) heritage films have been guilty of peddling a bourgeois or aristocratic hegemonic vision of 'the national past', as their critics have argued, the findings presented in this book make clear that they do not appeal to, nor work ideologically upon, all of their audiences in these terms" (178). While Monk's data suggests that audiences (at least British ones) do not think of period pieces as accurate representations of the past, this data relies on self-assessment, which may be faulty or uninformed. So, while Monk's work may seem to contradict arguments about the nostalgic influence of period dramas, I

believe both could be correct: individuals may not think they are influenced by heritage/period films but they are perhaps more influenced than they would like to believe and instill popular cultural beliefs about history.

Historical costume dramas/comedies provide an escapist past where whiteness and related hierarchies are secure, or at least perceived as more secure, and where whiteness is absolved of past systemic racism. Instead of indicting social and governmental systems for their racism and bigotry, specific evil or cruel white characters can be individually racist, but our protagonists–and by extension, good white people of the past–are the exceptions. Viewers identify with those good people and can more easily ignore how most white people would have been bystanders in the past, which also allows us to ignore how we are bystanders to racism and inequality in our present. In these ways, racism becomes an individual failing, not a systemic issue where all white people benefit and are culpable.[23] This claim aligns with Thompson and Pucci and Primorac's arguments about stability, consistency and heritage being major appeals of nineteenth-century British remediations. Many white Americans desire a cultural connection and history, but accessing that is difficult due to the resistance and denial of the United States' history of racism. The resistance to Nikole Hannah-Jones and the *New York Times Magazine*'s *1619 Project* (Serwer) and previously noted fear-mongering about critical race theory and banning of discussions of racism in schools (Ray and Gibbons) illustrate the desire by some to be ignorant about the U.S.'s long history of racism. This along with the fact that American whiteness has erased cultural signifiers and specific ethnicities for

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[23] Similar to how defenders of the Confederacy argue that the Civil War was about states' rights and not slavery as an attempt, retrospectively, to get the confederacy right on race (Blakemore), these narratives work to get white people of those periods right on race and on the right side of history.

many European Americans so that white people could maintain the racial majority (Frankenberg 2 and Mohanram 44-45) has led to many white Americans' desire for a cultural heritage.

Instead of having to claim the U.S.'s racist past or confront their own country's sins, British/European-based remediations allow white Americans to engage with a safer longer history and heritage. *Gone With the Wind*'s romanticization of an American Southern aristocratic class and their life of leisure is too close to slavery–you cannot have Vivien Leigh's Scarlett without Hattie McDaniel's Mammy–but with British colonization, the wealth and leisure is located in England while the colonies are elsewhere.[24] Additionally, American ignorance of British history further allows for escapism without the intruding knowledge of slavery and exploitation. We see this idealization and ignorance of historical white Europe in work done by Amanda-Rae Prescott, a writer whose work often explores period dramas and multiraciality, who has documented the racism in online fans of period pieces when productions have race blind casts. White fans use excuses like "don't mess with the canon classics" and "historical accuracy" to express their racist desires for all-white casts. Prescott also argues that "White supremacists already obsessed with perpetuating historical myths have made period dramas another front in their culture wars" ("Period Drama Karens"). Costume media provides a crucial function in whitewashing history, whether the creators or audiences consciously realize the whitewashing or not, and the European setting allows American audiences to connect with and claim iconic figures like William Wallace,

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[24] There were Black and other non-white peoples in England in the nineteenth and previous centuries, but in the popular cultural imagination, especially an American one based mostly on remediations, England is often perceived to be almost completely white.

William Shakespeare, and others as their own (Du Mez). This does not mean that every white American claims English ancestry, but instead that popular culture presents a very England-based history for consumer consumption that many Americans adopt as a generalizable historical representation of Europe.[25]

In these remediations, white men can imagine themselves as adventurers and military men, but white women are presented with lives of leisure where marriage and motherhood are the ultimate signs of a successful life. Within an American militant masculine ideology, as outlined by Du Mez, women are the promised prize, whose care is a balm from the hard world, being there for men to defend from the degenerate world. This and related ideas stem from the ideology of separate spheres and the culture of domesticity that dominated in nineteenth-century Britain and America.[26] In this ideology, white men were promised faithful wives who would make their home life comfortable, while white women gained influence and importance through their marriages to white men (Ellis 9-10; David 5). In reality, this domestic arrangement is far more complicated and tenuous, but it is still idealized, even when it is not realized, in media from the nineteenth century and today. Period pieces that focus on young white women, in particular, romanticize this past to also romanticize contemporary marriage and current inequality. Systemic issues are ignored and the pageantry is played up, as most of our

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[25] White nationalist groups in the United States use this idealization of Europe and its whiteness to claim a love of white/European/Western culture that works to obscure their white supremacy and bigotry (Gallaher 16-17; Mattheis 138; Southern Poverty Law Center).

[26] The idea of the Angel of the House stems from separate spheres ideology. Men inhabit the public sphere, where they go out to earn money, deal with other men, and face the corrupting influences of the world, and women are supposed to be in control of the private sphere, the domestic space where women run the home, care for the children, and provide a haven for the husband from the cruel world (Schlicke 188-189).

heroines are middle- to upper-class young women whose primary objectives are love and family. White women can imagine themselves as a princess, or at least an aristocratic lady, looking for her Lord, Duke, or Prince Charming (or at the very least a rich Mr. Darcy). These remediations offer white American women a connection to a mythical past where they can embrace nostalgia and imagine dominance and power without guilt of racism and colonialism, in a world where misogyny is an individual fault and not a systemic inequality.

As stated earlier, this chapter will analyze three recent popular remediations of nineteenth century Great Britain to explore how white womanhood is romanticized and idealized, systemic bigotries are erased, and white supremacy is surreptitiously naturalized. These three pieces of media provide different approaches to representing race and colonialism in period pieces but engage with similar ideas of gender and popular feminism. Popular feminism, sometimes termed neoliberal (Rottenberg) or white feminism (Beck and Schuller), is the feminism that most easily circulates in popular media because it "consents to heteronormativity, to the universality of whiteness, to dominant economic formations, to a trajectory of capitalistic success" (Banet-Weiser 16). It is a non-threatening version of feminism that refuses to consider intersectional oppressions or longer histories of capitalism, colonialism, or exploitation. It commodifies feminism to champion select women at the expense of others. *Emma.*, *Enola Holmes*, and *Bridgerton* all engage with popular feminism at the expense of more nuanced conversations about gender and race-based inequality. So, this chapter will not only explore how period dramas romanticize a mythological white past that absolves white people from racism, sexism, and other global harms, but it will specifically consider how

even "diverse," "liberal," or "feminist" productions romanticize and make palatable these ideas for younger, and often more progressive, audiences. While more explicit racism abounds in some period drama lovers' reactions to diverse casting choices, audiences that may consider themselves anti-racist may not see that even diverse casting and progressive narrative choices still help to romanticize and contribute to a white supremacist culture. These remediations offer a romanticized history that reaffirms colonial hierarchies by presenting escapism that appeals to popular white feminist sensibilities.

2.1 Emma.

The film *Emma.*, directed by Autumn de Wilde, was released in February of 2020 and received favorable reviews and multiple award nominations. This film closely follows Jane Austen's 1815 text and exemplifies most remediations of nineteenth century British literature and culture: an all-white cast, rich costuming, and lush landscapes and estates. After *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Emma* is arguably Jane Austen's next most well-known work, and de Wilde's *Emma.* fulfills popular conceptions of the Regency era and the historical ideal of white womanhood. The film begins with the novel's famous first line: "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (00:51-00:59). Emma Woodhouse is an ideal of beauty, power, and privilege. Within the community of Highbury, she is the highest-ranked woman in terms of social class, and only her father and Mr. Knightley really have any financial or social power over her. She basically runs her father's house, while Mr. Knightley from the neighboring estate verbally spars with Emma to keep her somewhat grounded. Throughout the narrative, her primary fault is her

vanity in her own power and perception, and her conflict arises when her arrogance

disrupts social norms and expectations. Emma is shown to not be a bad person, but she is

someone whose privilege has blinded her to the realities of society and her limited power

within that sector. Her resolution and happy ending comes when she realizes her faults,

apologizes and makes amends for her wrongs, and commits to marriage to the only man

who can effectively curb and correct her: Mr. Knightley. Mr. Knightley fulfills all

expectations for a romantic interest; he is rich, good looking, moral, and sensible. *Emma.*,

like the novel, tracks the evolution of a privileged woman into a suitable wife. The film

fulfills most expectations for a romantic drama while also normalizing conservative and

white supremacist ideals of compulsory heteropatriarchy.

Emma. seems intended to be beautiful escapism. The film is crafted to be visually

appealing; the costumes and settings to the season cards that mark the passage of time all

appeal to a cottagecore-like aesthetic that has been gaining popularity online since 2017-

2018 (Reggev). Beyond the visuals, De Wilde does not make radical changes to the

narrative nor does the film incorporate diverse casting choices. It is a traditional

remediation of Jane Austen. There are minor inclusions that point to awareness of a

contemporary audience: nonsexual nudity from Emma and Mr. Knightley and slightly

humorous interactions with the servants. The nudity is of both actors' bare butts–Emma's

warming hers by the fire and Mr. Knightley's while getting dressed–and while this nudity

is unexpected for a period piece, it indicates an awareness of a current audience that is

less phased by showing skin. The other nod to the audience that diverges from most

period pieces is the slight humor and absurdity in scenes with the servants; unlike most

previous remediations, the servants in *Emma.* are not smoothly completing their tasks and

surreptitiously disappearing off screen, but instead, they are shown stumbling and rushing around Emma and Mr. Woodhouse while non-aristocratic characters, like Harriet, take notice of their labor. Whether the servants are scrambling to move screens to accommodate Mr. Woodhouse's hypochondriac fears of a draft, dressing Mr. Knightley when he is partially nude, or moving around Emma while she ignores their presence, there is humor to the scenes which comes from the audience's perceived absurdity of (1) needing servants to do these things for another able-bodied person and (2) the lack of recognition from the people they are serving. Despite these brief recognitions of the serving class, the film does not work to subvert this power or make Emma more aware of those serving her. While the film recognizes that audiences may find the presence of servants disruptive to the viewing experience as illustrated by Harriet's visible discomfort when servants are skittering around her while Emma mostly ignores them (12:55-13:30), it turns their presence into a knowing joke between creator and audience that works to smooth over their inclusion. *Emma.* is crafted to be textually loyal and nostalgic, which has caused it to be overshadowed in media discussions by the more disruptive *Enola Holmes* and *Bridgerton*, but despite *Emma.*'s appearance of simplicity, Emma Woodhouse conveys a specific narrative for confident white women which encourages marriage and subtly enforces white supremacy.

Emma Woodhouse is distinct from many of Austen's heroines. Unlike those plainer and poorer heroines whose end reward is to gain financial security with their happy marriages, Emma Woodhouse is beautiful, rich, and confident from the very beginning. She also does not see a need to be married: "I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry…. I believe few married women are half as much

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mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield" (16:00-16:15). Emma's

popularity, freedom, and influence could be read as bearing similarities to young women

in the age of social media. While most do not have the wealth that Emma has, many

young women have the freedom and agency that only wealth could allow in the Regency

period; Emma Woodhouse could easily be a young career-oriented woman in the twenty-

first century.[27] If Emma Woodhouse could be identified with young women of the 2020s,

then her character development and narrative arc could also be read for what values they

ascribe to young women today through Emma. Emma's privilege lead her to become vain

and narcissistic, overestimating her own powers of influence. Emma's vanity and her

sense of self-importance lead to an inability to see people except as their relationship to

her: "The Martins are of precisely the order of people with whom I [Emma] feel I can

have nothing to do. A degree or two lower might interest me… But a farmer can need

none of my help, and is therefore as much above my notice as below it" (13:45-14:04).

Emma thinks she can alter social strata and have Mr. Elton propose to Harriet because

Harriet has Emma's blessing, but Elton rejects this with "Everybody has their level"

(43:13-43:17). Emma is shown to be well-meaning but naïve, and it is not until she learns

to listen to Mr. Knightley, who is more keenly aware of social structures and abides by

them, that she realizes her privileged position within the larger social structure and how

her actions have harmed Harriet and Miss Bates. Emma's popularity and influence cannot

override Harriet's lack of status, and Miss Bates's low social position makes Emma's

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[27] Emma Woodhouse has been adapted into this specific modern setting in Hank Green and Bernie Su's multiplatform web series titled *Emma Approved* (2013-2014). In this remediation Emma is running her own lifestyle business, funded by her father, that allows her to be a combination of match maker, event planner, and influencer. *Clueless* (1995) functions similarly even though it was pre-modern internet; made today, Cher Horowitz would definitely be an Instagram influencer.

snide comment particularly hurtful as she is not verbally sparring with someone like Knightley who shares her social position and can verbally jab back. Knightley warns and reprimands Emma for her lack of awareness in both situations. Emma's evolution and happy ending are directly linked to her love interest, who is an older rich white man.

If we read Emma as a potential metaphor for young women today, this escapist fantasy quickly becomes sour, as Emma's confidence can be read as narcissistic, and her power as a negative force that needs correcting by a more mature and perceptive husband. Young women who confidently post online about their life, body, career, and more are often targeted by men of various ages who seem to want to put these women "in their place." The misogynistic comments and attacks often try to belittle these women and make them seem unimportant or justify harassment (Buni and Chemalay).[28] Online harassment is a prevalent problem that is often exacerbated by gender, racial, sexuality, and other differences from an assumed straight, white, cisgendered man as has been documented by Ruha Benjamin, Safiya Noble, Kishonna Gray, Sarah Banet-Weiser & Kate M. Miltner, Olivia Little & Abbie Richards, among others. Bigotries overlap because all bigotries stem from white supremacy; the need to consolidate power into a small group requires creating hierarchies and separating groups of people. So someone who is homophobic is also more likely to be misogynistic as both stem from patriarchy, and because white supremacy structures patriarchy, racism and xenophobia also tend to overlap with misogyny and homophobia. Misogynistic comments and insults or false

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[28] Drew Afualo, @drewafualo, on TikTok has made a name for herself by stitching, collaborating by trimming a clip from someone else's video and then using it at the start of a new video. misogynistic videos and calling men on their actions and making fun of them. Scrolling through her page gives a glimpse into the prevalence of misogyny on social media as well as the consistent critique of women just for existing and participating online.

concerns about women's ability to find a man, as can be seen in Drew Afualo's videos footnoted, align with conservative and white supremacist concerns about falling marriage (Cohn et. al.) and birth rates (Chappell) in the United States. Some perceive these falling rates as a crisis of family values and proper gender roles (Pengelly). Along with these concerns is conservatives' consistent pressure and success in overturning Roe v Wade (1973) to ban abortion in the United States, which has also had white supremacist goals backing it from the beginning (Goodwin). Taking all of these phenomena together, we see the consistent criticism of young women who are independent and confident like Emma Woodhouse. Their desire to not wed, to not reproduce, and not bend their tastes and activities to the will of men who benefit from compulsory heteropatriarchy and white supremacy threatens conservative ideals.

As discussed in the Introduction, the mythos of the white American nuclear family is built upon the reverence to the global white mother that helped support colonialism in the nineteenth century, and the maintenance of this mythos is key to the continuation of white supremacy. These colonial stereotypes persist throughout American history in the cult of domesticity in the nineteenth century (Lindley 55-56), the white mother's during Jim Crow "advocating" for safe schools for their children (McRae 14-15), and even in the mom-influencers of Instagram and TikTok (Petersen). But these independent young women are threatening to white supremacy because they disrupt the societal and familial hierarchies of white supremacy. Instead of embracing motherhood and her place under a husband, she makes and spends her own money. She influences other young women to aspire to be like her. And while influencing and trending femininity has its own problems with white supremacy as will be discussed in the

dissertation's conclusion, happily unwed women pose a unique threat to culture that maintains itself primarily through the marriage and reproduction of white people and supported by the unpaid labor of white mothers and caregivers. If Emma Woodhouse, in many ways an ideal white woman of imperial England, mirrors white young women of today, then de Wilde's 2020 remediation may express an ideology that uncomfortably aligns with white supremacy.

Emma., at first glance, feels like another adaptation of Jane Austen's work, but taken in the context of the early 2020s in the United States, *Emma.* is not only highly identifiable with current young women and their online lives but projects a happy ending aligned to white supremacist ideals of a past Europe, complementarianism between genders, and white women's proper place (Mattheis, Love, & Gallaher). To clarify, I do not claim that this was the creators' intentions, nor do I fault the film personally for not radically re-envisioning a beloved piece of literature. Instead, I argue that we need to recognize how traditional period pieces like *Emma.* feed into conservative narratives of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy. Within the separate spheres ideology that guided nineteenth-century roles for women and men, Emma Woodhouse becomes a powerful man's complement. In modern white supremacist culture, a young woman like Emma should allow herself to be guided and partnered with a white man who will give her balance and a better perspective on the world. This escapist and nostalgic view of Regency England contributes to a conservative revisionist history that idealizes white heterosexuality and romanticizes sexual inequalities for a white woman audience.

2.2 Enola Holmes

While de Wilde's *Emma.* fulfills the quintessential period drama stereotypes and expectations, there has also been a number of period pieces which have shifted to becoming more racially inclusive and taking on more modern storylines.[29] Creative remediations of existing texts are not new, and the internet has allowed for fanfiction and fan community engagement with texts to take on greater popularity and influence productions created by established studios and producers. Tumblr, Twitter, TikTok, fan Wikis, and Facebook groups allow fans to connect and experiment with texts. The popularity of these communities and creative takes on storyworlds with fancasts, AUs, and imagine prompts has arguably led to greater creative freedom with established productions' takes on the *classics*.[30][31] The popularity of nineteenth century British literature has led to the proliferation of fan groups and conversations online. Despite the conservatism that permeates some of these online period media groups (Prescott), there is an audience and push for period pieces and related remediations to be more "political" and to consider things like racism, sexism, and other inequalities. Nancy Springer, a young adult author who had published YA texts inspired by the Arthurian and Robin Hood legends, created the *Enola Holmes Mystery Series* (2006-2010) about Sherlock

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[29] London and port cities in England were populated with non-white peoples in the nineteenth century and before, and all white casts are not historically accurate despite the perception cultivated through popular culture and white supremacy that England and Europe were all white (Gallaher).

[30] Fancasts are fan dream castings for real or imagined adaptations. AU stands for alternate universe where fans imagine what the characters may be like in a different storyworld. Imagine prompts are short posts that ask the reader to imagine the characters in a specific situation whereas AUs usually involve longer fanfiction works.

[31] I include classics in italics here to denote my uncomfortableness with the term often used for the primarily white canon that has been taught in K12 and secondary schools for the past few decades. The idea of the capital C canon or the classics has white supremacist culture at its core (Thomas et. al. 94).

Holmes's younger sister. Netflix adapted *The Case of the Missing Marquess* into the *Enola Holmes* film, which debuted on September 2020. Starring Millie Bobby Brown as Enola and Henry Cavill as Sherlock Holmes, the Netflix remediation was well received; it had the biggest first day opening of a Netflix film in 2020 and became the most watched Netflix film in 78 countries on its second day (Vyskočil). The film also ranked 7th out of 10 for the biggest Netflix original movies with 77 million views as of September 2021 (Clark). *Enola Holmes* represents a newer take on female-focused period films; instead of lush settings and focusing on the landed gentry, this remediation shows grittier London, our protagonist fighting for her life, and critiques of the aristocracy. Despite this girl-power revisioning of Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, the film's feminism is a veneer that works to hide the problems of the past and present.

   Enola Holmes the film was inspired by the book series that is meant to empower young women and push back against the perceived sexism of the Victorian era (Bhattacharya), so Netflix promoted it as a feminist film. One of Netflix's promotions was to erect statues of sisters next to statues of famous men around London, like Princess Helena Victoria, sister to King Edward VII, and Frances Dickens, sister to Charles Dickens (Netflix UK & Ireland). While the film's main narrative is Enola searching for her missing mother, a significant part of that plot is that Enola's mother is a key member of a multiracial suffragette group that supports the Reform Act to extend the right to vote. In a montage near the beginning of the film, we see that Enola's mother has raised Enola to have a much fuller education than many young women at the time, which includes studying a greater variety of subjects, knowing martial arts and fighting skills, and conducting science experiments. During this montage, John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection*

of Women (1869) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

(1792) are highlighted. Both texts are considered key feminist texts of the long nineteenth

century that highlighted white women's oppression and calls for their equality. The film

consistently comments on women's restrictive dress and nods towards Victorian dress

reform (@summerannelee), and even has Edith, a Black woman, business owner, and a

member of the suffragette group who teaches martial arts, call out Sherlock Holmes for

his privilege in ignoring politics: "[you can ignore politics] because you have no interest

in changing a world that suits you so well" (1:02:25-1:02:42). There is a constant critique

of "proper womanhood" throughout the film. Mycroft Holmes and the people who want

to restrict Enola into a lady are villainized, and Enola's agency and freedom are

celebrated. Unlike *Emma.*, *Enola Homes* (2020) is a period piece that openly criticizes

historic British culture and restrictive gender standards, and a critique of racism is subtly

implied in Edith and Sherlock's exchange. Despite Netflix's desire for this to be a

"feminist" film, *Enola Holmes* consistently falls short of intersectional feminism and

instead provides a girlboss feminism which focuses on individualism and which still

upholds a white supremacist ideal.

Despite its success, the problems of *Enola Holmes* are its repetition of white

liberal feminism that may feel good for white audiences, but this feminism is shallow,

self-serving, and often counterproductive to intersectional feminist causes. This idea is

well-captured by critic Clarisse Loughrey: "Enola herself is part-Austen heroine, part-

#Girlboss." Girlboss, coined from Sophia Amoruso's memoir, *#Girlboss* (2014), was

initially used to describe women who achieved professional and economic success

through their "hustle" and hard work. The term perpetuated the idea that any woman's

success is feminism, even successes that uphold oppressive capitalist structures, but this label was also a compromise which could allow a woman to call herself the boss while also fulfilling traditional gender norms and presenting as less threatening and assertive to men by being a "girl" and not a woman (Abad-Santos 2021). Five years later, the idea of the Girlboss has become a prevalent online joke, but it still presents a powerful narrative and ideology for the women most likely to benefit from capitalism and their closeness to white men's power. Like the white girl bosses of the 2010s that have been accused of being blind to their privilege, illegal and unethical business practices, and racism, *Enola Holmes* presents a historical #GirlBoss narrative that attempts to rewrite the past to center white womanhood, ignore racism and colonialism, and present a neoliberal ideal that trumps collective action.

Enola Holmes takes on the perceived patriarchy of nineteenth century England. In an interview with Nancy Springer about her book series and the film adaptation, it is clear that Springer has a pretty typical view of Victorian England. One of her opinions that makes its way into the film is her view of corsets. Springer states that corsets are cruel (Bhattacharya), and in the film, Enola says to the camera, breaking the fourth wall which happens throughout the film, "The corset: a symbol of repression to those who are forced to wear it. But for me, who chooses to wear it, the bust enhancer and the hip regulators will hide the fortune my mother has given me" (1:25:46- 1:24:48). It is a moment that invokes a "not like other girls" misogynistic trope to set Enola apart from other, "silly" or vain women.[32] Fashion historian Valerie Steele notes that "the corset is not about a

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[32] The "not like other girls" trope refers to a common misogynistic narrative device to distinguish female characters. Sometimes this is done by having a woman reject traditionally feminine attributes and hobbies in favor of more masculine traits, thus she is "not like other girls" and inherently better, more amenable to

monolithic struggle between oppression and liberty" and that corsets provided a variety

of functions, practical and aesthetic, but that they operated similarly to women's

undergarments today (Morra). Springer's ideas about the corset and Victorian England

more broadly seem to lack historical specificity and nuance, which leads to *Enola Holmes*

repeating inaccurate assumptions about the period. Whether due to these shallow pop

culture assumptions or the need to make a palatable feminist film or a combination, the

film's attempts at critiquing patriarchy often fall short.

Enola Holmes critiques patriarchy at the personal and the national level (concerns

about international imperialism are not alluded to) in its attempt at feminism. There are a

variety of antagonists, but all of them are faithful to a conservative idea of how things

have been and how they should continue. Enola's brother Mycroft is her personal villain

because he wants to force her into finishing school "to make her acceptable to society,"

with the ultimate goal of finding her a suitable husband and having children (1:49:58 and

41:50). Life, happiness, and purpose for white women come through marriage and

proximity to white men's power and continuing white men's lineage. The other main

villain is the Dowager of Basilwether. Through Enola's adventures looking for her

mother, she befriends The Viscount Tewkesbury, Marquess of Basilwether who is also on

the run. He is supposed to take his late father's position in parliament that is voting on the

Reform Bill that would extend voting rights to lower classes, but an assassin is trying to

kill him. It is revealed that Viscount's grandmother, the Dowager, has set up the

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the male protagonist. This version of the trope will be discussed more in chapter two. It is also seen in
historical costume dramas to differentiate between "progressive, forward-thinking and unique female
characters away from their more traditionally feminine counterpart" (Cox). Enola Holmes's snide remarks
about corsets and other fashionable dress trends is meant to distinguish her as aware and above "silly"
things like fashion and caring how she looks.

assassination so that her more conservative second son will vote against the Reform Bill, thus preserving the traditional power structure. The Dowager feels it is her duty to "protect" England and "As the world becomes increasingly *unstable*, it feels important *that these ideas of England are preserved for the safety and security of the future of our country*" (1:09:37-1:10:05, emphasis mine). The Dowager fulfills the Victorian idea of the "angel of the house," except she takes her duty to her home beyond the confines of her estate; her "home" is aristocratic England and so she feels a duty to "protect" it.[33] She sees England's glory, importance, and security as being predicated on continuing the old ways which, as illustrated by this film, are tied to patriarchy and oppression. In a perverse sense of her duty to her home/country, she orchestrates the assassination of her son and the attempted assassination of her grandson for being "new thinker[s]." This storyline seems to give audiences a more progressive and feminist message that advocates for greater rights for the lower classes and for women, but the film's feminism is a white, popular feminism that quickly falls apart with closer inspection.

The film attempts to be more progressive than many other period films by incorporating some postracial casting choices; Edith, as stated earlier, is a Black woman, Inspector Lestrade is played by a British actor with Pakistani and Kenyan ancestry, and the suffragette group and other background characters include people of many different races. However, the races of these characters do not change the underlying sexism and racism that still plays out within the film, specifically with the multiracial suffragettes.

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[33] In colonial ideology where the private home is used as a metaphor for the homeland and the public sphere is metaphor for colonial conquest away from home, the ability of a woman to run her home effectively and procreate was tied to the ability of the nation to be the head of the empire and continue that conquest (McClintock 17; 35-36).

When Enola searches for her mother in London, she goes to Edith's teashop, rumored to contain "seditious" books about feminism and women training other women in jiu-jitsu in a hidden upstairs room. Later, Enola finds the suffragettes' secret stockpile of plans and explosives. It is implied that if the reform vote does not go the way they want it to, they will stage explosions around London as a form of protest. Their explosives have dragon symbols on the side of the boxes in a vaguely Chinese-reminiscent style; combined with the Japanese jiu-jitsu, it appears that a general Orientalism is being projected onto the suffragettes. Suffragettes from the Victorian period were villainized, but the film's Orientalizing of this group combines that villainization of the suffragettes with colonial racism. Orientalism is the specific form of Othering that happened during colonialism to mark differences between the British and other Europeans versus the "savage" and "odd" rest of the world, particularly Arab and Asian peoples, that called for intervention to "civilize" them (Lowe). The Orientalizing of the suffragettes in *Enola Holmes* delegitimizes them and reaffirms Enola as the ideal protagonist/feminist. Not only is an organized group of women villainized, but the racial under- and overtones cannot be overlooked. The film continues a longer history of villainizing women who organize to protest inequality, and Enola's individualized feminism is presented as more appealing but also more effective than this radical, collective organizing. The film presents a "historical" version of popular feminism: individualized, superficial, and, most importantly, white. Despite Enola's combat skills and education stemming from her mother's belief in women's equality and participation in a suffrage group, Enola's path to progress is highlighted at the expense of the suffragettes and idealizes a white liberal

feminism where solutions can be found through the actions of one superior white woman who perseveres.

Enola Holmes upholds Enola's feminism above the more collective action of the multiracial suffragettes, and it ignores the history of English suffragettes who supported imperialism and racist ideologies to prop up themselves and their own feminism (Burton, Pettman, and MacMillan). To justify imperialism and the genocide and exploitation of non-white peoples across the world, Europeans more broadly, but the British more specifically, had to create the idea that white people were superior in race and culture. As has been touched upon, white men are the ideal subjects within British and European colonialism. This left white women somewhere between white men and colonized peoples. British white women, in their fight for political and social recognition as equals to white men, relied on imperialism and the existence of the colonized Other, specifically the colonized woman, "on whose passivity and disenfranchisement their [white women's] claims for imperial representation largely relied, they did so partly as a pledge to the imperial status quo" (Burton 16-17; along with David 10 and 42-43 and Meyer 8-10). *Enola Holmes* ignores this history. The film creates a history where misogyny is still present, but colonialism and racism are supposedly nonexistent. Its version of feminism that saves the day is far closer to the white, exclusionary suffragettes than a radical feminist collective with the goal of socio-political change.

In this section, I have argued that *Enola Holmes* presents a #GirlBoss narrative of popular feminism that crafts a version of history to assuage white female audiences by playing into popular cultural assumptions of Victorian London. Enola's "feminism" comes at the expense of other women, specifically a diverse collective of women. This

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feminism is comfortably neoliberal, allowing for its presentation as feminist to contribute to its popularity without threatening white supremacy or established systems of domination, like colonialism (Banet-Weiser and Rottenberg). Its attempts at racial inclusion fall short as it reinscribes exclusionary feminist ideologies that make the film more palatable and marketable. As with *Emma.,* this film is not pretending to be accurate to the period, but it plays into popular beliefs about the past and the present in ways that reaffirm misconceptions. However, unlike *Emma.*, *Enola Holmes* does try to be more progressive but does so in a way that does not radically critique or disrupt the existing structures of power, instead giving a shallow validation of white women's feminist struggle against the patriarchy. In doing so, it elides histories of colonialism and suggests that white women no longer need forgiveness or retribution for their part in colonialism because it has already been forgotten. These "feminist" reworkings of period pieces and history are becoming far more common, especially on streaming services. Popular series like Apple TV's *Dickinson* (2019-2021), Hulu's *The Great* (2020-present), and HBO's *Gentleman Jack* (2019-present) also present multiracial and queer remediations of period pieces. *Enola Holmes* exemplifies a newer subgenre of period pieces that attempt to balance the nostalgia and romanticization of the past with a feminist sensibility, but whether due to the source text and culture or the need for nonthreatening, popular feminism, the feminist veneers hide the erosion of history and accountability and support white supremacy.

2.3 Bridgerton

The final text for this chapter is the first season of Netflix's *Bridgerton* (2020-present), a series which presents a multiracial cast set in Regency England, and which

was one of the most popular remediations of nineteenth-century Britain in 2020.[34]

Released on December 25, 2020, this series was Netflix's first highly-anticipated

collaboration with famed television producer Shonda Rhimes. *Bridgerton* is a

remediation of Julia Quinn's romance novel series from the early 2000s. As noted earlier,

the Bridgerton book series is set in the years between 1813-1827 and relies on popular

culture's ideas of the Regency period. This series was watched by over 83 million

households worldwide within its first month and quickly became Netflix's top series to

that point (BBC). Its popularity concluded a contentious year that saw mass Black Lives

Matter protests, Donald Trump's losing a second presidential term, and heightened

awareness of racism for Americans. It also gained popularity after the Insurrection on the

Capitol Building on January 6, 2021. It is not by chance that *Bridgerton's* popularity

coincided with increased dialogue and conflict concerning racism in the United States.

Historical fiction tends to gain popularity in times of crises (like a global pandemic and

social and political upheaval) because some believe it helps "anchor anxious readers with

its strong sense of place and often quite traditional storytelling structure" (McMillan

Cottom citing Wood "The Black Ton"). Coming from Shonda Rhimes and in the context

of this upheaval, I argue that *Bridgerton* was meant to be an escapist fantasy of the past,

especially for women of color, but its historically inaccurate engagement with race and

feminism, while a calculated move to give space for women of color's escapism, played

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[34] As I'm finishing this dissertation in 2023, I have watched season 2 and the spin-off series, *Queen Charlotte*, but this chapter, originally written in 2021, will only consider season 1. I think the additional season and the spin-off complicate my argument and do nuance Queen Charlotte as a Black character, but for season one and in the context of 2020, my argument has not changed.

into white audiences' desire for escapism from the political reckoning and alleviation of their white guilt.

Like *Enola Holmes*, Netflix's *Bridgerton* presents nineteenth-century England as multiracial at all social levels and modifies aspects of the period to make it more palatable for a modern audience. Instead of having the main protagonist of season one, Daphne Bridgerton, give voice to modern audiences' concerns and give a feminist critique like Enola Holmes does, Eloise Bridgerton, the younger sister of Daphne, takes the role of a modern woman who wants to go to university and complains about the lack of options for women. The inclusion of Eloise assuages modern sensibilities and objections to allow for easier escapism because she gives voice to popular feminist ideas like women having equal status with men and having options for education.[35] Eloise in the show is very different from book Eloise, which seems to be used to acknowledge the complicated relationship between modern viewer and speculative historical past. Through this method, *Bridgerton* presents a mostly white feminist critique of the misogyny and unequal power dynamics between men and women during the Regency. In this way, it aligns with other historical Romances. Helen Taylor notes that the Romance genre is one of the only genres primarily written by women for other women and "puts women at the center of the narrative…women are never just someone's daughter, wife or mother."[36] Taylor connects Romance readers to women who read and love *Gone With the Wind,* and

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[35] While not fully explored in the first season, Eloise also represents a white feminist in that she consistently fails to acknowledge her own privilege in relation to other women who have even less freedom than she does.

[36] Often unstated in arguments by Taylor and others about the Romance genre is that the "women" they imagine are almost always white, cisgender, heterosexual, and middle to upper class.

she notes how these women enjoy the escapism that centers women's concerns, struggles, and wins. Sandjana Basker, a creator of color on TikTok, often discusses the Romance genre, and in one video, she claims that historical Romance is a type of speculative fiction that is "better at portraying the material consequences of patriarchy on women's lives than most of fiction, contemporary Romance included… it may have started with *Pride and Prejudice* [meaning modern popular adaptations of Austen's *P&P*] but it hasn't ended there" (@baskinsuns). In the same video, she acknowledges that the genre often "does not do race or the colonial legacy well," but that it does consider and handle women's inequality better than most genres which is why women of all races are drawn to it. *Bridgerton* is able to balance the escapism with its appeal to modern white feminist ideas, but the series also repeats many of the problems that *Enola Holmes* had with prioritizing a market-acceptable feminism over considerations of race and intersectionality. While *Bridgerton*'s lack of engagement with historically accurate race and colonialism give Black and other women of color a piece of media where they do not have to relive the atrocities of colonialism and their own dehumanization, the series also plays into popular ideas of white feminism during a politically contentious time. *Bridgerton*'s speculative history uncomfortably aligns with groups across the United States who are revolting against nuanced and more accurate narratives of the past and actively rewriting education curriculum from pre-kindergarten to higher education to not include discussions of racism (Adams et. al.).

 Bridgerton's justification for the post-racial, or color-conscious casting as series creator Chris Van Dusen calls it (Gulamhusein), is *love*, and love is what is able to preserve the story and genre while "resolving the conflict that race interjects into

historicals" (McMillan Cottom [@tressiemcphd]). King George III fell in love with Queen Charlotte, a Black woman, and decided to raise various people of color to all levels of society, including the aristocracy.[37] Within the series, two of the few Black aristocrats, Lady Danbury and the Duke of Hastings, discuss this: "We were two separate societies, divided by color until a king fell in love with one of us. Love, Your Grace, conquers all." Simon, the Duke, immediately points to the holes in the arrangement: "He may have elevated us from novelties in their eyes to now dukes and royalty, and at that same whim... he may just as easily change his mind, a mind, as we all know, that is hanging on by one very loose and tenuous thread... Love changes nothing" ("An Affair of Honor" 20:00-21:29).[38] This plot point is important because it establishes the speculative underpinnings of the storyworld and it points to why this version of history is so fragile– it only takes the decision of one person to reinstate racialized social hierarchies. While the inclusion of this plot would seem like a racially conscious decision, it is liberalism at its core: an individual choice that erases systemic issues. *Bridgerton* feeds into a liberal, or perhaps even conservative, ideal of racism as an individual failing, not a systemic capitalist system. As it contributes to a greater popular understanding of racism, *Bridgerton* presents an "easy" solution that those in power simply need to not engage in overt acts of racism, or find individuals of a different race that they can connect with and unlearn their racism. This, along with the repetition of racist tropes and only gender-

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[37] This is a nod to the rumors of the real Queen Charlotte having African ancestry (Brown).

[38] King George has a mysterious illness which makes him mentally unstable and has manic behavior which is supposed to nod towards the real King George's reputation as a "mad king."

based power imbalances provides an escapist fantasy that reinforces white supremacist goals of erasing systemic racism in history and alleviating white guilt.

While audiences of different races enjoyed the series, based on the primary authors and readers of the Romance genre and that the central family and protagonist of the series is a white woman (Daphne Bridgerton played by Phoebe Dynevor), it can be implied that white women were a major target audience even if they were not the only target audience.[39] Like the streaming series, the first novel follows Daphne's love story, despite most of the series following the birth order of the Bridgerton children. This is necessary because Romance, as a genre, is mostly written by and about women for women; beginning with Daphne Bridgerton's story gives the intended female audience a character to identify with while also the necessary insight and backstory to the Bridgerton family in order to pique interest in the entire series. I argue that the Netflix series goes even further to foster this identification between the assumed audience and Daphne Bridgerton. In the show, it seems that the characterization of Daphne may have been watered down to continue this appeal and allow more women to identify with her and imagine themselves into her place. Book Daphne is not the perfect "diamond of the season" and is far more opinionated and flawed, while Netflix's Daphne's defining traits are her desire for motherhood. Many commenters on Twitter echoed the sentiment that Daphne was "boring" and that she had more personality in the books (@jackieraimo,

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[39] While a gender and racial breakdown of the Netflix series is difficult because viewership is counted by households and not individuals, we do know that Romance genre readership is primarily women (Rodale) and while few studies note the racial breakdown of Romance readers, we do know that in 2020 only 12% of Romance books published were written by women of color (The Ripped Bodice Bookstore). Romance as a genre is overwhelmingly white, cisgendered, and straight in its authors and protagonists.

@hellenus, and @rashiequeen).[40] Since an appeal of the Romance genre is the escapist fantasy, I argue that the show attempts to make Daphne a blank slate to allow identification by a wider variety of viewers. These choices could be justified if the change in Daphne's characterization was necessary for the change in medium, but by centering her personality around her white beauty and motherhood, the series reinforces ideals of white supremacy.

Netflix's Daphne Bridgerton is white, pretty, and wealthy enough to not have to be worried about marrying for money, but her characterization does not go much deeper than that except with her strong desire to be a mother. Even when being blackmailed into marrying the horrible Nigel Berbrooke who attempts to sexually assault her, the "comfort" from her mother is that Daphne will be a mother and that will make her marriage bearable ("Shock and Delight" 39:20-39:50). Although this is not to say that women of color would necessarily be unable to identify with Daphne Bridgerton, Daphne's blankness except for her desire for motherhood aligns with cultural expectations (specifically those informed by patriarchy and white supremacy) that cisgender, heterosexual white women will procreate with cisgender, heterosexual white men. We also see Daphne's lack of characterization bolstered by the fact that she is "not like other girls."[41] Other young women's negative characteristics allow Daphne to be shown in relief what she is not: a "mean" girl who is chasing men for money or pushing

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[40] Many tweets echoed these claims. Searching for "Daphne Bridgerton and "boring" on Twitter will show the current number.

[41] See footnote 17 about this misogynistic device. Like Enola Holmes, Daphne is characterized as "not like other girls" by wanting to marry for love (a more modern idea) instead of for money, status, or security despite those being legitimate reasons in the nineteenth century (Schaffer).

other women down for her own gain. While other young women are insipid and lack conversation skills, Daphne is clever and aware. Daphne's ability to capture the most eligible bachelor's attention comes through her charm and kindness and her right hook.[42] What little characterization Daphne does get comes at the expense of other young women, and sets her up to be the Duke's perfect match and fulfill the role of the "Angel of the House." While the show includes multiple characters of color and even has Daphne's love interest played by a Black man, by centering the narrative on Daphne's whiteness and potential for motherhood, white supremacist ideals of historical revisionism and patriarchy are reinforced.

As noted earlier in the chapter, adventure narratives about colonialism and conquest help to romanticize that past for men since they would have been the ones going on those grand adventures, and thus they identify with the heroes. Marriage and domestic narratives, I argue, produce a similar result in women. By romanticizing these pasts of conquest and colonialism, parallels in the present are also affirmed. Daphne Bridgerton fulfills many of the Angel of the House attributes established and idolized in nineteenth-century Great Britain, exemplified by John Ruskin's *"Of Queen's Garden"* and Coventry Patmore's "The Angel in the House." As noted earlier, men were supposed to go out into the harsh world while women were to "oversee and give order to the 'private', domestic sphere" (Schlicke 188-189). As the "Angel of the House" she "was dependent on men and submissive to them, gentle self-sacrificing, capable of self-renunciation" and her role

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[42] When Nigel Berbrooke attempts to sexually assault Daphne as a ploy to ruin her reputation so she has to marry him, she punches him out which impresses Simon, the Duke, who was going to intervene on her behalf ("Diamond of the First Water 49:11-49:56). Through this and various other scenes, Daphne is shown to not be an incapable or helpless damsel as a continuation of "not like other girls" characterization.

was to be wife and mother (Mohanram 31). At the same time, she is lesser and weaker

than white men and constantly under threat of being corrupted, either by doing her job as

wife and mother poorly or by being sexually corrupted by a non-white man (Mohanram

34). White women "served as mediating and threshold figures by means of which [white]

men oriented themselves in space, as agents of power and agents of knowledge"

(McClintock 24). White women held a contradictory position in the British empire:

considered lesser than white men, their labor in the domestic space was undervalued but

was also integral to maintain their husband's status through a well-kept home and well-

raised children to continue the familial and colonial legacy (Langland 17 and 29; Poovey

161; Armstrong 29). While not widely recognized, white women were (and continue to

be) crucial to the support and maintenance of the ideological and physical underpinnings

of colonialism and white supremacy. The frustration of a subset of modern white women

with this conflict will be explored more in the conclusion, but for this chapter, it is crucial

to recognize the importance of motherhood, marriage, and the cultural processes that

attempt to romanticize them for white supremacist ends. Within white supremacy, a white

woman's most important role is to be a wife and mother, so it is important to note when

popular media, especially media that seems to present a more progressive narrative, still

revolves around white marriage with the promise of motherhood.[43]

The contradictory devaluation of motherhood and domestic duty and the

perceived innocence of white women (more on that later) has led to the erasure and

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[43] I do not intend to disparage the Romance genre or romance as a plot. We are all bound by the cultural
values of our time, and some work that focuses on romance is subversive. I only want to note one of the
motivations for an abundance of romance media for women and how that is used to naturalize marriage as
an expectation seemingly removed from white supremacy.

ignorance of how ideas about white motherhood and womanhood are closely tied to white supremacy. Even in the nineteenth century, when white British feminists were advocating for their equality to white men, it was at the expense of colonized peoples; British white women "strove to identify themselves with the Self of the nation" through creating the idea of a passive Indian woman other who needed white women's intervention to "save" them from assault, exploitation, and "savage" practices like "widow sacrifice" (Burton 16-17 and Spivak 93). This characterization of white women can be also seen in American white mothers, as a result of the colonial inheritance that passes from European empires to the American empire. Elizabeth Gillespie McRae explores how white women used their positions as concerned mothers to "continue to sustain various degrees of racial segregation, in practice, if not law" in schools and elections from the 1920s to the 70s (14-15). Their "white supremacist maternalism" allowed them to be guides of morality and be seen as guardians of racial segregation without being remembered and vilified like the Klu Klux Klan (10 and 94). Jessie Daniels's work extends this argument to modern examples of white women who use their white motherhood to "protect" their children and hoard resources for their white communities (166-167 and 169-170). White women were crucial to the construction and maintenance of the British Empire and continue to be so even in the twentieth and twenty-first century American empire. When media remediates the British empire, it does so in a white supremacist culture that constantly works to hide itself, naturalizing itself to continue its dominion. If white women are integral to the maintenance of that culture, then noticing when media helps to normalize and promote this kind of white motherhood is crucial to disrupting white supremacy.

As noted earlier, Netflix's *Bridgerton* gained immense popularity at the end of a tumultuous year and peaked in popular discourse after the January 6th Insurrection, which involved a compilation of neo-Nazis, far white extremists, and assumed white supremacists attempting to disrupt proceedings to elect Joe Biden as president after Donald Trump lost the 2020 election. *Bridgerton* not only provided an accessible escapist fantasy, it also reinforced traditional values of heterosexual marriage, virginity, and white motherhood. Daphne Bridgerton may marry a Black man, but Daphne's white motherhood, and the means by which she will secure it, reinforces those values. She is petite and pretty and is shown to be funny, intelligent, and kind, and she is acutely aware of her position in society and how her worth is determined by who her husband will be: "This is all I have been raised for. This is all I am. I have no other value. If I am unable to find a husband, I shall be worthless" ("Diamond of the First Water" 32:20-32:54).[44] Her defining characteristic is her desire to be a mother. Daphne's quest for children even leads the series to excuse her raping her husband who does not want a child because of childhood abuse and neglect from his father ("Swish"48:50-51:00). Children make Daphne sympathetic because it reminds us of the trope of the self-sacrificing and morally superior mother who was key for justifying and upholding the ideologies of an imperial nation (David 5). Taking advantage of her husband is not coded as selfish or an assault because motherhood is her calling, her purpose. The ending scene of the season is Daphne's triumphant happy ending: her loving husband by her side as she gives birth to a

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[44] As part of the contradiction of white supremacy and women, this ideology wants intelligent women who are aware of their position and how to use that position. McRae's mothers who upheld Jim Crow segregation were not ignorant, but astute women who used their perceived innocence to hide their racism and manipulation. Nor are today's women in alt-right groups simpering housewives who do not understand their husbands' politics but women who embrace some of the tenets of white feminism to justify their own power and privilege.

boy, the metaphorical and literal reproduction of a colonial empire ("After the Rain" 1:07:04-1:08:45).[45]

Daphne's characterization and narrative arch is contrasted by how the non-white characters are treated in the series. Simon, the Duke of Hastings and Daphne's eventual husband, is played by Regé-Jean Page who is British and Zimbabwean. Simon is the most eligible bachelor of the season: he holds the highest title, richest income, and is presented as the most handsome man on screen. Throughout the season, his body is displayed for the heterosexual woman's pleasure, and in moments with Daphne, we often see close-ups of his mouth and lips as he cleans his sugar spoon, his forearms as he rolls up his sleeves, his fingers as they want to reach out to grasp Daphne's hand, and other parts of his body that may not be considered explicitly sexual but are through the female gaze.[46] Daphne's gaze becomes ours. While this avoids the male gaze and objectification of Daphne, the absence of discussion about Daphne's whiteness with Simon's Blackness within the series repeats similar power imbalances. Colonial and slavery scholar Kerry Sinanan notes that in the sugar-spoon scene, "Daphne consumes Simon with her white gaze that reduces him to an artifact," while the series ignores the histories of African slave labor that allowed the wealthy to consume sugar (Kafantaris et. al.). Daphne raping Simon

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[45] In the book, *The Duke and I*, Simon and Daphne have three girls before they have a son. While the changing of the firstborn to a boy may be to parallel Simon and his father, this change also aligns with the needs of the empire for male children to take over their father's fortunes and conquests.

[46] "A term coined by feminists in response to the claims made by Mulvey that the conventions established in classical Hollywood films required all spectators, regardless of their sex, to identify with the male protagonist and to adopt the controlling male gaze around which such films were held to be structured. 'The female gaze' thus marked out neglected territory. For many, the term alludes to the right of women to adopt the active and objectifying gaze that has traditionally and stereotypically been associated with males, undermining the dominant cultural alignment of masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity. Despite the label, this need not involve replacing one form of gender essentialism with another: the objects of the gaze need not be confined to males." (Oxford Reference).

inverts colonial fears of non-white men raping white women, but because of the gendered

and racialization of these characters, his assault is not taken as seriously as it may have

been if the roles or their races were reversed. As noted earlier, Simon and Lady Danbury,

two of the few Black aristocrats, have the only meaningful discussion about race, so the

lack of acknowledgement between Daphne and Simon allows audiences to ignore that

difference as well.

The other characters played by non-white actors also see the replication of

colonial and racist stereotypes. Simon's objectification and rape by a white woman builds

on his backstory of his abusive father who is notably darker than Simon and his mother,

which reflects colorism and cultural narratives of Black men being abusive and bad

fathers. Queen Charlotte seems to reflect the American cultural idea of the "welfare

queen," an idea which arguably comes from an anti-monarchy sentiment of the

characterization of an undeserving person who lives lavishly and uses drugs thanks to the

money and hard work of others. In the show, Queen Charlotte is dressed in the Rococo

style, a stark contrast to the sleekness of the Regency dress of the aristocrats around her,

and this style of dress is often associated in popular culture with Marie Antoinette, the

excess of the French monarchy when their people were starving, and the subsequent

French Revolution ("Diamond of the First Water" 4:35-5:30).[47] This style of dress along

with her inability to ever be entertained and casual drug use aligns her with Marie

Antoinette, but by being Black she is also aligned in the popular imagination with the

welfare queens of the American 1980s ("Shock and Delight" 18:12-18:37 and 43:10-18).

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[47] In the spin-off series, *Queen Charlotte*, we learn that she continues to dress this way to not confuse King George who struggles with severe mental illness, but in season one of *Bridgerton*, none of this is revealed yet.

President Ronald Reagan's administration pushed this anti-poor stereotype and combined it with racism against Black mothers who struggled to keep their families afloat and used government assistance to do so. Relatedly, I argue that racism is also present with the character of Sienna, Anthony Bridgerton's mistress, who works as an opera singer and kept woman. While Sienna is played by Sabrina Bartlett, a white woman, she is consistently made darker and sexualized through her clothes and skin tone which contrasts to how Daphne and other aristocratic white women are dressed. With Sienna's heavy makeup, suggestive clothing, and tanner skin tone, her character is racialized in specific ways that keeps her visually at a lower station and far from serious consideration as a suitable wife. While the white characters have their faults, it is the *specific* faults of the characters of color—or characters who are racialized—that cause concern. However, it is the inclusion of Daphne's main foil that illustrates most clearly how Daphne's racial whiteness informs how her character is read in contrast to a woman of color.

The inclusion of Marina Thompson, played by Ruby Barker who has British and Montserrat ancestry, provides the contrast to Daphne's whiteness and "good" motherhood. A cousin to the gauche but white Featheringtons, Marina is visually non-white and racing to find a husband so that her out-of-wedlock pregnancy can be hidden. While most of the other young women on the marriage market are assumed to be sexually "pure," Marina's darker skin connects her to stereotypes of sexually promiscuous women of color consistently used as foils against the virginal white women: "the prostitution of Black women allowed white women to be the opposite; Black 'whores' make White 'virgins' possible" (Daniels citing Hill Collins 164). All of the young women on the marriage market are appraised for their suitability to be wives—for example, Nigel

Berbrooke makes a comment about marrying Daphne and not needing to consult her because "When I am buying a horse, I do not negotiate with the horse" ("Shock and Delight" 28:40-28:50). In a particularly disturbing scene with Marina, she is examined by Lord Rutledge, who demands to look at her teeth as if he were looking to purchase a horse ("An Affair of Honor" 5:10-6:00). While there is blatant misogyny in how women are assessed on the marriage market, Marina's skin color adds a layer of racism. Asking her to spin so Rutledge can look at how her body moves and asking to see her teeth for either the pleasantness of her smile or making sure she is clean and well cared for calls back to the slave markets where people were assessed for their suitability for forced labor (Johnson 2001). Because Marina's skin color is not remarked upon and since there is a parallel between this action and between Berbrooke's comments about Daphne as the horse he wants to purchase, it seems that the slave market allusion is meant for not only Marina, but for all of the women on the marriage regardless the color of the women being assessed and traded by men. This equation continues a harmful flattening of oppression and ignores white women's proximity to white men and the power and privileges that come from that proximity.

The Bridgertons, in the books and in the show, are used as the ideal model of a family who loves and cares for each other. In the books, they are contrasted with other white families that have various dysfunctions, but in the streaming series, their contrast comes at the expense of people of color. Marina, Simon, and even Queen Charlotte's narratives point to stereotypes of Black and non-white broken families, where abusive fathers, irresponsible mothers, and the tragic mullato tropes are used as examples of fragility and brokenness to uphold the stability and responsibility of white families. The

series does add nuance and sympathy in ways that seem to attempt to push back against these stereotypes at times—for example, a scene where Queen Charlotte must deal with one of King George's psychological episodes reveals her as a grieving wife and mother, and Simon is able to overcome his father's abusive legacy. Marina threatens to deceive one of the Bridgerton brothers into eloping with her and Penelope Featherington tells her she should not deceive a "good man," Marina responds, "Well, should I perhaps entrap a bad man, then? Perhaps you would find it acceptable for me to live my life with a man who treats me like a mere beast?" ("The Duke and I" 35:55-36:31). Marina argues for her humanity in spite of the social rules that work to dehumanize her and limit her choices. These and other moments add depth of character and nuance to their situations that push against the stereotypes that assume poor family situations with the colors of their skin, but they are not enough to break the patterns of stereotypes sustained throughout the series, which are particularly important to address in the current cultural context of white supremacy and historical revisionism.

The problem is not *Bridgerton* itself, like the other texts explored in this chapter, but the world that *Bridgerton* was created and gained popularity in. It is an impressive series that creates a wide appeal for diverse audiences, specifically for women of color who rarely see themselves reflected in period Romances.[48] The multiracial cast, campy costuming, and highlighting of gender inequality are blended with a traditional romance narrative, aristocratic settings and characters, and little to no commentary on historical systemic inequality. Building on Shonda Rhimes's reputation from her other shows—like

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[48] Relatedly, season two of *Bridgerton* and *Queen Charlotte* both center non-white women as their protagonists; giving these women conflict and faults while also championing their happy endings. Especially for such large budget productions, the centering of a non-white woman is kind of radical.

Grey's Anatomy (2005-present), *Scandal* (2012-2018), and *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-2020)—that all fall within the drama category, often have multiracial couples, and have a woman as the central protagonist, *Bridgerton* can feel radical and modern compared to other remediated period pieces, which allows it to extend beyond expected fans of period dramas (a subset of white women). But this also makes the series more dangerous as its potential impact reaches further. *Bridgerton'*s treatment of characters of color builds on contemporary and historical stereotypes without showing the systems and histories that informed those biases and racism. Sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom discusses why Black women in particular love Regency Romance and *Bridgerton*, despite the issues of racism, colonialism, and slavery making it very difficult for escapism and enjoyment to be possible. Cotton suggests that Rhimes's inclusion of the explanation for the lack of racism and slavery gives Black viewers "permission to suspend disbelief" and that the series is "elastic enough not to present too many challenges for story continuity." By "individualizing [racism] as a love story," Rhimes presents a period Romance that can, for the most part, allow escapism for non-white peoples (McMillan Cottom "The Black Ton"). While this is a masterful move to give access to escapism for non-white audiences, this move also plays into current moves by conservatives and white nationalists that attempt to ignore/rewrite history.[49] The backlash against Nikole Hannah-Jones and the *New York Times Magazine*'s *1619 Project*

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[49] My argument does not implicate Rhimes as a creator who is consciously creating narratives that romanticize colonialism and ignoring histories of racism. Instead, I believe she intended to create an escapist fantasy that was also accessible to Black women and other non-white audiences by giving a justification for the postracial society unlike most historical dramas (McMillan Cottom "The Black Ton"). This project also recognizes that Rhimes, despite her success, has to work with the restrictions of creating content for an assumed white audience and mostly white executives.

(Serwer), the propaganda and misinformation against critical race theory and banning of discussions of racism in schools (Ray and Gibbons), and the recent revival of banning books that discuss the Holocaust and other racism-led events (Garcia) all illustrate how ignorance of history is white supremacy's current playbook. By giving non-white audiences a way into escapism, *Bridgerton,* unfortunately, also plays into white ignorance and revisions of history that comfort white audiences.

2.4 Conclusion

The romanticization of the past depends upon the ignorance and erasure of the horrors of colonialism and slavery, especially the Regency and Victorian periods when Britain's wealth and social structure relied on its empire. *Emma.*, *Enola Holmes*, and *Bridgerton* all ignore or sublimate these histories to more effectively allow for escapism, and when they do engage with gender-based inequality, it is through a popular, white feminism that is nonthreatening towards capitalism and white supremacy. This kind of feminism relies on neoliberal and surface-level fixes without acknowledging deeper histories and systems of oppression. In *Bridgerton*, instead of systemic national and social violence against non-white people, there are individual instances of racism and race-based inequality that point to individual bad white people. The critiques of gender-based inequality are voiced to comfort audiences and allow for further escapism. *Enola Holmes* chooses to include a multiracial cast without justification, but Enola's characterization with white feminist sensibilities comes at the expense of the multiracial, collective group of suffragettes. *Emma.*, despite giving one of the most identifiable Austen heroines for young women in the twenty-first century, reinforces ideas about heterosexual marriage and the need for young women to humble themselves. While these

narratives are fictional, they build off certain nineteenth-century assumptions that have been reified over the last thirty years of historical and costume dramas. They continue to repeat and thus legitimize some assumptions of what life was like in the Regency and Victorian eras. This repetition erases colonialism and presents an idealized English domestic life where structural inequalities are bare to non-existent, and presents bigotries, whether based on race or sex, as individual failings and not systems crafted for and by white supremacy.

This chapter has explored and connected some of these longer histories and colonial ideologies that continue to have influence through remediated British literature and culture, and, as has been noted, key to that continued influence is the careful inclusion of more modern sensibilities that comfort and distract audiences. By incorporating popular feminist sentiments and individualizing racism and bigotries, the imagined white female audience can feel seen as a victim and embrace the escapism without having to consider their own position as oppressor, and by using British culture and texts instead of Antebellum South ones, American ignorance can be used to avoid white guilt and shame. Through this targeted entertainment and escapism, white supremacist versions of history are reinforced and white feminist heteronormative relationships are still seen as crucial to the happy ending. In the following two chapters, these values, and surreptitious white supremacy enacted through white feminism and a romanticization of the past, will be explored in modernized romantic comedies and social media influencers and content. Popular media created by and for white women often gets belittled or disregarded because of misogyny, but, as this chapter and the next ones hope

to prove, this media is highly influential and works to naturalize and disguise white

supremacy.

CHAPTER 3. THE CREATION OF A POSTFEMINIST JANE AUSTEN: WHITE
FEMINISM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY DOMESTIC NOVELS AND
POSTFEMINIST CHICK FLICKS

Jane Austen and related period media have become an expected part of American popular culture. To better understand how we came to a place where costume dramas dominate the popular culture landscape and allow for white nostalgia and escapism, we need to look back to the moment when period pieces combined with popular culture. While the first chapter explored how historical remediations project current ideals onto history to revise and idealize it for white supremacist motives like white comfort and nostalgia, this chapter will look back to the 1990s to the moment when Austenmania injected British Empire ideals of white womanhood into popular culture. To trace this history of idealized white womanhood, this chapter analyzes two key modernized remediations of nineteenth-century literature into postfeminist media: *Clueless* (1995) and *Bridget Jones's Diary (BJD)*, the novel and film (1996/2001) that modernize Jane Austen's most popular novels.[50] These modernizations embed and romanticize ideas of idealized white womanhood into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by making these ideals central to postfeminist romantic comedy genre tropes and presenting them as prerequisites for finding love and personal fulfillment. As one of the few genres targeted almost exclusively at women, this "chick lit/chick flick" genre is often dismissed and belittled as being without substance and not worth serious consideration. As scholars such as Elana Levine, Melissa A. Click, and Pamela Bettis & Natalie Adams have

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[50] From my count, Jane Austen's seven novels, if you count the unfinished *Sanditon*, have been remediated over forty times since 1990 between film, television, and literary web series that include both costume and modernized versions. The most popular source texts are *Pride and Prejudice* with ten remediations and *Emma* with nine since 1990. The next most popular nineteenth-century British author is Charles Dickens with over twenty remediations (Appendix A).

argued, these texts and films are important for understanding the socialization of women in the United States. Austen's nineteenth-century narratives work well within this genre because the marriage plot, the focus on middle- to upper-class women, and the slightly rebellious but in the end still proper female protagonists could equally describe a Jane Austen novel or the heroine of a romantic comedy. This chapter will show how nineteenth-century culture and ideas of white womanhood are embedded within postfeminist media that invoke ideas of female freedom and liberation while instilling conservative values and roles in (primarily white) women that are linked with the white supremacist hierarchies and social values of the nineteenth-century British Empire.

This chapter identifies Jane Austen and the 1990s as key in contemporary American popular culture because of three overlapping phenomena: Austenmania, Neo-Victorianism, and postfeminism. The 1990s saw the rise of Austenmania and Neo-Victorianism, a proliferation of Jane Austen and nineteenth-century British culture in American popular culture. Austenmania, specifically, began with the three popular Austen period adaptations in 1995, and since then the author's popularity has continued to grow and create new fans with new remediations and with the internet as Austen fans found each other on different platforms and forums (Hudelet 261). Those three films/miniseries were *Sense and Sensibility* with Emma Thompson and Kate Winslet, the lesser popular *Persuasion* with Amanda Root and Fiona Shaw, and the BBC miniseries *Pride and Prejudice* with Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle. Notably also released in 1995 was *Clueless*, which modernized Austen's *Emma* (1815), which will be discussed in this chapter, and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (the novel) and the film *Emma* starring Gwyneth Paltrow quickly followed in 1996. The combined popularity of these remediations and

the star power of many of these actors helped Jane Austen become a pop cultural force

that has continued to the present day. While Jane Austen has consistently been

remediated and maintained a position of prominence in the white literary Canon, it was at

this cultural moment that, I argue, she transitioned into modern popular culture. Tied to

Jane Austen's popularity is the concurrent rise of Neo-Victorianism in popular culture.

While Austen's work represents and resides more in the late-eighteenth century and

Regency era, in a modern popular consciousness, Jane Austen has become inextricably

intertwined with Neo-Victorianism. Neo-Victorianism is a term used to encapsulate

media that "self-consciously play at a metatextual or metahistorical level with the

Victorians" or, more plainly, work from Steampunk to historical romances that play with

popular conceptions of the Victorian period (Heilmann and Llewellyn citing themselves

495). Heilmann and Llewellyn note in their chapter that "Victorian" is "often conflated

with the long nineteenth century… which dominates the vocabulary of nostalgia,

heritage, and a more slippery sense of Victorian 'cultural memory'" (493). While I and

readers of this chapter most likely know the difference between Jane Austen's Regency

and the Victorian period, I argue that they are conflated in popular culture memory, as

Heilmann and Llewellyn note, and that the popularity of Jane Austen spills over and

helps the popularity of all historical fiction and period pieces.[51]

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[51] I would argue that this even includes remediations of the Renaissance and William Shakespeare. While Shakespeare does not need Jane Austen's assistance in maintaining popular cultural prominence, I would argue they help each other. As Sandoff notes in *Victorian Vogue: British Novels on Screen*, "culled from the English novel's 'canonical traditions' or theater's bardic texts (the Shakespeare films likewise exploded on the cultural scene in the 1980s and 1990s), these references form a 'common postcolonial cultural legacy for English-speaking audiences'" (xv citing Pidduck). All historical fiction that is based on the English/general European past contributes to some extent to a popular historical idea and blends together in the popular consciousness.

The rise in popularity of Jane Austen and Neo-Victorianism coincided with the rise of postfeminism in the 1990s. Postfeminism, the term, suggests that society is beyond the need for feminism. In the late 1980s and 1990s, it was a reaction to second-wave feminism and related activisms of the decades prior, like the Civil Rights Movement, and the more collective efforts to challenge systems of oppression and inequality. This new "feminism" and the media exemplifying it was "preoccupied with "the end of feminism" like the *Time Magazine* cover in June 1998 that asked "Is feminism dead?" (Laughlin et. al. 85 and *Time Magazine*).[52] Postfeminism "distorted" the "political and social goals of feminism" and characterized feminism as "rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult and extremist," and simultaneously positioned itself as a more "moderate," comfortable feminism that championed women's choices (Negra 2). Postfeminism co-opts feminism and neutralizes its socio-political work by embracing conservative ideals of femininity and heteronormativity while also championing a woman's right to *choose* the life that makes her happy. These "choices" turn systemic inequalities that second-wave feminism worked to address into individual responsibilities (Wilkins 149-150); it is the neoliberalization of feminism, encouraging women to "undertake private initiatives and self-improvement over collective efforts to deal with challenges emerging systemic societal issues of inequity, oppression, and exclusion" (Sharma). Postfeminism promised

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[52] Postfeminism is often conflated with third wave feminism, though there are differences. The wave model of feminism imagines key points in feminism as the peaks of waves, but this model centers a white heterosexual, usually affluent, women's version of feminism (first wave being white women's suffrage and the second wave being equal rights like the Equal Pay Act (1963) and Roe v. Wade (1973)). The wave model often excludes activism and work by women of color and queer women, and through this combination of highlighting the women most accepted by society and excluding the less desirable women, popular culture has latched onto this neat, white explanation of feminism. Postfeminism/ third-wave feminism mostly follows this trend. While explicit third-wave feminists in the 1980s and 1990s attempted to be more inclusive and intersectional by using work by Kimberlé Crenshaw, their work is often eclipsed by the popular culture of the moment that embraced postfeminism and an aesthetic defined by all things girly and feminine (Grady).

liberation and freedom for women on the surface but crafted a "feminism" that was conservative and exclusive at its core, ultimately serving as the precursor to popular feminism. In the previous chapter, I discussed popular feminism, a non-threatening version of feminism that "consents to heteronormativity, to the universality of whiteness, to dominant economic formations, to a trajectory of capitalistic success" (Banet-Weiser 16). Popular feminism circulates by and through pop culture and its origins are found in postfeminism.[53]

Three shifts in media production in the 1990s led to the ideal circumstances for postfeminism and Austenmania to combine, a combination that this chapter will show incorporated nineteenth-century British ideals into feminist media. First, we saw a shift in consumer culture with the massive growth of the internet and the mass franchising of media content due to the major franchising success of brands like *Clueless* which "became the foundation for a complete multimedia brand, including a television show, a video game, and twenty-one novels" on top of the successful film (Hunting 145). Multimedia branding and franchising became a key goal especially in media targeted at young women. Secondly, an "increasingly conservative climate in the US in the late 1990s and into the 2000s seems to have made the female friendship film, which clearly was inspired by feminist notions of sisterhood, anathema to mainstream filmmaking" (Hollinger 223). We see this in the shift from multi-women-lead films like *Steel*

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[53] Sarah Banet-Weiser notes in her book on popular feminism that it was not until mid–2010s when Beyoncé famously performed at the 2014 VMA's with "FEMINIST" in the background that feminism became trendy and more broadly acceptable (7). Before this, most female celebrities avoided identifying explicitly as feminists and instead espoused a general ideology of female empowerment and gender equality (Beck 3). After this Beyoncé performance, feminism became commodifiable (Beck 4-5). Chapter 3 will talk more about the turn to popular feminism in the 2010s, but for this chapter, postfeminism is the precursor to popular feminism and through it we can track the evolution of conservative feminine values in popular culture.

Magnolias (1989) and *Fried Green Tomatoe*s (1991) to the solo-driven female films of

Legally Blonde (2001) and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002).[54] And thirdly, more

women entered into filmmaking in the 1990s, and for these new filmmakers to balance a

feminine perspective while being seen as producing legitimate cultural work, they turned

to Jane Austen's and related historical work to meet the demands of the changing media

landscape and to provide familiar characters and story worlds (Hollinger 222). The

alignment of these trends led to the creation and mass dissemination of postfeminist

media that, as this chapter will detail, used Jane Austen as a key influence to meet the

demands of (1) a franchise model that needs a built-in audience that is familiar with key

characters and (2) a desired solo-female protagonist whose personal growth is mostly

dependent on their own strength and willpower to sell to the young female audience

while also reaffirming conservative ideals.

Postfeminist media fulfilled the demands of the changing media landscape and

used it to circulate and naturalize its messaging. Because it was not a social movement

based in theory and community practice, postfeminism relied on popular culture to

disseminate its ideology. We see the power and spread of postfeminism through the

growth of the romantic comedy and drama genres in the 1990s and 2000s.[55] Often

referred to as "chick lit/chick flicks," terms with derogatory connotations and

dismissiveness, these related genres continue the tradition of popular media made by, for,

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[54] This is not to say that films like *Legally Blond*e or *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* do not illustrate the importance of family or female friendships, but their primary focus is on the lead lady's focus on self-improvement with a key relationship being her romantic one.

[55] Also popular were zines, girl bands like the Spice Girls, movements like the Riot Grrrls, among other media and culture that sometimes did espouse a more third-wave feminist politic over a superficial postfeminism, but this project is specifically focused on the chick flick/chick lit postfeminism so it will not try to cover the nuances of each of these media forms, their feminisms, or their impact.

and about women, that has consistently circulated from the popular novels of the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Showalter) to "woman's films" (Hollinger) and soap

operas in the later twentieth century (E. Levine "Melodrama and Soap Opera"). The term,

"chick," is, usually, a dismissive or patronizing slang term for women or girls. It gained

popularity in the 1950s as a term for young, unmarried women, and in the late 1980s and

1990s, described, but also demeaned and dismissed, films and media made for women

(Oxford English Dictionary and T. Barker). Postfeminism thrived through chick media

because this media was made for a young female audience, often gave a shallow female

empowerment message, but almost always ends with a heterosexual coupling that signals

our heroine has grown enough to be worthy of her male partner and the promise of soon

fulfilling the nuclear family ideal. While the misogynistic dismissal of the genre often

leads women to acknowledge the "cringe" associated with liking chick flicks and

romance-based media, many women do find it enjoyable and identifiable (Rowntree et al.

9).[56] Feminists also often critique the genre and take issue with how the genre

"reinscrib[es] traditional attitudes and reactionary roles for women," noting the genre's

alignment with postfeminism and conservatism (Ferriss and Young *Chick flicks:*

contemporary women at the movies 1). Despite this critique, chick flicks "have [also]

been embraced as pleasurable and potentially liberating entertainments, assisting women

in negotiating the challenges of contemporary life" (Ferriss and Young *Chick flicks:*

contemporary women at the movies 1). As noted earlier, postfeminism is contradictory in

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[56] Rowntree et. al.'s data comes from "an anonymous on-line survey of forty-one women living in Australia" (1), and their survey does not seem to have asked for the women's racial identity. From my research, there does not seem to be a published study that asks similar questions, but Rowntree et. al.'s study does seem to confirm the anecdotal observations of scholars like Suzanne Ferriss & Mallory Young, Hilary Radner, and Natalia M. Thompson about the popularity of chick flick/lit despite their status as lower cultural genres.

nature, espousing a conservative social structure and heteronormativity while also championing women and putting them as heroines worthy of consideration and focus, and this media's influence and popularity helped to socialize an entire generation of young American women and continues to influence popular culture. The combination of nineteenth-century British imperial values and modern feminine ideals through a postfeminist Jane Austen has helped create popular media that projects a girl empowerment sentiment while surreptitiously reinforcing dangerous social hierarchies that value whiteness, heteronormativity, patriarchy, and more. Postfeminist media, while often disregarded because of its girliness and obsession with all things pink, is an important part of our culture that needs to be further examined and critiqued.

3.1   *The Creation of a Postfeminist Jane Austen*

The rising popularity of chick flicks corresponded with the Austenmania I have already discussed. I argue that these are not unrelated phenomena, but closely related trends that used one another to gain popularity. The changing media landscape, as noted earlier, fostered Austenmania and postfeminist chick flicks, but at their core, they both contain key elements of heterosexual pairing, an empowered heroine, and a postfeminist messaging. Postfeminism combines the backlash against second-wave feminism with a girl power façade to sell to young women, and Jane Austen is key to that construction. Austenmania, in period remediations as well as modernized ones, presents an Austen that is not antifeminist or antifeminine. It presents an idea of womanhood that provides nostalgia and good feelings without enacting systemic change or creating more than temporary social discomfort. This postfeminist media and postfeminist Jane Austen co-opt feminist sentiments and ideas to (1) capitalize on Jane Austen's legacy and (2) craft

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and sell a neutralized feminism. *Clueless* and *BJD* exemplify this commodification of

Jane Austen to balance modern girl power and historical hierarchies.

Postfeminist media is most clearly exemplified in chick flicks, but even costume

dramas and period pieces based on Austen's and other's works did not escape the

postfeminist sensibilities of the era.[57] Jane Austen's novels provide heroines that enact

"safe rebellions" (E. Barker citing Ascheid 198-199) and "maintain a fine balance

between stubborn individuality and feminine compliance… Austen heroines aspire to a

certain degree of independence, but not so much as to be offensive to their male

counterparts" (Steenkamp 4). Austen's heroines are able to be defiant, intelligent, and

"not like other girls" (re: more masculine) while also securing their happy ending with a

marriage to a good, wealthy man.[58] Austen's narratives provided historical source texts

that easily fit within the postfeminist framework; they provided heroines that were

identifiable because they were flawed and made missteps but also strong-willed and witty

that were still able to get the ideal man in the end. Austen's empowered heroines nicely

fit within a modern heteronormative framework, and Jane Austen provides a white

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[57] An example of this phenomenon beyond Austen remediations is the rebrand of Marie Antoinette through Sophia Coppola's 2006 film, *Marie Antoinette*. Marie Antoinette was the last queen of France before the French Revolution and often mistakenly attributed to saying the phrase "let them eat cake" when she was told her starving people had no bread. The chick flickification of Marie Antoinette made it so she was "no longer viewed as a heartless, elitist, anti-revolutionary wicked witch, she had now morphed into a sympathetic, unfairly maligned victim - one who had successfully made the transition from literal teen queen to mature, elegant wife and mother." (Ferriss and Young "'Marie Antoinette': Fashion, Third-Wave Feminism, and Chick Culture" 98). *Marie Antoinette* exemplifies the notable lack of female solidarity within postfeminism and the focus on the individual, and it illustrates the encouragement for women "to settle for a future in which 'women playing the same games as men do' is the only mode of radicalism or emancipation on offer" and the only choices women have are "neoliberal renditions of heterosexuality, matrimony, motherhood and consumerism" (Anwer and Arora 14).

[58] Chapter one discusses the misogyny that motivates a "not like other girls" trope.

Canonical source text that appeals to a conservative sensibility. This is the creation of a postfeminist Jane Austen that has broad appeal in American popular culture.

Jane Austen is considered by some to be a feminist icon (Looser "Jane Austen, Feminist Icon") and she has been invoked for over a century by feminists to support their cause (Looser "Jane Austen, Political Symbol of Early Feminism"). Despite feminists' claim to Jane Austen, she is also claimed by Alt-Right conservatives (Schuessler and Wright). This project is not concerned with debating whether Austen and her works are more conservative or liberal, but instead to interrogate how Austen, as a pop culture icon, and the postfeminist remediations of her works allow her to be invoked by feminists and white nationalists at the same time when they are supposed to be at different ends of the political spectrum. Jane Austen and her works are often invoked by conservatives and the Alt-Right as a "1) symbol of sexual purity; 2) standard-bearer of a vanished white traditional culture; and 3) exception that proves the rule of female inferiority" (Wright). Jane Austen's novels, as part of a white literary Canon, have become tightly intertwined with heteronormativity and Whiteness. I argue that Austen and her books are caught up and contribute to white nationalist ideas of "Old Europe" as the "geographic heartland" of whiteness and White Culture (Gallaher 16-17). American white nationalists often invoke a "mythic white past" that uses specific ideas of gender and race hierarchies in old Europe to justify modern racism and patriarchy (Mattheis 138). We see this clearly play out on social media with traditional wifehood (tradwife) and domestic trends (Love) and the "Victorian Era-Inspired Momfluencers [That] Are Taking Over Instagram with their sepia-toned images of babies bathing in buckets, based on 'the best mothers in literature,' these women eschew modern life — online" (Petersen). I argue that remediations of Jane

Austen and other costume dramas have helped to craft this misconception of what England and Europe were like in centuries past as discussed in chapter one, but in chapter two, this remains relevant as we examine how Austenmania combined with postfeminism, increasing the impact of this white feminist messaging and imperial ideas of womanhood. Within the modernized remediations of Jane Austen's most popular novels, we can see the updating and normalization of gender hierarchies and white supremacy under the postfeminist surface, and the invocation of Jane Austen within postfeminist media also works to legitimize postfeminism by connecting it to a longer history of "feminist" work.

Bridget Jones's Diary, Clueless, and other Austen remediations work so well within a postfeminist framework because they share critical ideas and parallel each other in how they engage the personal and political. Nancy Armstrong's 1987 book, Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel, documents how the creation of a new female subjectivity through nineteenth-century conduct books and novels drastically altered the social system and the perception of women's lives and purposes, and how those alterations continue to have impact on how modern audiences understand the past and the present. While Armstrong's book predates the proliferation of postfeminist popular culture and thus is not referring to the still-to-come Austenmania, she identifies why novels by Austen, among other nineteenth-century British authors, fit so well within a contemporary, later twentieth-century ideal. She notes how women are able to tame the male protagonist through their own worthiness despite her idiosyncrasies (6) and the domestic space and marriage operate as a space free of politics where all conflict can be

resolved through love and understanding (48).[59] These ideas are also present in

postfeminist chick lit in the 1990s, but that is not where the parallels end. Armstrong also

makes the argument that "reading of materials for and about women" helped establish a

cultural hegemony (9) and that this focus on the domestic as women's space is used to

remove it from political consideration and influence (48). This process works to

delegitimize women's stories to obfuscate their influence and power. We see similar

misogynistic moves in the relegation of "chick" flicks/lit as part of a lower cultural status.

From these parallels, I want to draw attention to two main connections between what

Armstrong is noting of this literature and the postfeminist romantic comedies this chapter

is discussing: (1) marriage as the resolution to all conflict mirrors the neoliberalism in

postfeminist media where a heterosexual partnering signals the end of the film/novel and

final resolution and (2) the "apolitical[ism]" and "uncritical consumerism and

individualism" that helps to define the chick lit/chick flick genre (Butler and Desai 2).

Postfeminist media inherited far more than a few source texts to use as inspiration from

nineteenth-century British literature and culture. Armstrong's text does not make an

explicit connection to postfeminist media, but her analysis illustrates the clear socio-

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[59] Armstrong even uses Elizabeth Bennet to illustrate the careful balance and ideal that women are presented with to appeal to the correct men and achieve resolution: "While excelling in none of the traditionally feminine qualities represented by her competitors, Elizabeth surpasses them on an entirely different plane. Her particular assets are the traditionally masculine qualities… all of which at first seem to impede a good marriage" (50). Elizabeth Bennet's foils in her sister, Jane, and Caroline Bingley illustrate just how much Elizabeth does not fulfill feminine ideals, and there are two scenes (with Mr. Darcy at Netherfield in Chapter 8 and Lady Catherine in Chapter 29) that speak to her lack of accomplishments and education as a proper young lady. Despite Elizabeth's transgressions against proper femininity, she still appeals to the novel's most eligible bachelor, Mr. Darcy. But Elizabeth's masculine attributes mostly disappear after she agrees to marry Darcy: "Her "liveliness of mind" loses its cutting edge, and from then on she will exert a softening influence in the world projected at the end of the novel… Their union miraculously transforms all social differences into gender differences and gender differences into qualities of mind" (Armstrong 51). Political and social differences are solved through a private domestic arrangement that leads to happily ever after.

political parallels that help to define nineteenth century domestic literature and postfeminist chick media. *Clueless* and *BJD* most clearly exemplify these parallels and connections despite the century of separation because they make explicit how British nineteenth-century ideology can still have influence within a modern postfeminist genre.

3.2   The Impact and Influence of **Clueless** *and* **Bridget Jones's Diary**

Clueless was released in 1995 during the initial wave of Austenmania. While Austenmania usually gets applied to period adaptations, *Clueless*, despite its 1990s southern California setting, also proved the enduring popular power of Jane Austen. Written and directed by Amy Heckerling, who directed the popular teen comedy, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), *Clueless* illustrates how the socio-politics of a town in nineteenth-century England can also apply to a 1990s American high school (Bagno-Simon 2). Emma Woodhouse becomes Cher Horowitz, a blonde valley girl whose fashion sense is one of her defining features, who is taking care of her single father while also facing the drama and conflicts of high school. Mr. Knightley becomes her ex-stepbrother and college student Josh (their parents got divorced), Harriet Smith becomes the awkward new girl, Tai, and Emma's Highbury social group become Cher's high school clique. The film follows the plot of Austen's *Emma* pretty closely, with Cher playing matchmaker and having blind confidence in her perspective on the world. She begins to fail and doubt her own abilities when she is, briefly, no longer the most popular girl in school while also realizing she is in love with her ex-stepbrother who she has fought and bickered with the entire film. Emma/Cher are anti-heroes for most of their narratives and come off as privileged and obtuse to realities beyond their own, but they are able to reach the resolution of their stories when they gain awareness and are able to

see and appreciate what makes others happy and not just what would make them happy. *Clueless,* despite its drastic change of setting, works because it captures Austen's "ironic satire" about societal conventions and stereotypes and turns it toward the genre of "teenaged-focused romantic comedies" and "lay[s] groundwork for similar, female-led comedy films to follow" (Luetkenhaus 37). *Clueless* was able to combine a nineteenth-century Austen with postfeminist media to create a film that began a massive multimedia franchise and inspired the postfeminist media that came after it.

Helen Fielding's novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary,* was released in 1996 and actually references *Clueless* (60). Five years later, the film was released. Both the novel and the film were successful and were credited with catching the mood of the period as Bridget Jones was hailed as ''the Spirit of the Age" (Genz 100). *BJD* is 32-year-old Bridget's diary that details her year of trying to stop smoking, lose weight, and pivoting between trying to be content with her singleness and desperately trying to attract a man. While the plot connections to *Pride and Prejudice* are looser, we do see Bridget, like Elizabeth, turn down men who are not good enough and it is her honesty and idiosyncrasies that attract Mr. Mark Darcy, a successful lawyer. Bridget and Elizabeth are facing a world that expects them to marry, but they struggle to fulfill ideals of womanhood that are supposed to help them attract the correct man. In the end, being themselves is enough to make their Mr. Darcys fall in love with them. Bridget romanticizes period and costume dramas and the straightforward plots to love and fulfillment, and while book Bridget fawns over Colin Firth's portrayal of Mr. Darcy in the 1995 BBC *Pride and Prejudice* (Fielding 215), film Bridget's Mark Darcy is played by that very Colin Firth (and Hugh Grant, from the 1995 *Sense and Sensibility,* plays her cheating boyfriend, Daniel Cleaver). *BJD*

continues what *Clueless* began by incorporating Jane Austen into a modern context and illustrating the connections between that era and the current one. Both exhibit a postfeminist sensibility that balances conservative ideals with its girl power feminist branding.

Clueless and *BJD* bridge the nineteenth- and late twentieth-/early twenty-first centuries and, I argue, help us more clearly see the parallels between nineteenth-century imperial white womanhood ideals and postfeminism, but this connection would not matter as much if *Clueless* and *BJD*, as examples of postfeminist Jane Austen remediations, were not as popular or influential. *Clueless* and *BJD* are often cited for their status as beloved films and some of the first examples of chick flicks and chick lit (T. Barker and Express).[60] They both had lucrative franchises and continue to live onward in the popular consciousness. As noted above, Heckerling's *Clueless* was able to fulfill the genre conventions of a teenage rom-com and laid the "groundwork for similar, female-led comedy films to follow" (Luetkenhaus 37). It set a standard that chick flicks could be self-aware and clever in their delivery, and it was so impactful that it became a "touchstone" for that era (Luetkenhaus 38). *Clueless*'s staying power in popular culture through fashion (Nast), makeup (HipDot and Revolution Beauty), and memes (A. Cohen) is a testament to its lasting impact and importance. And as cited earlier, *Bridget Jones's Diary* was "credited with catching the mood of the period" (Genz 100). And even in the 2020s, women continue to reflect on Bridget Jones and how she showed their younger

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[60] *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the novel, is often credited with founding "chick lit" (Smith 672-3). Chick lit overlaps heavily with chick flicks in that the genre "uses first person narration to chronicle the romantic tribulations of young, single, white, heterosexual, urban heroines" and often comments on consumer culture (Smith 673). While the film comes later within the chick flick genre, I use the combined popularity of the novel and the film to argue for its status in postfeminist chick media.

selves that "unpolished, average, eccentric and allegedly "overweight" women were worthy of love and respect" (Ali). Bridget Jones was, and for many continues to be, a highly identifiable female character representing the stress and fear of not having the career, relationship, or life you wish you could have and feeling that you have somehow failed. *Clueless* and *BJD*'s continued popularity is a testament to the impact that this postfeminist media has had on popular culture so far in the twenty-first century.

Beyond their personal staying power, these narratives were influential on other popular postfeminist media. *Legally Blonde* (2001) is one of the most popular and influential films of this era (Kaplan), and we can see *Clueless* and *BJD*'s influence on it. The screenwriter for *Legally Blonde* recently said in a group interview commemorating the twenty-year anniversary of the film that "[*Legally Blonde*] immediately struck us as one of the greatest movie ideas ever, and we pitched it as "Clueless" meets "The Paper Chase," one of those law school movies from the 1970s" (Kaplan). It's not difficult to see the parallels between the blonde and fashion-forward Cher Horowitz and *Legally Blonde*'s blonde and fashion-forward Elle Woods. Both take on the "dumb blonde" stereotype and turn it on its head, showing that you can be blonde, beautiful, smart, and successful. *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the film, was released the same year as *Legally Blonde*, but we can see the novel's influence on one of *Legally Blonde*'s most iconic scenes where Elle attends a party dressed as a Playboy Bunny when no one else is in costume. This scene is in the novel and the film when Bridget is supposed to attend a "Tarts and Vicars" party as a "bunny girl" and wasn't told that they abandoned the theme for a more standard garden party (Fielding 145-6). Bridget and Elle both walk into the party dressed in a bunny costume, embarrassing themselves but also jumpstarting their

commitment to themselves above the men who have left them open to embarrassment.

This iconic scene in *Legally Blonde* seems likely inspired by *BJD*. Beyond their specific

impact on films like *Legally Blonde*, *Clueless* and *BJD* also inspired many remediations

throughout the 2000s that modernized classic literature like *10 Things I Hate About You*

(1999), *She's All That* (1999), *O* (2001), *Deliver Us from Eva* (2003), *Bride and*

Prejudice (2004), *Material Girls* (2006) and *She's the Man* (2006) to name a few.[61][62][63]

While a short-lived subgenre that was mostly contained to the late 1990s and early 2000s,

these modernized classics (particularly *Clueless, BJD, 10 Things,* and *She's All That*)

have become significant within the chick flick genre and are often invoked or remediated

in online content (A. Wilkinson et al; Bose). *Clueless* and *BJD* were massively influential

on their own but their impact also helped to define postfeminist media.

3.3   *The Postfeminism of* Clueless *and* Bridget Jones's Diary

Clueless and *BJD* have been discussed and critiqued as pieces of feminist media to

mixed conclusions. *Clueless* has been accused of being less enlightened than the women

in Austen's time (Ferriss 123), and Looser has noted how Cher's wardrobe becomes more

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[61] In the order above, the films are based on *Taming of the Shrew* (1594), *Pygmalion* (1913), *Othello* (1603), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), and *Twelfth Night* (1602).

[62] To further state the influence of these texts on modern teen remediations of classic lit, Davis notes "Within roughly 20 months at the turn of the millennium, filmgoers were treated, knowingly or not, to two versions of *Pygmalion* (1913), with *She's All That* (1999) and the gender-reversed *Drive Me Crazy* (1999), as well as an adaptation of *Dangerous Liaisons/Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782), called *Cruel Intentions* (1999), a recast *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897), titled *Whatever It Takes* (2000), a gender reverse of *As You Like It* (1599), named *Never Been Kissed* (1999)" along with *10 Things I Hate About You* in 1999 *O* in 2001" (53).

[63] I want to note that I did not include *Deliver Us from Eva* until I was working on chapter three, and Brittany Cooper's book, *Eloquent Rage*, noted that this film was also a remediation of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* (54). While I knew of *O*, I was ignorant of the *Eva* connection. I had looked at multiple listicles online and scholarly work like Davis's, so I was surprised by my accidental omission. I note this ignorance because I think it speaks to the whiteness of this and related genres.

conservative as she undergoes her inner makeover ("Feminist Implications of the Silver Screen Austen") and claims "the pairing of such costume choices with Cher's moral "improvement" evokes a reactionary nostalgia for family values, and inscribes her internal trajectory within a patriarchal order in which women's sexuality is held in check by its display in acceptably" (Thornell 23). It has also been argued that Cher's reliance on fashion and her "'consumer agency' is … an integral part of her performance of femininity, reflecting her ultimately limited agency within a patriarchal system" (Thornell 26). *Clueless,* despite its popularity and connection to young women, is most often critiqued for its lack of feminism. Bagno-Simon is one of the few scholars who defends Cher and her feminism by reminding readers that Cher is a high school girl and "being a beautiful, rich blonde in 1990's Beverly Hills does not rid you of adhering to social rules and hierarchies" (2). This reading defends Cher for privileging her own survival in her social structure, and sees Cher's self-improvement and growth as enabled by the women in her life, not just her romantic interest in Josh (Bagno-Simon 4). Despite the scholarly critique of *Clueless'*s feminism, within popular culture, Cher and *Clueless* are often held as feminist as exemplified by *Marie Claire*'s "Why *Clueless* is Important For Women" and *Bustle*'s "Why *Clueless* is Still A Feminist Masterpiece" from the 2010s (L. Cohen and Khona). *Clueless*, despite mixed critiques, is widely considered to be an example of feminist media within popular culture.

   Bridget Jones's Diary faces similarly mixed criticism. Svensson makes the argument that the parallel between Bridget and Elizabeth Bennet "provides the reader with an illustration of power hierarchies in a contemporary setting" (Svensson 214). Guenther reads the text as a feminist confessional (84), and Harzewski sees Bridget Jones

as "as a modern everywoman and a departure from the beautiful heroine of historical romances" (59). Relatedly, *BJD*, as an example of chick lit, has been commended for making women's "singleness intelligible" and assists in "giving meaning to the social, political, cultural, and juridical shifts which have and broadened the 'scripts of femininity' available to (some) Western women" (Taylor citing Ussher 74). *BJD* is often explicitly connected to postfeminism which praises it for its "girl power" and "authenticity" but is not blind to its problems: "*Bridget Jones's Diary*'s stance on feminism, though ironic… draw[s] upon the stereotype of feminists as angry and unremittingly serious. In consequence, aspects of radical feminism are appropriated to make negative blanket statements about the larger feminist project" (Harzewski 60). The scholarly critiques of *BJD* are overall kinder to its rendition of feminism than they are to *Clueless*, and popular publications are also more willing to recognize *BJD*'s faults while still defending it: *Glamour*'s *"Bridget Jones's Diary* Is Perfect, Just the Way It Is, 20 Years Later" and Refinery 29's *Bridget Jones* Writer Helen Fielding Says She's 'Staggered' By The Sexism In The Film" (Singer and N. Levine). Both *Clueless* and *BJD* inspire contradictory readings because they do espouse postfeminism that combines some feminist ideas and empowerment while also conforming to heteronormativity, consumerism, and neoliberalism.

I do not disagree with the conflict expressed by critics about the simultaneous conservativeness and feminist influences of these texts, but I embrace this conflict as key to their influence and underappreciated power. Because *Clueless* and *BJD* are able to toe that line of empowered heroine that still fits within conservative power structures, they fulfill the tenets of postfeminism that co-opt feminism but negate its more radical parts.

As noted earlier, Jane Austen's heroines portray "safe rebellions" that give the feeling of empowerment and individuality without disrupting systems of power (E. Barker citing Ascheid 188-9). The postfeminist remediations of Jane Austen are able to pull tenets of white supremacy and patriarchy that helped uphold the British Empire in the nineteenth century into a twentieth and twenty-first century popular cultural context. Using Austen's novels as an influence and inspiration for postfeminist media, sets a standard of how to craft heroines in chick flick/lit media that create a similar balance and appeal. Using Austen's novels as an influence also appeals to conservatives who highly value a white Canonical literature and furthers its appeal to feminists and legitimacy by making claim to the longer history of media made for and by women. To be clear, I do not think enjoying these texts and related popular culture makes one antifeminist, but their influence and incorporation with other postfeminist media have helped to shift feminism from a (flawed) socio-political movement to a capitalism playbook with the goal of selling content to women. As bell hooks argued, "We have to constantly critique imperialist white supremacist patriarchal culture because it is normalized by mass media and rendered unproblematic" (65). While work by others has explored and continues to explore more explicit forms of inequality, this chapter looks at seemingly light-hearted and benign postfeminist artifacts and how their influence has assisted in the normalization of historical power structures.

As with chapter one, I do not make claims about any specific intention by the authors or creators. Instead, my intent is to draw attention to the impact of this genre as a whole and *Clueless* and *BJD* have had on the larger cultural consciousness of post-/popular feminism. Austen's heroine's rebellions and her satire may have been more

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impactful during her time,[64] but to modern sensibilities, her novels fit within a postfeminist sentiment that wants to feel rebellious while also aligning with existing power structures like heteronormativity and patriarchy. Amy Heckerling, the writer and director of *Clueless*, and Helen Fielding, the author of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, reimagined a beloved historical author's work. What they could not have predicted was how well their texts captured the ideal of the moment and became highly influential to the point of helping to define the postfeminist era and continuing to have an impact on American popular culture in the 2010s and 2020s. These texts were created within a specific context and social value-system, but their influence has grown far beyond that context.

The rest of this chapter will draw parallels between three major features of nineteenth-century domestic novels and culture and 1990s/2000s postfeminist media. Those features of idealized white womanhood are (1) a reliance on consumerism and the idea of self-improvement, (2) a (neo)liberal/individualistic conception of selfhood and responsibility, and (3) the idea of authenticity and effortlessness and its ties to attracting a quality romantic partner. These features are prerequisites for attracting the "correct" romantic partner and with that romantic partner is the promise of happiness and an easier life. In a similar way that domestic novels and women's media in the nineteenth century were used to privatize the home and remove it from consideration as a political space (Armstrong), postfeminist media takes steps to neutralize feminist and female

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[64] As discussed earlier, Jane Austen's status as a feminist author or an early feminist during her life are not central to this project. Scholars like Devoney Looser have written multiple pieces, scholarly and public, that ask the question about Austen's feminism, but for this project, I am more concerned about the creation and use of a postfeminist Austen to sell nineteenth-century imperial values to a modern audience.

empowerment through romanticizing the domestic space and heterosexual partnering and idealizing a femininity that conforms to neoliberalism and capitalism.

3.3.1   Consumerism and Self-Improvement

Postfeminist chick flicks and related media are known for their reliance on and promotion of consumerism (York, Butler & Desai, and Wilkins). *Clueless*, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, *Sex and the City*, *The Devil Wears Prada,* and more attach women's fulfillment and sign of success to their ability to consume. They also sometimes critique that connection, but the ability to purchase is often key in postfeminist media. This consumerism is often tied to ideas of self-improvement and the ability to better self-manage. The famous makeover montages from *Miss Congeniality*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding,* among others and even Tai's makeover in *Clueless* make dowdy and overlooked women into polished ladies whose outward appearance better represents their inner value. Through the makeover, these women become more capable and physically appealing which often results in the love interest finding a deeper appreciation for her. Sometimes the makeovers are balanced with either an internal makeover or an appreciation of the woman's internal value that she held all along, but the effects of the physical makeover usually stay in some capacity. We see this in *Clueless* when Tai re-embraces some of her skater aesthetic again at the end of the films but still retains a more fashionable preppy look influenced by Cher's makeover. The makeover as film trope is not new, as we have seen in *Cinderella* and *Pygmalion*, but in postfeminist and related media in the 1980s-early 2000s, the makeover montage has added weight that reflects the changing media and political landscape. Maryn Wilkinson, studying 1980s teen films, notes the evolutions of media that wanted more "conservative values on the

one hand as it embraced opportunities for women and new strategies for self-improvement on the other" (385). While the postfeminist chick flicks of the 1990s had not been introduced yet, M. Wilkinson's arguments about the teen films can be used on them. M. Wilkinson argues that the makeover makes "visible the transformation process, by connecting the transformation process to individual consumerism and disposable income, and by presenting the body as malleable, promoting and celebrating notions of self-transformation and actively self-initiated performances of femininity" (386). Self-improvement, femininity, and consumerism are all intertwined within the makeover. While the makeover montage has become strongly associated with the postfeminist pushback against second-wave feminism (Grady), I argue that we can connect the makeover montage and the related new female consumerism of the later twentieth century to the shifts in economics and domestic labor during the British Empire in the nineteenth century.

During the nineteenth century, England saw a dramatic shift in economic and socio-political systems. Due to the rapid increase in wealth from Industrialization and the British Empire, class distinctions became defined through cultural representations as the rising middle class "adopted genteel cultural patterns of behavior" so that status was defined by fulfilling certain cultural ideals based in behavior and material accouterments rather than just the status inherited directly from family lineages (Langland 25). Like in the 1990s when young women were a newly recognized target audience for multimedia branding but their interests were also devalued as "chick" media, I argue that we can trace a similar phenomenon in nineteenth-century domesticity where a woman's value was determined by her ability to manage her household but was also depoliticized. In the

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nineteenth century, responsibility for adopting the genteel cultural patterns of behavior most often fell on women, who managed the domestic space where most of those cultural ideals were located. We see this in *Emma*, in Emma's stress about attending dinner at the Coles, a family whose wealth has recently come from their work in trade. They expanded their home and desire the company of the area's genteel families, but Emma is concerned about them knowing their place and how things are done. The Coles exemplify savviness in knowing the expectations of the higher class and how to replicate that in their own domestic space which allows Emma and the other high-born families to begin to open up their social circle (Austen *Emma* 201-205). Mrs. Cole, being in charge of the domestic space, was most likely key to changing her family's place in society; middle-class women were tasked with maintaining the look of a genteel life by giving the appearance of wealth and leisure despite most of these women needing to be an active participant in household labor (McClintock 161-163).

Despite the domestic and economic power of women that defined her husband socially, this new social organization promoted a division of domestic from public "real" life that worked to delegitimize the domestic space as political (Lesjak 9-10).[65] This move not only made the private sphere seem apolitical, but it also worked to devalue domestic labor: "the wife's labor of leisure and the servant's labor of invisibility served to disavow and conceal within the middle-class formation the economic value of women's work" (McClintock 164). Key to this construction were domestic novels that

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[65] A wife's power and influence was social and unofficial. It was not until the Matrimonial Causes Act 1857 that divorce became somewhat more accessible in egregious circumstances and the Married Women's Property Act 1870 that gave women some control over their own income and money. And the Custody of Infants Act of 1839 and 1873 gave women some rights in petitioning the courts to have custody of their children.

cultivated a cultural hegemony that naturalized expectations and new social relations: "the domestic novel helped to produce scripts that could be exploited by capitalism in producing wage labor" (Armstrong 37). This circular process of real-life political and economic changes informed domestic novels which in turn informed the politics and economics of everyday life which helped to naturalize this construction and render it ahistorical (Lesjak 12). Middle-class women gained new economic power that was tied to their perceived value as wives and women, but that same power was delegitimized and undervalued by society. Instead of focusing on the decisions of maintaining the household, women's purchasing power is often seen as illogical and silly, like in *Pride & Prejudice* when Lydia wastes her money on an ugly hat because "there were two or three much uglier in the shop; and when I have bought some prettier-coloured satin to trim it with fresh, I think it will be very tolerable"(Austen *Pride and Prejudice* 151). Lydia is the prime example of silly femininity and what not to be, but she reveals most clearly the internalized-misogyny and assumptions of women's purchasing power. This new construction of women and their social value, because it was removed from politics and history, has been highly influential in defining Western ideas of the role of women and naturalizing it as their "proper" place: "the more closely nineteenth century fiction asks us to focus on the domestic life and the personal experience of women, however, the more it will also insist that the information at hand is natural and universal and hence removed from political history" (Armstrong 48). We see an update of this process with consumerism and the value of women in postfeminist media where her ability to consume is a direct reflection of her social value but shopping and related activities are disregarded as "silly" to men so they are seen as apolitical.

In postfeminist media in the 1990s, women's value is at least partially defined by her ability to conform to beauty standards that are often determined by purchasing power. Clothes, makeup, hair, etc. are all key to the makeover that visualizes the transformation process and causes a reevaluation of the woman's worth. Her value increases as she conforms to feminine ideals that overwhelmingly support Western white beauty standards; in a similar way, nineteenth-century middle-class women were valued based on conforming to white ideals of the house and family that were being defined increasingly by the consumption of goods. Cher, living a lavish lifestyle in Beverly Hills and taking care of her high-profile lawyer father, most resembles women of the nineteenth century managing estates and households, but it is her ability to consume and project a certain feminine ideal through that consumption that ties her back to the nineteenth century. A defining feature of Cher the character and the film as a whole is the fashion. Cher's fashion has been called "iconic" and her outer appearance is tied to her value in the high school social structure (Spellings). From the opening sequence that shows Cher's computer-organized closet (00:51-1:22) to her being more stressed about ruining her Alaia dress than her own life when being held at gunpoint (42:15-42:40), one of Cher's most defining characteristics is her fashion, to the point that when she's going for her driving test she is stressed about finding the right outfit because it's her "most capable looking outfit!" (1:11:08-1:11:29). Cher's ability to purchase clothes and fulfill a physical feminine ideal gives her power.

That power is made even clearer when Cher's attempts to raise the social value of the new student, Tai, by making over how Tai dresses, acts, and who she socializes with. Dionne, Cher's best friend, states that makeovers are "[Cher's] main thrill in life. It gives

her a sense of control in a world full of chaos" (25:55-26:02). And when Cher is no longer on the top of the social pyramid and feels out of control of her own life, she gives herself a "makeover of the soul" (1:21:43-1:21:46). While not an outward makeover based on conforming to Western beauty standards (because a thin, blonde Alicia Silverstone already fulfills them to a T), Cher's internal makeover is focused on maturing and better fulfilling cultural and social ideals like being self-sacrificial and more socially aware. Cher matures and becomes a better manager of herself which allows her to better earn the respect of those around her and become attractive to Josh. Cher's ability to fulfill feminine ideals and her growth in self-managing are not far from the nineteenth-century ideals that helped to mold women into better versions of wives and mothers that would support the Empire: "self-effacement, self-sacrifice, reciprocity, altruism, responsiveness, self-control, sweetness, prettiness, and vulnerability" (Marcus 107). As caretakers of their husbands and children, wives and mothers must have control over themselves and be willing to sacrifice to support and better the people around them. And for Cher, it is when she combines her outward beauty with "makeover of the soul" that she becomes more respectable to the audience and attractive to Josh.

Similarly, *Bridget Jones's Diary*'s structure is predicated on her New Year's resolution to be better in the coming year. While Bridget does not experience a sped-up makeover montage, her diary is supposed to represent these attempts at self-improvement. Each diary entry documents calories consumed, weight lossed/gained, cigarettes smoked, lottery tickets bought, among other numbers meant to represent Bridget's self-assessment. Beyond these numbers, Bridget's diary documents her romantic pursuits either pursued by her or forced upon her by those around her. Bridget's

assessment of her self-worth is intimately tied to her perceived ability to fulfill certain societal standards which, it is constantly implied, will attract a good man. Despite *BJD*'s attempts to demonstrate the "social, political, cultural, and juridical shifts which have and broadened the 'scripts of femininity'" (Taylor citing Ussher 74), it is representative of the postfeminism moment "wherein 'girlpower' was the most lucid statement of feminist intent available" (Taylor citing Whelehan 77). Postfeminism embraced this self-improvement message that equated women's worth with their ability to consume and manage their lives. Bridget uses self-help books and self-critique to try and force herself to have more control over her life which she hopes will lead to a more stable and successful career and romantic relationship that she, and others, see as key for happiness. While Bridget's attempts to better herself ultimately fail as she does not quit smoking or keep the weight off, she still gets the guy in the end. This contradiction will be elaborated on in the coming pages, but because Bridget does get the guy to fulfill the genre and narrative's imperative, *BJD* affirms a consumerism and self-improvement drive that not only represents and perpetuates the postfeminism of the moment, but it also illustrates its deeper connections to the nineteenth century.

One of the scenes in both the novel and the film that illustrate the influence of the nineteenth-century domestic ideal on postfeminism is Bridget's birthday dinner. Bridget vows to host her own birthday dinner party with a three-course meal to prove her self-worth and abilities. By buying the correct ingredients, following the best recipes, and decorating her home appropriately, Bridget can illustrate her abilities as a woman and receive "adoring glances and endless approbation" from her friends and make her seem less "common" to Mark Darcy (Smith citing Fielding 685). Between the makeovers in the

movies and the assurances from the domestic magazines, there is an implicit promise that

if she works hard enough and follows the correct directions, Bridget can succeed.

Unsurprisingly, Bridget fails, but this scene illustrates how chick lit/chick flicks extended

the consumerism and self-management of the heroine to her domestic space, and, as we

see with Bridget trying to impress Mark, there is a promise of a good relationship and

upward mobility in mastering "proper" domestication (Smith 685). Bridget relies on

domestic magazines, like Martha Stewart's publications, to guide her attempts at self and

domestic improvement. Both postfeminist media and these domestic publications

"empower" women by promising they can attain happiness through hard work. Bridget

exemplifies this postfeminist ideal that she can achieve happiness and fulfillment, at least

for the day, through consumerism and following the directions. Like the nineteenth-

century women managing their own households, Bridget buys into the idea that a proper

cooked meal and ideal domestic space holds sentimental value that is equated with ideas

of "home, family, maternity, warmth" (Smith citing McHugh 674). This description of

the emotional weight of being properly domestic and its value projected to women in the

1990s and early 2000s could also be used to describe the changing economic and

domestic landscape of nineteenth-century England. *BJD*'s exploration of Bridget's

attempts at meeting an idealized womanhood and domestic space through consumerism

and self-management illustrates the parallels between the centuries and their respective

media. Like *Clueless*, *BJD* surreptitiously helps to bring nineteenth-century English

values of womanhood and the domestic into a postfeminist context by attaching women's

self-worth to how well they control and better themselves through consumerism and

following prescribed ideals.

3.3.2   Individualism

Postfeminist chick flicks champion the idea of their protagonists overcoming obstacles through hard work and self-control, but they rarely acknowledge their systemic and structural hindrances (or privileges). Butler and Desai are some of the few scholars who have taken a transnational and critical race approach to postfeminist chick lit, and they note how middle to upper-class white chick lit is often seen as "apolitical," produces a "middle-class neoliberal subject," and "reenact[s] the limitations of hegemonic U.S. feminist thought" (2). *Clueless* and *BJD* both fit these descriptions, but I particularly want to note the production of a "neoliberal subject." Cher and Bridget's consumerism and self-improvement is intimately tied to the idea of self-betterment and a "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" mentality. While our modern neoliberal setting is somewhat defined by conservative efforts to systematically disable government-funded social support and the idea that individuals can overcome poverty, illness, and disenfranchisement by just working harder, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the beginnings of this political ideology that began to craft individualistic citizens. The eighteenth century in Western Europe is often defined by the Enlightenment that saw a rise in "scientific and rational ethos, including freedom from superstition and religious intolerance" (Birch and Hooper), but the Enlightenment also saw the rise of scientific racism and classical liberalism that worked to justify colonialism and perpetuate the idea that hard work would be rewarded so people's poor lives were their own fault. Heroes in works by Jane Austen's, and other nineteenth-century writers', often illustrated this ideology: "the heroine must take stock of herself and be the catalyst of new behavioral patterns. Our world and Austen's, despite their two hundred-year separation, work in the

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same way…in that each of us is responsible for her own happiness, which will not arise from love alone but from qualities of mind" (Harzewski 80). Both Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse mature and become more aware of their world and what would make them most happy throughout their respective novels, but key to both narratives is how Darcy's letter (Austen *Pride and Prejudice* 135-141) and Knightley's reprimand for Emma's insult of Miss Bates (Austen *Emma* 364-6) are catalysts for our heroines taking stock of themselves and taking steps to be better. *Clueless* and *BJD* both highlight these ideas of being worthy of happiness stemming from one's "quality of mind"/self-control and one's ability to change their behavior (often based on male critique) and further naturalize this idea in postfeminist media.

Bridget Jones's popularity is often attributed to how identifiable she was to her female audience because she exemplified the struggle and failure to meet seemingly impossible standards of womanhood (Harzewski 59 and Genz 100). She represents the stress and futility of constantly trying to be better: "Bridget's diary reveals the external pressure she feels to be better than she is, pressure that exists without reference to her own qualities and qualifications— improvement for its own sake" (Marsh 57). We see her struggle and continually fail to keep off the weight, stop smoking, find a good man, and be "better." She also struggles with 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 hero" (Genz 100). But instead of critiquing the social systems and expectations that are too high for women, "Bridget internalizes and individualizes this postfeminist problematic as she turns her confusion inward and interprets it as her personal, psychological dilemma" (Genz 101). Instead of recognizing the futility of

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achieving all of her goals, Bridget is the perfect neoliberal subject; she continues to try (and fail) until she secures happiness and stability through fulfillment of the heterosexual ideal by dating Mark Darcy. She never questions the larger societal and capitalistic expectations, and because the film subscribes to a postfeminist philosophy, Bridget still gains her happy ending and a partner that removes the need to worry about her old goals/stressors. Feminism in *BJD* is reduced to a "delicious night of drunken feminist ranting with Sharon and Jude [her friends]" (Fielding 107) and is something that you occasionally dip your toe into when you're having a hard time but do not full on commit to because "after all there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism" (Fielding 18). *BJD* does not have Bridget conquer the system by being perfect nor recognizing that it is a system that is intended to be unequal and dooms her to failure. Instead, Bridget's "quality of mind," her naturally charming self, is enough for Mark Darcy to pick her "just as you [Bridget] are" giving her an individual way out (*Bridget Jones's Diary* (film) 54:04).

While *BJD* shows Bridget playing a game that she is doomed to fail, *Clueless* uses Cher's privilege to avoid almost all considerations of unequal social systems. Cher's privilege is used to poke fun at her ignorance but is never questioned or put into a larger context. The first scene after the opening montage shows Cher getting ready in her mansion, using a computer to try out different outfit combinations until she settles on the correct one. During this scene, Cher's voiceover ironically states, "I actually have a way normal life for a teenage girl. I get up, I brush my teeth, and I pick out my school clothes" (00:51-1:22). This ironic juxtaposition allows the audience to giggle at Cher's insistence she is normal. Luetkenhaus argues that "what *Clueless* does so well, that arguably other

Austen adaptations fail to accomplish at the same level, is maintain the ironic satire so particular to Austen's narration" (Luetkenhaus 37). It is this ironic satire that takes Emma Woodhouse and Cher from obtuse spoiled princesses to endearing young women who are trying to figure life out; the audience knows we are not supposed to take them too seriously and instead laugh at their missteps. This satiric move may endear us to Cher, but it also helps to undercut and misdirect from any serious consideration of Cher's privilege or responsibility. The next closest scene that *Clueless* gets to noting Cher's privilege is when she calls their Salvadorian housemaid Lucy, "Mexican." Lucy and Josh become upset with Cher, and she has a very teen outburst that has her yelling, "everything is all my fault!", and it ends with Josh calling her a "brat" (1:11:30-1:11:23). In the next scene we find out that Cher did apologize to Lucy, but she is plagued by the "ickiness" of Josh thinking she was a mean person (1:12:03-1:12:16). The takeaway from this scene is that Cher is realizing she likes Josh more than just as an ex-stepbrother, but what could be a moment of critique or realization for Cher of her privilege and cultural ignorance, instead becomes a moment of humorous satire that shows Cher's continued missteps. In a nineteenth-century household, the domestic space and the people within it were "projected as free from politics but as these households had servants, class and gender issues became worked out within the home" (Langland 14). In a similar manner, instead of this scene acknowledging the racial and economic politics of a white Cher having a Salvadorian maid and Hispanic yard worker and Cher referring to them both as "Mexican," *Clueless* designates it as a funny social mistake that she can easily apologize for. The real importance of the scene is Cher's budding romantic relationship.

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Throughout *Clueless*, systemic inequalities and unequal privileges are neutralized by personal goodwill or an apolitical domestication. In her debate class, Cher is supposed to be debating about the United States' responsibility in giving refuge to oppressed peoples. Cher, given the pro position, compares it to her father's birthday party when some guests did not RSVP. She states, "But people came that, like, did not RSVP. So, l was like totally bugging. l had to haul ass to the kitchen, redistribute the food, squish in extra place settings, but by the end of the day it was, like, the more the merrier" (04:40-04:46). Cher takes an explicit political issue that should require thoughtful consideration, but she is a high school teenager so she relates it to something she is familiar with and in the process distracts audiences from the political implications and reduces the significance to a dinner party mishap. The problem is not Cher being a silly teen, but the problem lies with the greater chick flick trend that refuses to acknowledge privilege and systemic oppression and instead ignores and downplays those issues through the domestic space. In talking about the depoliticizing of the nineteenth-century domestic space, Lesjak notes "the shift from production to the pleasures of the home or the pub eclipses the economic inequalities on which the productive sphere is based, transforming them into private, domestic matters rather than collective, political ones" (Lesjak 15). We see this play out in another Austen novel, *Mansfield Park*, where the protagonist, Fanny Price, comes from an impoverished home that is held against her, but issues of class and income inequality are sidestepped by Fanny's inner goodness finally being recognized by her uncle, Sir Thomas, and cousin, Edmund, who marries her and secures her position out of poverty and chaos. Similarly, even when Cher attempts to join in more collective action during the makeover of the soul, the impetus is her interest in Josh. She volunteers

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with Miss Geist, her English teacher who is often trying to rally her students into getting involved with their communities and politics, to help with the Pismo Beach Disaster Relief, but again, these moments are undercut with satire as Cher attempts to donate her skis or takes another student's hookah for the victims (1:23:03-1:23:19; 1:24:15-1:24:25). The film pokes fun at Cher's ignorance even as it acknowledges her good intentions, and at the end, Cher's personal journey to be better mostly relies on her own willpower and self-discipline. Like the nineteenth-century domestic novel, postfeminist chick flicks similarly support a (neo)liberal conception that systemic issues and inequalities are to be overcome through an individual's personal work and self-reflection.

The consumerism that enables self-improvement and the (neo)liberal ideology in postfeminist chick flicks comes full circle with the narrative climax of the heroine getting the guy. In a similar way that Elizabeth Bennet, despite her embarrassing family and lower social status, earns the admiration and love of Mr. Darcy, or Emma Woodhouse's capability to mature and humble herself earns Mr. Knightley's affection, our heroines, after fulfilling these certain values, are rewarded with the ideal romantic partner. This heterosexual pairing also helps to remove most if not all remaining obstacles to her happiness, further justifying the neoliberalism espoused throughout the narrative. From nineteenth-century domestic novels to postfeminist rom-coms, the primary solution to the heroine's problems is found in a partner/marriage. Systems of inequality are only lightly questioned and happy endings come about when the individual women are worthy enough to attract the right men. Within this dynamic, the heroine must be intelligent/witty, beautiful, down to earth, and to varying extents "not like other girls." The first chapter discussed the misogynistic "not like other girls" trope in reference to

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Enola Holmes dismissing traditional femininity. This trope places value on women who reject feminine attributes and embrace more masculine traits. Importantly, she still maintains the delicate balance of femininity, but she knows when it is acceptable to disregard the "sillier" rules of femininity. In these narratives, male love interests don't want a superficial, helpless woman nor a butch woman who does not need a man. We see this kind of woman in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* with Elizabeth's muddy hem when in her quest to get to her sick sister as fast as possible she walks through a muddy field. Elizabeth's rival, Caroline Bingley makes fun of her petticoat, but Darcy is somewhat impressed by her commitment to her sister and willingness to disregard decorum (Austen *Pride and Prejudice* 26). In costume dramas and chick flicks, this trope is used to separate the "progressive, forward-thinking and unique female characters away from their more traditionally feminine counterpart" (Cox). This trope is replicated in chick flicks through a variety of ways, but most emphasize her authenticity and inner goodness that cannot help but shine through.

3.3.3   Authenticity

We can see the parallel to this ideal of authenticity in how nineteenth-century women were idealized and their feminine attributes naturalized, particularly their ability to look effortless as they fulfill domestic and feminine duties. As Mohanram argues, "It is within the context of the Enlightenment and the articulating of liberal democracy that the political constructed what was purported to be natural" which included ideal white womanhood (29). Ideal womanhood was often tied to a middle-class conception of the "Angel of the House" that was "dependent on men and submissive to them, gentle, self-sacrificing, capable of self-renunciation. Her primary role was that of wife and mother"

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(Mohanram 31). Some of the instances where we see Knightley best appreciate Emma is when she exemplifies these ideals: taking care of her nephews (Austen *Emma* 304), apologizing to Miss Bates (368-70; 376), being willing to postpone her wedding to stay with her father (421). Through the Enlightenment and the growing empire, white women inhabited a critical place within the social hierarchy and ideology; their role was critical yet privatized and depoliticized by making ideal white womanhood seem like a natural occurrence. If a middle-class white woman properly submitted to this arrangement, she was often awarded or at least promised the award of economic and social security through marriage (Armstrong 37). A white man securing the correct wife was critical as, established earlier, his socio-political standing depended on her fulfillment of white womanhood ideals; even Emma Woodhouse, who does not need the financial security, benefits socially and secures her position as the highest woman in Highbury from being married to Mr. Knightley. Wives needed to be trusted to fulfill the role and duties and not physically stray from their husbands or threaten men's reputation, home, and future. Austen's texts show how Emma and Elizabeth are the ideal female protagonists, and wives, by contrasting them with the women around her. Harriet is sweet, docile yet "not clever" (*Emma* 23), Isabella has similar neuroses to their father (89) and Mrs. Elton is meddling, conceited, and obtuse whereas Emma is able to be clever, pretty, and still have understanding and maturity. Elizabeth Bennet is neither a self-centered Lydia nor a haughty Caroline Bingley nor a pushover when faced with an angry Catherine de Bourgh (Austen *Pride and Prejudice* 241-244), and Lydia running away with Wickham exemplifies the fears of a woman who does not protect her virtue accordingly. Both Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet present us with flawed, yet still trustworthy and

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appealing heroines. These women are able to balance femininity and agency, hard work and submission, and are truthful and trustworthy at their core and that appeals to the ideal man who will also give them economic (for at least Elizabeth) and social security (for both heroines).

In *Clueless* and *BJD*, our heroines must learn to embrace their more "authentic" selves to distinguish themselves from other women who are trying too hard. These narratives champion the natural/authentic woman vs those with control and poise and are "laquered [sic] over" (Case citing Fielding 182). In *Clueless*, a critical part of Cher's progress is her becoming more comfortable with herself (sitting and eating popcorn with Josh) and letting others be their authentic selves (Tai embracing her grunge aesthetic and dating skater boy Travis). Her foil is Amber who is similarly rich and popular, but whose more extravagant fashion and nose job suggests a further level of inauthenticity and who, along with Elton, are the shallow and mean teens in Cher's clique. While Cher has an inner goodness that becomes more apparent as the film progresses, Amber is one-dimensional as a catty mean girl who may be included in Cher's social group but who is not Cher's friend. In *BJD*, Bridget is supposed to be a realistic example of single women who worry about their weight, job, and relationships. While imperfect, her honesty in her diary, and even in her life, give audiences a heroine to identify with: "In 2001, a 32-year-old British white woman resonated with a preteen me… "Bridget Jones's Diary" showed a young Rasha that unpolished, average, eccentric and allegedly "overweight" women were worthy of love and respect" (Ali). Bridget's honesty and vulnerability are contrasted with other pretentious women, including Mark Darcy's glamorous colleague, Natasha. In one scene, Natasha and some other snooty women disparage television romance dramas

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and contrast them with classic literature like *Middlemarch* and *Othello* (86-88). Bridget speaks up and reveals that she does enjoy those television programs, and while the women look down on her, Mark Darcy seems to appreciate her honesty. Her failure within the neoliberal system, noted earlier, makes her sympathetic to viewers and reveals an authenticity to Mark Darcy, both of which enable her status as the protagonist and secures her happy ending. In the book and the film, Mark Darcy reveals to Bridget that he likes her "just as you are" even though she fails to meet social standards of femininity and success (*Bridget Jones's Diary* (film) 54:04). In *Clueless* and *BJD*, Cher and Bridget are shown to be "not like other girls" through being honest and kind with themselves and others and not trying *too* hard to be something they are not, and this is when they are most attractive to their love interests.

On the surface, consumerism and purchasing one's fulfillment of feminine ideals seem to contrast with the valuing of an authentic woman, but as postfeminism is contradictory, so are these values. Women in the nineteenth century were expected to expertly run a household, or if they could not, they needed the money to project that they could. Similar to "the not like other girls" trope, postfeminism projects a delicate balance: a woman needs to fulfill certain ideals but not look like she is trying too hard. There is a value of looking *effortless* in fashion, work, and home life that spans the nineteenth century and our contemporary moment. The Natashas and Ambers are given as warnings of being too "fake" and, along with their inability to be natural women, are associated with cruelty and being unlikable. Case notes how *BJD* struggles with the "conventional opposition between female 'control' and feminine virtue or desirability" and the narrative "reward[s] her [Bridget] for being out of control– the genuineness that apparently wins

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Darcy's heart, after all, is the product of Bridget's persistent failure to carry through her plans to remake herself in another image, as thinner, more cool and poised, more intellectual" like Natasha (Case 182). This contradiction reveals the instability of postfeminism and its ideals; it demands heroines that try to fit within social standards and expectations so that they are a good neoliberal subject that contributes to capitalism, but she must also be naturally charming and her idiosyncrasies be quirky and funny enough to not be distasteful to the ideal men around them. As *Elle* writer, Amy S. Choi, notes about projecting effortlessness as a woman: "The key is to be only imperfect enough to be charming, so that I can say, 'Oh, I don't really wear makeup. I'm pretty low maintenance.' So I can be the kind of lady that is effortless." While other publications have started to talk about the hidden labor of women looking effortless (Peterson in *Teen Vogue* and Wilson in *Medium*), our culture still highly values women's ability to look and act effortless in all things feminine.

Clueless and *BJD*, as examples of postfeminist media, do attempt to portray some feminist ideas and push back on clear examples of misogyny [Elton sexually harassing Cher (40:30-41:55) or Bridget getting cheated on by Daniel (Fielding 153)] and on the surface, the ideal of an authentic, real woman being enough to appeal to the correct man could be revolutionary. But as stated in the previous paragraph, there is a value of looking effortless which hides women's labor that we see paralleled in the nineteenth-century ideal that expected women to hide their physical and emotional labor and act like their feminine attributes came naturally. These pieces of media further emphasize this by their casting choices of women who clearly fit the ideal and even have to put effort in to be less attractive. Cher and even supposedly dowdy Bridget are played by thin, blonde

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white women who are conventionally attractive. Alicia Silverstone and Renée Zellweger are beautiful by popular Western standards, and it was well-covered in the news that Zellweger gained thirty pounds just to play the "overweight" Bridget Jones (Harzewski 72). The difference between Cher and Amber or Bridget and Natasha are their supposed "natural" charm and beauty. Cher and Bridget are supposed to be our postfeminist heroines that break standards and empower their audiences, but instead they mostly repeat the impossible standards for a natural and effortless femininity that calls back to the nineteenth-century Angel of the House. *Clueless* and *BJD*, as key examples of postfeminist chick flick/lit media, are better able to show the connections between the changing economic and social status of women in the nineteenth century British Empire and postfeminist media of the late 1900s and early 2000s. Drawing these parallels illustrates that the conservative ideologies that guided a changing social and political landscape during the British Empire are also being exhibited in postfeminist media that was (and is) highly influential on popular conceptions of what feminism and female empowerment is and does.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has drawn connections between nineteenth-century domestic novels and their reflection of the century's cultural values concerning white womanhood and the postfeminist media of the 1990s, specifically the postfeminist media that remediates Jane Austen's novels. Those domestic novels and more recent postfeminist media genres reflected and established cultural expectations of women's lives and how white women can expect to achieve personal fulfillment. Despite their century of separation, both value self-improvement through consumerism, a neoliberal idea of selfhood and responsibility,

and the projection of effortlessness and authenticity in femininity. The correct combination of these values promises women a happy ending through attracting a valuable romantic partner who will alleviate most, if not all, of her stressors and fulfill her life. What is unstated in the postfeminist presentation of these values of white femininity is how these ideals work to support a white supremacist construction of society and to delegitimize women and others who fail to meet these impossible standards. While Bridget Jones receives her happy ending through Mark Darcy choosing her over the other women, throughout the novel and film, we see the ridicule, sexual harassment, and dismissiveness that Bridget experiences from her mother, as well as from Daniel, Natasha, and others because she continually fails to meet certain standards of femininity. Relatedly during the British Empire in the nineteenth century, who gets full personhood, compassion, and value is dependent on who meets certain standards that were created to exclude the non-white, non-wealthy, and those who did not adequately support the power and prestige of white men.

Because nineteenth-century domestic novels and contemporary postfeminist media is often ridiculed or dismissed because of their female-focus and popularity, it is easy to ignore how these genres reinforce hierarchies and establish white-centric values, but these standards are connected to the sinister and malevolent white supremacist hierarchies that also work(ed) to justify colonialism and racism. While not an Austen novel, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* has reached its own popularity in contemporary culture and it too projects similar values that have been discussed in this chapter, but Jane Eyre's, the character, ability to fulfill these white feminine values, to be the protagonist who gets the rich man in the end, comes at the expense of Bertha Mason. Bertha, Mr.

Rochester's first wife from Jamaica, is locked in a room for most of the novel, with her ghostly self haunting Jane until her existence is revealed at Jane's wedding. Bertha becomes one of the "other" women that is contrasted with Jane, but this is not a haughty and flirtatious foil to Jane but a much larger metaphor for colonialism and the superiority of white, English women. Bertha's wildness and mental illness is contrasted with Jane's self-control and reason. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that "[Bertha] must play out her role, act out the transformation of her 'self' into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the *feminist individualist heroine* of British fiction" (251 emphasis mine). Similar to the postfeminist heroines of the contemporary media discussed in this chapter, Jane and other nineteenth-century domestic novel heroines gain their value and "feminism" often at the expense of others, whether they be women who fail to meet certain ideals or the colonized people who are violently othered. The connections between these genres establish and reinforce imperial hierarchies that are white supremacist in nature. Again, who gets to be the heroine, who gets full personhood, compassion, and value, comes at the expense of other women/people who have failed to reach a similar standard. While nineteenth-century domestic novels and contemporary postfeminist media embrace femininity and center white women's lives and experiences, its feminism is a white popular feminism that values exclusiveness and supports conservative ideas and white supremacy-based hierarchies.

This chapter, as a whole, has discussed explicit white supremacy less than the first chapter, but this second chapter is still interested in understanding how white supremacy, historical and contemporary, continues to impact how white womanhood is constructed

and valued in American popular culture. White supremacy is embedded into our systems of capitalism and compulsory heterosexuality that are highly valued in most popular media, but postfeminist media embraces it all in a way that is intended to appeal and set standards for young women and promises liberation and empowerment. And those standards, as argued in this chapter, often are grounded in values that were critical during the British Empire to maintain social hierarchies and devalue colonized peoples and others who could not fulfill them. Jane Austen and the impact she has had on modern popular culture is key to this connection. Her status in the Western Canon of literature and culture gives her legitimacy and a longevity that validates a conservative and Western white-centered worldview while the feminist remediations project Austen as an early feminist whose heroines would embrace modern femininity and feminism, à la *Lost in Austen*.[66] Again, this chapter is not concerned with arguing whether we should view Austen and her original works as feminist or conservative, but instead, we should recognize that the creation of a postfeminist Jane Austen in the 1990s allows the remediation of her works to use a feminist facade while maintaining conservative values and that those values permeate postfeminist media beyond the Austen remediations. This chapter's argument does not negate the fact that Jane Austen is still a beloved and impactful author whose thoughtful writings about women's lives that continue to engage audiences and help women of many backgrounds feel seen and centered, but it recognizes that a significant part of her impact is how her works have been wielded to support

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[66] In *Lost in Austen*, a television series, Amanda, a modern young woman, switches places with Elizabeth Bennet. At the end of the series, Amanda stays in the novel's world and marries Mr. Darcy, while Elizabeth has embraced modernity and leaves the novel for a life in London.

certain ideas of the past (as discussed in chapter one) and reaffirm those ideas and values in the present (chapter two).

Postfeminist media was defining for the 1990s and early 2000s popular culture, but it has also been experiencing a revival in the current trend cycle in the late 2010s and early 2020s. In the last five to ten years, we are seeing the return of postfeminist media and trends. *Clueless*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and other chick flicks are being remixed on TikTok, with even Alicia Silverstone recreating some of the most iconic scenes (Silverstone), and being invoked in fashion (Adhav and Griswold). Films like Netflix's *Do Revenge* is filled with call backs to the chick flicks of the 1990s and early 2000s, and a plethora of media from this moment are being either rebooted or recalled: *Bridget Jones's Baby* (2016), *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (2016), *Mean Girls* (the musical) (2017), *Charmed* reboot (2018), *Clueless, The Musical* (2018), *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020), *Friends: The Reunion* (2021), and the *Drama Queens* rewatch podcast for *One Tree Hill* (2021-present).[67] This combination of media is not only a testament to the impact and influence of postfeminist media and culture, but if this chapter's argument is to be taken seriously, the continued valuing and projection of an idealized white womanhood in popular culture that is based in imperial values that support white supremacist ideals. Chapter three and the conclusion will turn to conversations about current media and the continued influence of nineteenth-century imperial white womanhood, but here, I want to stress the importance of recognizing the intertwining of postfeminism and imperial white supremacist values of white

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[67] Their originals were: *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and *Bridget Jones's Diary: The Edge of Reason* (2004), *Gilmore Girls* (2007-2007), *Mean Girls* (2004), *Charmed* (1998-2006), *Clueless* (1995), *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003), *Friends* (1994-2004), and *One Tree Hill* (2003-2012).

womanhood. This is not just a critique of the shallow feminism that centers personal choice and aesthetics over communal actions and a socio-political focus, but also of the white supremacist values that helped to structure colonialism, devalue certain peoples, and still influence our contemporary popular culture. By connecting the past to the present, I hope that these connections and influences become clearer to track and critique and that we take more seriously women's media that is often overlooked and disregarded because of misogyny that labels them as "silly," "emotional," and just a "chick flick."

CHAPTER 4.   THE PROMISE AND FAILURE OF A FEMINIST PRINCESS: THE
WHITE POPULAR FEMINISM OF MEGHAN MARKLE

2019: Meghan (née Markle), the Duchess of Sussex, was on a royal tour of South

Africa with her husband, Prince Harry. This was four months after giving birth to their

first child, she had been under nearly constant attack by British tabloids and social media,

and she was now performing duties under the umbrella of the Royal Family that refused

to protect her from those attacks. A journalist, recording content for an ITV documentary

on the work the British Royal Family was doing in the Commonwealth, asked Meghan

about her physical and mental health and the pressure she was under. Meghan,

unprepared for this question, answered with vulnerability saying, "Thank you for asking

because not many people have asked if I'm okay" (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 4," 52:14-

53:50; Hampton). This moment of vulnerability, of authenticity, inspired a wave of

support on social media with the hashtag #WeLoveYouMeghan from other Black and

people of color along with women and mothers of all racial backgrounds who identified

with her struggle to keep it all together despite the stress. But what inspired sympathy and

understanding from so many, apparently drew the opposite reaction from the British

Royal Family, and, as suggested by the end of "Episode 4" of Harry and Meghan's

Netflix docuseries, was the beginning of their decision to leave royal life behind.

Embedded in this seemingly small moment are layers of racism and British colonialism

intertwined with misogynoir and the hope of a popular white feminism; this final chapter

looks to disentangle this web of meaning as it continues the dissertation's conversation

about white womanhood, the British Empire, and contemporary feminism.

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Meghan Markle/Meghan the Duchess of Sussex has inspired many discussions about race, womanhood, motherhood, and royalty since 2016 when the British tabloids revealed that she and Prince Harry were dating.[68] This final chapter turns to her, or at least the media surrounding her, to explore the far-reaching implications of the white supremacy of the nineteenth-century British Empire, idealized womanhood, and popular feminism. Up to this point, this dissertation has relied on popular fictionalized narratives that influence how white womanhood and popular feminism are intertwined and built upon the legacies of empire, but this chapter turns to the narratives that represent Meghan's privileged embodiment of a white popular feminist ideology, the promise of that ideology, and the attempted destruction of that ideology (and her) when put into conflict with the British Royal Family. To be clear, the chapter focuses on Meghan and Harry's version of their story and Meghan's articulation of her feminism, so "reality" and "truth" become slippery terms. It may be helpful to think of these collective media as a sort of memoir of Meghan's experience. Because this dissertation is concerned with the promotion and power of white popular feminism, chapter three will take seriously Meghan's narrative of her experience and assume it as truthful, at least from Meghan's perspective. We, the general public, will most likely never know Meghan's true feelings or the absolute truth of what all happened from 2016 to 2022, but an analysis of Meghan's narrative and feminism is still productive to interrogate how a white popular

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[68] Meghan (née Markle), the Duchess of Sussex is referred to by many names in academic and popular texts. She often refers to herself as just Meghan ("The Misconception of Ambition with Serena Williams" 4:13-4:18). This chapter will mostly refer to her as Meghan because that is what she refers to herself as or Meghan Markle because, for me, this refers to her as an individual without her royal title. I do not assume familiarity with her personal self when I refer to her as Meghan or disregard her royal title when I use Meghan Markle.

feminism moves through culture.[69] Meghan and Harry's love story was and continues to be presented like the narratives with happy endings covered in the first two chapters, but, as this chapter intends to explain, it became a nightmare that reveals the false promise of white popular feminism beyond the fictional narratives we tell ourselves.

Meghan, through the media she has either created or approved to tell her story, embodies a white popular feminist ideology. Meghan Markle may be a biracial woman, but I argue she is a white feminist, and as Rafia Zakaria notes "You do not have to be white to be a white feminist" (1). Zakaria defines a white feminist as "someone who refuses to consider the role that whiteness and the racial privilege attached to it have played and continue to play in universalizing white feminist concerns, agendas, and beliefs as being those of all of feminism and all of feminists" (1). It is a gender-only, color-blind feminism that centers white, middle-class Western women and repeats white savior complexes and colonialism. Zakaria also notes how it gets repeated around the world through the dissemination of white Western nineteenth-century femininity:

> South Asian feminists who adore Jane Austen's heroines as models of strength,
> wit, and judgment are also absorbing Austen's imperialist views, her justifications
> for white colonizers taking over land without native knowledge… the uncritical
> presentation of white feminism as the definitive and only kind of feminism
> covertly recruits women of color in its own justification. (10-12)

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[69] This chapter was primarily written between January and March 2023, so major events relating to Meghan Markle, Prince Harry, or the British Royal Family that came after may not be discussed including the coronation of King Charles III. Relatedly, this chapter sometimes slips between present and past tense due to the fact that these events and conversations are still ongoing in popular culture as I write and will continue past the completion of this dissertation.

Meghan abides by a white feminism, and while others may project an intersectional

feminism onto her because she is biracial and a woman, her activism and articulation of

her feminism rarely acknowledges how her race influences her gender and vice versa.

The chapter will explore it in more detail later, but Meghan's feminism rarely strays far

from the white feminism that circulates in and through popular culture and social media.

Throughout this project, I have repeatedly used Sarah Banet-Weiser's definition

of popular feminism, a feminism that circulates easily through popular culture because it

"consents to heteronormativity, to the universality of whiteness, to dominant economic

formations, to a trajectory of capitalistic success" (16). The power of popular feminism is

that it "manifests in discourses and practices that are circulated in popular and

commercial media" thus "these discourses have an accessibility that is not confined to

academic enclaves or niche groups" (Banet-Weiser 1). One does not need to have read

bell hooks, the Combahee River Collective, or Betty Friedan to understand or appreciate

popular feminism. While Zakaria and Banet-Weiser's discussions of feminism overlap, as

the white feminist narrative often relies on popular culture to circulate its messaging, I

want to make it explicit in this chapter that I am discussing a white-focused and white

supremacy-supporting feminism that widely circulates in popular culture, so I combine

their terminology. In popularity there is power. As Stuart Hall stated, "popular culture is

one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it

is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle" (192), and in the early 2020s, Meghan

Markle is at the center of a major struggle with the British Royal Family, popular

feminism, white supremacy, and public opinion.

The larger dissertation has been focused on drawing connections between the idealized white womanhood of the nineteenth-century British empire and idealized womanhood in contemporary culture. Chapter one analyzes the popularity and reception of period media from 2020, *Bridgerton*, *Emma.*, and *Enola Holmes*, to explore how period media, even those that attempt to be diverse and more progressive, still cultivate a white nostalgia for a past that aligns with a popular, white feminism that is non-threatening towards or even actively supports capitalism and white supremacy. Chapter two uses two popular remediations of Jane Austen's novels, *Clueless* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*, to trace the combination of Jane Austen and period media with postfeminist pop culture in the 1990s and early 2000s. This fusion embedded nineteenth-century values of white womanhood into postfeminism/popular feminist media that continue to have influence today. Here, chapter three moves to discuss the media surrounding Meghan Markle because (1) she represents and espouses the values of white womanhood discussed in chapter two and (2) her initial inclusion into the British Royal Family promised similar modernizations of the Royal Family's image and attempts similar work of nostalgia and diversity covered in chapter one. Meghan Markle's remediation of her own experience extends the discussions of the first two chapters into, if not quite "real-life," then closer to the real consequences of the failure of white feminism and its commitment to white supremacy. Initially, Meghan was perceived as an asset to the British Royal Family because she was a "feminist" biracial woman, who still hit most of the markers of white femininity, and her inclusion was a ploy to maintain control of the Commonwealth, improve public opinion, and to forget that this Institution and empire were built on white supremacy and colonialism. What became clear was that her

biracialism, feminism, and popularity would be too much for the white supremacy of the Institution of the Royal Family that is tightly bound with patriarchy and the exploitation of women's and people of color's bodies and lives (Clancy and Yelin "Monarchy is a Feminist Issue" 6).[70] Meghan Markle's story had promise to be like the postfeminist romantic comedies discussed in chapter 2 (á la *The Prince and Me* (2004)) and she and Harry have been compared to *Bridgerton* (Rosa), but in the real world, white supremacy does not care about true love or the well-being of one woman who "tried so hard.. And it still wasn't good enough" and Meghan's narratives reveal that (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 5" 43:57-44:05).[71] Meghan's treatment by the British tabloids and Royal Family reflects the White supremacy inextricably tied with the British Royal Institution, and Meghan's exit and subsequent narrative reflects the self-focused and self-preserving ideology of white feminism. When Meghan's attempts to insert herself within the royal family failed, her feminism then pivoted to save herself and her family instead of working to condemn the system's racism and misogyny that harmed her in the first place. This chapter details these promises and potential of Meghan's inclusion into the Royal Family, and the promises and potential of her feminism to be meaningful on such a public stage along with the subsequent failure of all of those promises.

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[70] To clarify terms, the royal family are the blood relations and spouses of those relations of the late Queen Elizabeth II and current King Charles III. "The Institution" is a broader term that "refers to the Institution of monarchy — the business of monarchy — so its public role" and includes the people and systems that keep the monarchy working, private secretaries, palace aids, communications teams, etc. (Fakuade).

[71] *The Prince and Me* is a 2004 romantic-comedy that stars Julia Stiles (who was a popular actress in the postfeminist rom-com films of that era like *10 Things I Hate About You,* mentioned in chapter two as a remediation of William Shakespeare's work) as Paige, a Wisconsin farm girl who wants to be a doctor, who meets Denmark's Crown Prince, Edvard, at college. Edvard, or Eddie, is pretending to be a normal student, and Paige's passion and hard-working nature charm the prince. The film ends with the promise that he will wait for her until she achieves all of her dreams of becoming a doctor and helping people in third-world countries, and then they will marry and she will become his queen.

Meghan's biracialness and feminism was initially presented as an asset to the Institution of the British Royal Family. She could "modernize" them and make them more relatable for the Commonwealth and work to distract from the histories of racism and colonialism tied to the British Empire (Weidhase 916). Leading up to her and Harry's wedding, publications like *The Economist* asked "Can Meghan Markle modernise the monarchy?: In a time of flux, she could be an asset for the Royal Family" (Duncan and Low), and *The Guardian* published "Has Meghan Markle changed Britain's attitude to race and royalty?" (Iqbal). Even Harry and Meghan expressed their hope that Meghan could be an asset for the royal family to connect with their Commonwealth subjects, a majority of whom are people of color (The US Sun; *Harry & Meghan* "Episode 5" 13:36-13:45).[72] The maintenance of good public opinion is key because the British monarchy does not have any explicit political power; instead their power is symbolic. If their popularity declines too much, the British government may call to remove them as head of state, like so many of the former colonies have done, and then the royal family (1) is no longer royal in any capacity and (2) loses tax-support, many of their palaces and residences, and security (Fakuade and Tognini).[73] The Royal Family's position within the government, but also within society, depends on their success at making people like and want to keep supporting them. Meghan entered into the royal family amongst

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[72] The interview, *Oprah with Meghan and Harry* is not available on any streaming platform that I could find in March and April 2023. I did watch the entire interview when it came out. *The US Sun*, despite being a tabloid, seems to have a full, correct transcript of the interview. I will cite that transcript instead of the interview due to accessibility.

[73] The former Queen Elizabeth and now King Charles personally own(ed) Balmoral Castle in Scotland and Sandringham House in Norfolk, but the rest of the estates are more complicated in their ownership (Tognini).

multiple calls from formerly colonized nations to remove the monarch as head of state, removal from the Commonwealth, and reparations for colonialism.

During the twentieth century, when it seemed that Great Britain's Empire could potentially crumble, Great Britain proposed and implemented for it and its colonies the idea of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth realms are fourteen countries including Canada, Australia, and Papua New Guinea that still recognized the late Queen Elizabeth, and now recognize King Charles, as the sovereign.[74] There is also the "Commonwealth of Nations, a group of 54 countries that were once part of the British Empire—the majority of which no longer recognize the Queen as sovereign" (Barry). These changes to the colonial system were to allow the formerly colonized countries to "be equal in status" but "united by a common allegiance to the Crown" (McKeever). While there has been a restructuring of politics, there are people who see the Commonwealth as an extension of colonialism.[75] In the Netflix docuseries, historian and filmmaker David Adetayo Olusoga explains that "Britain calculated that it needed to grant these countries independence in a way that protected its commercial and capitalist interest. So it created this privileged club of formally colonized nations called the Commonwealth" (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 3" 43:10-43:30). In the twenty-first century, we see a similar hope that the inclusion of

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[74] The royal family still benefits from the taxation of former colonies that are part of the Commonwealth realms (Fakuade).

[75] The rebranding of colonialism into the commonwealth can very clearly be seen in the renaming of Empire Day to Commonwealth Day. This national holiday began a year after Queen Victoria's death in 1902 to celebrate the British Empire, and in 1958, the title was changed to "Commonwealth Day" (Britannica Kids and Westminster Abbey). The shift to celebrating the great empire to celebrating "their unity of vision and common commitment to peace and justice in an increasingly polarised world" feels like a superficial move to project feel-good emotions on a contentious history (The Commonwealth).

Meghan with her Blackness could revitalize the relationship between Great Britain, the royal family, and the Commonwealth countries.

At the same time that Meghan entered into the Royal Family and was imbued with the promise of reviving the Institution, Brexit was also happening. Brexit, or the British exit from the European Union (EU), was a highly contested political event that often invoked similar rhetoric to Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan discussed in chapter one. Many supporters of Brexit were "distressed with the influx of migrants from elsewhere in the EU who had arrived through the EU's open borders" and wanted to maintain a certain idea of who is English/British (Wallenfeldt). Scholar Akwugo Emejulu argues that "An unstated campaign strategy of the Leave campaign was to re-imagine Britain and Britishness (but really Englishness) as white in order to make particular kinds of claims to victimhood which would highlight economic inequality without challenging neoliberalism." White Britons were set as the victims to the influx of working-class immigrants that played on white fears of a Britain where whiteness would be the minority. The inclusion of Meghan into the royal family promised a supposed redefinition of what the royal family looks like to better reflect the Commonwealth and a changing Britain, and yet the country was facing social and political turmoil over the increasing diversity and who gets to be considered British.

Despite the royal family's desire to be perceived as modern and embracing change, they could not and cannot let go of their traditions and commitment to white patriarchy and inequality. Prince Andrew, Duke of York, has been accused of sexual abuse and tied to Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell's human trafficking. Despite the evidence, the Institution and late Queen Elizabeth defended and supported Andrew

throughout these claims. He was rumored to be her favorite son (Weaver), but his support was not just a mother protecting her son. Rather, it exemplifies the monarchy continuing a long legacy of abusing and discarding those with less power to protect their own interests. This project is not about Prince Andrew, but noting how his sexual abuse allegations and ties to Epstein and Maxwell were refuted or smoothed over by the Institution when Meghan was the target of racist insults is important to contextualize the false embracing of feminism and the commitment to power inequalities that serve the monarchy. Clancy and Yelin's "Monarchy is a feminist issue" goes into a fuller explanation of how Meghan was sacrificed to make the stories about other white royals, like Andrew, disappear or fly under the radar, and they note how "the monarchy's response to allegations of sexual abuse has been attempts to silence these stories through injunctions and threats of legal action, and closing down comments on Andrew's personal Instagram page @hrhthedukeofyork" (5). And to make matters worse, the royal family made these moves to protect Andrew while they refused to refute lies or push back on the abuse experienced by Meghan in the press (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 4" 30:00-36:00). Despite the Institution's moves to modernize and connect with its former colonies, most of which are populated by people of color, the British Royal Family and the United Kingdom are still intimately tied to ideas of whiteness, patriarchy, and power. Meghan's treatment is part of a much larger system that would prefer to ignore their colonial history and embrace a neoliberal postracial present.

This is the context and Institution that Meghan stepped into. Her white popular feminist ideology promises success, but it is unprepared for the long histories of power that work to maintain the British Royal Family, its empire, and future. There is a clear

power imbalance between this centuries-old Institution and an American actress born to a social worker and a lighting director, but Meghan is also not wholly a victim who is just letting these things happen to her. Most discussions of Meghan either paint her as a victim, ignorant of what she was getting into and bullied by the Institution, or as the scheming villain, narcissistic and manipulative of Harry with a grand scheme of breaking the monarchy apart. The media that Meghan and Harry put out often follows the former narrative while the British tabloids most often invoke the latter. While the public may never know the full truth of what Meghan knew beforehand and what has been a calculated move for self- and familial-preservation, it is clear that Meghan is smart and has some agency over her story. Roxane Gay and Tressie McMillan Cottom are two scholars of color who are known for their public scholarship on race, feminism, and popular culture. In their podcast, *The Roxane Gay Agenda*, they open one of their episodes discussing Meghan Markle and Prince Harry's situation. This podcast was recorded the same week the interview with Oprah was released in March 2021. They note that Meghan "is not a woman who has let life happen *to* her" ("Best of Hear to Slay: Adults Ain't It" emphasis original 10:00-10:10). They applaud Meghan's hustle and note how what Meghan reveals in the Oprah interview is calculated and even an intentional "threat" to the monarchy (10:40-10:55). They recognize the unequal power relations and the harm of the royal family while also recognizing Meghan's (and Harry's) calculated moves in this process. Meghan is not a villainous mastermind, but she is a very smart woman who is making rhetorical and narrative choices post-royal family that give her power and agency. And the playbook she often pulls from is the white popular feminism that balances white victimhood, empowered sensibilities, and individual self-interest.

Post-royal family, Meghan has crafted a white popular feminist narrative that has become her personal brand and the story that she sells to support her family. A key component of that brand is her feminism, but she needs that feminism to move easily in popular culture, not ruffle too many feathers, and be able to make her money. White popular feminism works for Meghan in many ways because its priorities and goals for achieving gender equality come from "personalized autonomy, individual wealth, perpetual self-optimization, and supremacy… It's a specific way of viewing gender equality that is anchored in the accumulation of individual power rather than the redistribution of it. It can be practiced by anyone, of any race, background, allegiance, identity, or affiliation" (Beck xvii). It is playing the white man's "game," navigating the systems of inequality and oppression as something to be personally overcome rather than dismantled. Gay and McMillan Cottom point to this strategy with Meghan's move back to Los Angeles post-royal family and how they see her primed to be "LA royalty" because she has an existing network of support of other high-profile people and "Hollywood is enamored with the crown and with that storyline" (7:24-26). McMillan Cottom also argues that Meghan "perform[s] white innocence for an audience" when claiming that she knew very little about the royal family and never Googled Harry (15:10-15:35). Gay and McMillan Cottom break down and applaud the ingenuity of Meghan and Doria, Meghan's mother, that appeals to white innocence and respectability politics within and post the royal family. Meghan's espousal of white popular feminism is not a choice made in ignorance but a strategic move throughout her career that enables her to position herself within white neoliberal standards of excellence and respectability, empowered femininity, but also leaves space for her to be the victim inspiring sympathy.

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Meghan carefully balances and fulfills white popular feminism to achieve her own prosperity and protection.

While I think it is fair to critique Meghan's espousal of white popular feminism, I want to make clear that my critique of her does not negate the harm and power of the British Royal Family in its treatment of her. They are not victims of Meghan. Instead they all work towards similar goals of the maintenance of their own power and privilege. If anything, the royal family failed to see how her goals could have aligned with their own if they did not let their misogyny and racism get in the way. By using her as a scapegoat, they made her their victim and now she is using that as a key part of her feminist empowerment story. While I do not agree with her white feminism, I still respect her moves to use that harm and exploitation by the royal family for her own benefit. They have far more power, privilege, and longevity than Meghan, and yet, she was able to remove her family and use her mistreatment to her own advantage. Relatedly, I want to quickly note that Meghan is not a solo agent manipulating Prince Harry. They seem to truly love each other, and from his account of his life, he seemed ready to leave the royal family especially to avoid the fate of his mother (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 6" 29:35-30:00). Harry and Meghan have committed together to this white popular feminist narrative that portrays Meghan as an empowered but mistreated heroine who is able to save herself and her family.

Because of the constant misinformation and projection of words and motivations onto Meghan that she did not express herself by tabloids and social media posters, I want to privilege her view of events and the media she has put out into the world. This not only allows the interrogation of her white popular feminist narrative, but also works to avoid

the misogynoir targeted at the Duchess of Sussex that attempts to speak for her and paint her as a caricatured villain. While I will bring in news articles, tabloids, and social media for context and examples, this chapter will prioritize her view of events. I also exclude interviews and the memoir, *Spare*, by Prince Harry. This book only has his name on it and his interviews are only of him speaking, and while she is aware of their contents, I do not want to attribute his actions and words to her. Due to these circumstances, I will mainly analyze the interview, *Oprah with Meghan and Harry,* their Netflix docuseries, *Harry & Meghan,* and Meghan's Spotify podcast, *Archetypes,* as the media she has approved to represent her side of the story and her perspective on topics important to her. These pieces of media most clearly track her narrative arch that aligns with the values of white popular feminism, its promises, and its failures.

4.1 The Promise of White Popular Feminism

In the *Harry & Meghan* Netflix docuseries and in her podcast, *Archetypes*, Meghan articulates her feminism and activism by starting with a story of eleven-year-old Meghan becoming angry at a sexist commercial for dish soap that only had women washing dishes ("Misconception of Ambition with Serena Williams" 00:00-3:20). Child Meghan went on a letter writing campaign to try to get the sexist ad changed (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 2" 13:55-14:50). She wrote to the First Lady, "Hillary Clinton, Attorney Gloria Allred; and Linda Ellerbee, who hosted [Meghan's] preferred news source, as an 11-year-old – Nick News – W5!" and the soap manufacturer. The soap ad was changed from using "women" to "people" due to Meghan's campaign, and she was interviewed on Nick News. She describes this moment as "an awakening. To the millions of ways – big and small that our society tries to box women in, to hold women back, to tell women who and

what they should and can be" (*Archetypes* "The Misconception of Ambition with Serena Williams" 03:09-03:18). The repetition of this story across her podcast and Netflix docuseries stresses its importance to Meghan and how she conceptualizes her own feminist journey, but it also points to what kind of activism Meghan values most: advocating for girls and women. While the changing of the ad is admirable, I use it here to note her feminist awakening and how her feminism has not seemed to evolve much beyond this singular concern for how women, in general, are treated, which we know almost always defaults to a white women's perspective without an intentional consideration of how race, wealth, etc. nuance that experience. The problem is not that Meghan wanted and wants to advocate for women of all ages, but that her feminism consistently fails to consider how intersecting identities nuance that oppression of women. She continues to project a white, gender-only feminism that aligns with neoliberal ideas and fails to challenge systemic inequalities.

On the surface, Meghan Markle's white popular feminism advocates for gender equality and is motivated to help those with less power, but once we look deeper, it becomes clear that her feminism is "a type of feminism that takes up the politics of power without questioning them– by replicating patterns of white supremacy, capitalistic greed, corporate ascension, inhumane labor practices, and exploitation, and deeming it empowering for women to practice these tenets as men always have" (Beck xvii). Now I do not argue that Meghan, personally, is participating in things like inhumane labor practices, but her refusal to delve deeper and critique systems of oppression reads as complicity. When Meghan considers racism or sexism it is never in combination with each other or other privileges and oppression. It is a projected ignorance of the

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complications and nuances and falls in line with the argument, "By ignoring your white privilege, you ignore your white power. When you ignore your white power, you uphold white supremacy. This is white feminism. White. Feminism. Is. White. Supremacy." (Jackson and Rao 44). Meghan's feminism takes after the postfeminist romcoms of the 1990s and early 2000s by projecting a superficial feelgood empowerment but now with the neoliberal capitalist feminist logo that "positions the singular you as the agent of change, making your individual needs the touchpoint for all revolutionary disruption" (Beck xvii). It is individualized, based in feel-good emotions, and non-disruptive to systems of power, and with her biracialism, it also is "diverse," hitting popular shallow diversity quotas that distract from the lack of substance of her feminism.

As noted earlier, one does not have to be white to be a white feminist (Zakaria 1), and while Meghan identifies as a biracial woman, she has not always been treated like a biracial woman nor does she often articulate a personal ideology where race is key to her own existence. In her and Harry's interview with Oprah, Meghan is asked if she was concerned/thought about her ability to fit in as the first mixed-race person to marry into the royal family, and Meghan responds, "I thought about it because they made me think about it" (The US Sun). And in their Netflix docuseries, Meghan notes of her experience growing up, "Very different to be a minority but not be treated as a minority right off the bat. I'd say now, people are very aware of my race because they made it such an issue when I went to the UK. But before that... most people didn't treat me like a 'Black woman'" ("Episode 2"17:25-45). Meghan, from her own explanation of her childhood and early adulthood, identified as biracial but was able to move through life and work as "ethnically ambiguous" (Markle "I'm More Than An 'Other'"). She notes how she would

go to auditions for biracial characters and characters of color and would get turned away

because she did not look dark enough (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 2" 39:24-39:50 and

Markle "I'm More Than An 'Other'"). Tressie McMillan Cottom, a sociologist cited

earlier who has watched the media Meghan has starred in from *Suits* to her Hallmark

movies, states "Meghan Markle has for her entire career as an actress played white" and

adds "She has successfully played white at least as long as Harry has" (Gay and

McMillan Cottom 3:17-3:41). In many instances, Meghan seems like she was able to pass

as white and move through the world and work as a white woman. As many stories that

we get of Meghan's childhood, she never reveals that she experienced any racism

directed at her, but she does mention the first time she heard someone use the n-word was

when she was in her 30s and a white woman yelled it at her mother (*Harry & Meghan*

"Episode 2" 16:40-17:27). From her own explanation, Meghan seems to have been able

to invoke or ignore her Blackness as it suited her, and racism was not something that was

key to her experience growing up. To be clear, I do not fault nor blame her for being able

to avoid colorism and racism in her childhood. I want to illustrate how Meghan seems to

have been able to live like a white woman in many spaces throughout her life.

In her 2015 essay on her biracialness in *Elle* magazine, "I'm More than an

'Other," Meghan details how her biracial identity influenced her life and how she chooses

to use that identity. She describes stressors growing up about what boxes she checked in

school for her race, how she auditioned for acting roles and could morph into other

ethnicities based on what color she wore, and more. At the end of the essay, her

conclusion is that we should find our identity independent from race markers and that we

should "push for color-blind casting….introduce yourself as who you are, not what color

your parents happen to be. You cultivate your life with people who don't lead with ethnic descriptions such as, 'that black guy Tom', but rather friends who say: 'You know? Tom, who works at [blah blah] and dates [fill in the blank] girl.'" Meghan articulated in 2015 and continues to articulate a personal ideology that views race as something personal, not systemic, and that you can choose a way out of. Her final thought in her *Elle* essay is that "You create the identity you want for yourself, just as my ancestors did when they were given their freedom. Because in 1865 (which is so shatteringly recent), when slavery was abolished in the United States, former slaves had to choose a name. A surname, to be exact." While this essay seems intended to be liberatory, paralleling her great-great-great grandfather's liberation from slavery and naming himself with her own struggles to self-identify, it comes off as shallow. She gestures toward that deep history while eliding it to preach a postracial ideal that actively ignores that darker people, even her own mother, cannot *choose* their way out of racism. It ignores the systemic oppressions and harm that stem from slavery and still very much impact people today.

As someone who grew up in a very white space and took years of education to know better about racism, I would happily give Meghan the benefit of the doubt or note how this represents a view that she has since grown out of, but it does not feel like she has. Even when racism begins to be directed at her, Meghan still works to individualize and direct it elsewhere instead of recognizing the deeper systemic harm. From Meghan's account of her life, racism seems to have been a non-issue for her personally, at least until she started dating Harry. After the news of them dating came out, one specific headline from the *Daily Mail*, a British tabloid and news outlet, was "Harry's girl is (almost) straight outta Compton" and the article stressed the "gang violence" around where

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Meghan's mother lived in the Crenshaw neighborhood of Los Angeles (Styles). This racist headline is one of the first of many attacks and lies that the British tabloids and others would use against Meghan Markle, but notably, Meghan suggests that her initial reaction to this specific headline is "I've never even lived in Compton" and "why do you have to take a dig at Compton?" suggesting she was incredulous and that this racism did not feel personal (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 2" 18:48-19:10). I want to focus on the race aspect here, but the use of Compton could also add layers of class, poverty, and policing into this conversation. The reaction to the headline that Meghan gives audiences suggests that the racism did not inflict the pain or cause offense like it seems intended to. She is an actress, so she could be projecting a reaction to seem above the insult to not prompt similar racist reactions intended to harm her. If it is the latter, then her reaction is understandable, but even then, it works to distance herself from the racism and project the idea that the racism did not wound her. Within Meghan's popularity and status is the potential for exposing racism and misogyny, but she continually diverts from making those explicit connections.

The Netflix docuseries does briefly expand on the racist treatment she received by the British press, but the focus is how the palace refused to comment and to transition viewers into how the UK press and news outlets operate. Meghan and her mother articulate that Meghan did not grow up being treated as a Black girl so she was unprepared for this racist treatment (Harry & Meghan "Episode 2" 17:30-18:40). As Meghan presents it, before she became associated with Prince Harry, her biracialism did

not seem to greatly affect how she was treated or moved through the world.[76] This may be why her feminism, born out of the mistreatment and misogyny she experienced personally with the ivory soap ad and the boys in her class making sexist statements, is less interested in the intersections of different identities with womanhood. Her racial identity was not central to how she moved through the world which seems to have contributed to why her activism and advocacy continues to abide by a popular white feminist ideology.

I am not the first to accuse Meghan of projecting a feminism that is complicit to maintaining inequalities. Dowler and Bartos call Meghan's feminism, "comfort feminism" that "promotes a feel-good camouflage that obscures a white supremacy and renders any demands for accountability for sexism and racism futile" (1). Clancy and Yelin note that she was called a "feminist princess" whose inclusion into the royal family was positioned as a "feminist, post-racial utopia: a bi-racial, divorced, self-proclaimed feminist, American actor 'modernising' (Duncan and Low, 2018) an ancient patriarchal Institution" ("Meghan's Manifesto" 1). Clancy and Yelin continue along similar lines in another of their articles, "Monarchy is a feminist issue," and argue that Meghan's feminism's represents "popular, neoliberal and celebrity feminisms [that] enable the generalised, reassuring appearance of progress, without demanding structural change" (2). What this chapter intends to add to this conversation is how Meghan's feminism aligns and builds from the narratives and idealized femininity discussed in the first two

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[76] It is important to note that even if Meghan did not heavily identify with her Blackness or if her mother did not feel the need to have the race talk with her (Harry & Meghan "Episode 2" 17:45-18:20), that does not negate her Blackness nor the racism she has experienced (Young). I detail Meghan's discussion of her own racial identity here to acknowledge how her childhood experience may have influenced the feminist ideology of her adulthood.

chapters and how despite being the victim of white supremacy and patriarchy as embodied by the British Royal Family, she still maintains a white popular feminism to sell her story to maintain culturally relevant and palatable.

I do want to be careful with how I associate Meghan with this kind of feminism and the harm it perpetuates. Meghan's alignment with a white popular feminism is not surprising or solely her fault. While chapter two discusses postfeminism of the 1990s and early 2000s as the precursor to popular feminism, it was not until the dramatic shift of Beyoncé proudly declaring herself a feminist at the 2014 VMAs that a cultural shift made feminism, the term, most acceptable for a consumer culture (Banet-Weiser 7). While ideas of female empowerment and gender equality had been popular and circulating in the postfeminist era, calling oneself a feminist was not widely popular until post-Beyoncé's VMA performance. But then it became a type of brand, a feminist lifestyle and aesthetic that one could represent in slogans, mugs t-shirts, etc. Feminism became something you could "buy, obtain, and experience as a product rather than an amorphous feeling that rushed in from challenging power" (Beck 104). We get Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's "lean in" feminism and the #girlboss era where women were encouraged to play the man's corporate game to gain power and money even though that also required them to often step on other women on their way to the top (Banet-Weiser 7-9). Meghan Markle grew up in the 1990s and early 2000s and was highly influenced by postfeminist media; her podcast often reflects on girl-focused media from that period including *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Legally Blonde* (2001), the Spice Girls, *Mean*

Girls (2004), and more.[77] And Meghan's role on *Suits* along with her travel blog and beginnings of activism happened during the rebrand of feminism in the 2010s. She even gave an interview to *InStyle* magazine in 2015, one year before she met and started dating Prince Harry, where she muses on being a girlboss and ties that identity into her character on *Suits* and her lifestyle blog (Roberts). Meghan represented the popular feminism of that period, and she continues to this day. On some level, it does make sense that she, as a white-passing biracial woman who fits within the respectability politics of white middle-class standards, could embrace the white feminist messaging that

> erases complex systems and casts you as the maker of your own fate. Deeply
> Institutionalized heterosexist, classist, sexist, and ableist impediments are
> reframed as something you as a feminist mastermind can control for and
> overcome. This narrative perpetuates the important cornerstone of white feminism
> that you can prevail over these circumstances through elaborate personal design.
> (Beck 106)

From Meghan's letter writing campaign to her success with her blog and role on *Suits* that enabled her activism, Meghan is a prime non-white subject that "proves" white feminism works if we ignore all other systemic issues and oppressions.

Meghan continues, even post-royal family, to maintain a white popular feminism. After she and Harry exited the British Royal family, they have monetized their "side of the story" to be able to afford security and refute the lies told about them (*Oprah with*

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[77] These references are specifically in "The Stigma of Singleton with Mindy Kaling," "Duality of Diva with Mariah Carey," and "Breaking down 'The Bimbo' with Paris Hilton."

Meghan and Harry and *Harry & Meghan* "Episode 3"). Released in the latter half of 2022, along with their Netflix docuseries, was Meghan's podcast, that focused on "the labels and tropes that try to hold women back. Over the course of the next dozen episodes, we're going to live inside and rip apart the boxes women have been placed into for generations… how we can move past them" (*Archetypes* "The Misconception of Ambition with Serena Williams" 04:18-04:52) This twelve-episode series takes on the labels and stereotypes that are used against women, but they rarely connect individual experiences of misogyny or racism to broader systems or cultural standards. Each of the first eleven episodes cover an "archetype" like ambition, singleton, bitch, bimbo, and more with female celebrity, activist, and scholar guests to give context, nuance, and their personal takes on the stereotypes, and the final episode features three men to get their takes on these stereotypes and the collective effort to combat them ("'Man-ifesting A Cultural Shift' with Trevor Noah, Andy Cohen, and Judd Apatow"). Racism is only mentioned four times the entirety of the podcast, even though whole episodes are supposedly devoted to the anti-Asian stereotype of the Dragon Lady and the anti-Black Angry Black Woman trope (Archetypes "The Demystification of Dragon Lady with Margaret Cho & Lisa Ling" and "Upending the "Angry Black Woman" Myth with Issa Rae & Ziwe," and "The Audacity of the Activist with Jameela Jamil & Shohreh Aghdashloo"). The podcast even features prominent women of color like Serena Williams, Margaret Cho, Issa Rae, Ziwe, Mariah Carey, and more, and yet, there is rarely an explicit acknowledgement of *racism* or other -isms that nuance these women's experiences. They talk about the harm, mistreatment, harassment, etc., but there is not the effort to connect those individual experiences to the larger systems of oppression. This

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podcast is the most clear post-royal articulation of Meghan's feminism and her perspective on the challenges that women face, and it confirms that Meghan's feminism is gender-only and abides by a popular feminist ideology.

Meghan's podcast attempts to explore a plethora of problems for and constraints on women, but even when it feels on the precipice of introducing an intersectional analysis or explicitly condemning systems like capitalism, heteronormativity, whiteness, etc., it pivots or distracts from that deeper conversation. In the episode, "The Stigma of the Singleton with Mindy Kaling," Kaling does recognize the privilege of being financially secure in choosing to have children without a partner along with the pressures to be partnered from being part of an Indian family (24:10-25:45). Kaling's discussion is not an intentional intersectional practice but a discussion about the nuances of her own life, and it is one of the closest times the podcast gets to discussing the myriad inequalities and pressures that influence what decisions women even have to conform to certain ideals or not. Relatedly, in the "Good Wife/Bad Wife, Good Mom/Bad Mom…" episode, the academic who speaks on the pressures of motherhood and domesticity touches on capitalism and how it has changed family structures, but it cuts to a different discussion before there is an explicit connection between capitalism, the nuclear family, and the unequal distribution of domestic labor (34:00-36:20). And in the episode on "Angry Black Women" there are references to double consciousness and how Black women are not allowed to express the full range of emotions without getting negatively stereotypes, and yet even here, Meghan never connects to her own experience nor is there any discussion of the racism or the histories of colonialism that contribute to this stereotype. While some of the guests on the podcast may get closer to articulating an

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intersectional analysis or at least considering dimensions of inequality beyond gender, Meghan, notably, never does and, more than that, she personalizes and consistently neutralizes discussions that get closer to considering systemic inequality. This move keeps her content accessible and non-disruptive, allowing it to more easily circulate in pop culture spaces and conversation, and it also works to distance those with power from the harm they perpetuate. This podcast was so close at times to having a nuanced and intersectional discussion of how misogyny intersects with racism, heteronormativity, and more, but it feels like it avoided those opportunities to maintain a more comfortable conversation.

In her podcast, the Oprah interview, and the Netflix docuseries, Meghan often separates individuals from the systems they serve and projects a benign ignorance and helplessness of those in power. In the final *Archetypes* episode with her male celebrity guests, comedian, writer, and political commentator Trevor Noah and Meghan are discussing toxic masculinity and the socio-cultural programming that shapes men and women. Noah gives the metaphor of designing a space/home,

> someone who creates that space will generally create the space with themselves in mind. You know, if I build a house, the natural way for me to think that I will move from one floor to the next is stairs. But this is because I have functioning legs…It is only when I encounter somebody with a disability who cannot use those stairs that I realize, oh crap, I built this house only for me and I didn't even consider this as an element. ("'Man-ifesting A Cultural Shift' with Treavor Noah, Andy Cohen, and Judd Apatow" 1:02:00-1:02:34)

While this metaphor could be useful in some circumstances where individuals unconsciously repeat harmful stereotypes and expectations that they can easily change if they were more informed, it also gives an easy way out to those with power who refuse to consider or value alternative perspectives or people. It assumes a benign ignorance and not an intentional system created to be unequal. Meghan reaffirms that ignorance in her reply, "that's a great way to just reframe our thinking surrounding this. That it's not done with an intent to cause pain, but maybe it's just done because you're only seeing it through the lens of what you know" (1:02:40-1:02:53). Again, the metaphor could work in some circumstances, but for Meghan who has become inextricably linked with our conception of the British Royal Family and its imperial history, that excuse could be extended to that entire Institution of the monarchy. And in the other media, she has also worked to separate the family from the Institution and conveyed that they personally are not at fault for the harassment she experienced: "So, there's the family, and then there's the people that are running the Institution. Those are two separate things. And it's important to be able to compartmentalize that, because the Queen, for example, has always been wonderful to me [Meghan]" (The US Sun) and "this is when a family and a family business are in direct conflict" when she is talking about Harry trying to leave the royal family and being blocked from seeing his grandmother (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 5" 16:00-16:25). These examples illustrate a consistent move to individualize actions and neutralize impacts, and they reflect a neoliberal white popular feminist ideology that privileges personal feelings over systemic harm and complicity. The feminism that Meghan projects centers a white, middle-to-upper class sensibility and experience as universal, ignores how race, money, disability, etc. can shift experiences, and abides by

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neoliberal, capitalistic idea that individuals are responsible for their own success and overcoming adversity.

Meghan's feminism and activism are key to how she presents herself, and throughout the media she and Harry have put out, her feminism and activism attracted Harry to her early on (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 3" 30-16-30:25). Popular media and the public have also recognized it and applauded her feminism: "7 times Meghan Markle was a feminist icon, from calling out sexism in 'Suits' to sending notes to sex workers," "The most empowering and inspiring things Meghan Markle has ever said about women," and "Meghan Markle on being a feminist and why she doesn't look at Twitter" (Friel, London, and Stump, respectively). Meghan's feminism invokes conceptions of empowered womanhood and popular feminism and thus easily circulates in popular culture because it fails to explicitly critique or push back on systems of oppression and makes empowerment and liberation seem like personal choices. Because of its wide-spread acceptability and Meghan's own fulfillment of white feminine ideals, her inclusion into the Royal Family inspired hope that her feminism and biracial identity would "modernize" the monarchy and suggest that society had achieved a post-racist ideal (Weidhase 916; *Harry & Meghan* "Episode 4" 13:20-13:50). Even Harry and Meghan expressed their hope that Meghan could be an asset for the royal family to connect with their non-white Commonwealth subjects (*Oprah with Meghan and Harry*, *Harry & Meghan* "Episode 2" 47:44-48:50 "Episode 5" 13:36-13:45). A commonly expressed hope in the months and days leading up to Harry and Meghan's wedding was that her biracial-ness and feminism would reform and reinvigorate the Institution of the British Royal Family. While those willing to recognize the history and inextricable

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whiteness of the British Royal Family suspected that this was a neoliberal fantasy doomed to ultimately fail, it was a powerful dream that seemed plausible within a white popular feminist framework.

Part of chapter one of this dissertation explored the postracial castings in *Bridgerton* and related media, and I argue that they helped to recraft historical memory and create a more palatable history to white audiences that erased the horrors of colonialism. Meghan's inclusion as a biracial woman into the royal family held a similar promise of easing historical tensions and further connecting the "Great Imperial Family" of the British Commonwealth (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 3" 44:00-46:00). The royal family, and even Meghan and Harry, hoped that Meghan's Blackness would make her identifiable with British colonized subjects even though Meghan, as an American, had little culturally in common with Commonwealth subjects except maybe a similar skin tone. This is not to say that seeing a "Black princess" in the royal family is not significant or valuable, especially to young Black women in the Commonwealth, but that her inclusion is not enough to ignore those histories (Dowler and Bartons; Yelin and Paule). Honestly, this "fairytale" of commoner American princess and disillusioned British Prince supposedly being enough to show colonized people of color that they are being represented in the royal family or to try and compensate for centuries of oppression is insulting, but it still sold, it sold like *Bridgerton,* and Harry and Meghan are still selling it through their media to show how the Royal Family fumbled Meghan's inclusion into royal life. This is one of the moments where the slippage between white feminism and white supremacy shows more clearly. This imagined more equitable empire exemplified in *Bridgerton* and repeated in the postracial promise of Meghan Markle and Prince

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Harry's marriage taps into a white feminism that is inclusive, neoliberal, and feels good to audiences that shy away from uncomfortable feelings, histories, and realities, but it is insufficient when put in conflict with the centuries-old empire that has sustained itself through the oppression and exploitation of non-white people and colonies. The British Empire/Commonwealth's history and popular conception are intimately tied to whiteness, and while the Institution was willing to include Meghan because of the promise she represented that would reinvigorate their brand, it was ultimately unable to sustain the inclusion of a feminist princess of color.

While Meghan was the victim of racist attacks as soon as it became public that she was dating Prince Harry, the Royal Family was willing to initially accept her despite her Blackness and feminism because she fulfills most of the standards of white femininity. To better understand Meghan's feminism and the fraught position she is in as a biracial woman married to a white British prince, we need to talk about respectability politics and misogynoir, both of which are bound up with one another and add nuance to the way the public sees and engages with Meghan Markle and her story. Coined by Evelyn Higginbotham, respectability politics is the "promotion of (white) middle-class ideals among the masses of blacks in the belief that such ideals ensured the dual goals of racial self-help and respect from white America," though similar ideas can be seen in British society (14). Based on a neoliberal idea that each individual is responsible for acting correctly and working hard to achieve success and personal fulfillment, the respectable ideal is tied to white standards of dress, deportment, and speech that often excludes Black and other people of color, sometimes women, and those from lower social classes (Pitcan et. al. 164). Related to respectability politics is misogynoir. This term,

developed by scholar Moya Bailey, is used to describe the unique racialized misogyny

that targets Black women (Bailey 1). The combination of respectability politics and

misogynoir leads to an almost impossible struggle for Black women. Misogynoir makes

it so even if a Black woman is able to fulfill respectability standards, she cannot escape

the misogyny and racism because her Blackness excludes her from idealized whiteness.

We see this very clearly in the treatment of Meghan once she, and her Blackness, gained

close proximity to the whiteness of Harry and the British royalty.

Meghan, pre-Harry but definitely now that she is married to him, maintains a very

specific aesthetic that aligns with white standards of femininity, deportment, and

respectability that value thinness, education, beauty, trendy but still conservative fashion,

and motherhood (Nunn, Daniels, and Banet-Weiser). By most measures, even those

discussed in chapter two, she meets or surpasses standards of white womanhood. She

consistently talks about reading new books and how they educate her and expand her

world (i.e. self-improvement); her feminism abides by a work hard and feel empowered

model aligning with neoliberal ideas of personal responsibility; and she notes in multiple

media her value of being authentic (The US Sun and "Good Wife/Bad Wife, Good

Mom/Bad Mom with Sophie Grégoire Trudeau, Pamela Adlon and Sam Jay"). And to

further the connections to the second chapter, in their docuseries, one of the things that

drew Harry to Meghan was her ability to make work look effortless: " I thought to

myself, like, 'What a dream.' I found a woman that not necessarily finds this easy but is

able to do it and make it look easy (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 3" 10:38-10:45).[78]

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[78] Chapter 2 of this dissertation discussed the connected values of self-improvement, neoliberalism, and authenticity/ effortlessness as key for white womanhood in the nineteenth century and postfeminist media.

Meghan is beautiful, thin, fashionable, educated, thoughtful, and overall non-offensive in her speech, look, and most of her content. She projects an effortless authenticity and a constant drive for self-improvement even while critiquing the stereotypes that work against women. Meghan's alignment with white respectability politics and the promise of her "feminism and status as a successful, Black, female celebrity were co-opted by the monarchy to project the appearance of modernisation" (Yelin and Paule citing Clancy and Yelin 1). Even Doria Ragland, Meghan's mother, 'ha[d] to offer a performance of utmost respectability… while the material fact of her Blackness nevertheless provides the ideologically useful appearance of a post-racial royal family open to difference" (Handyside 199). And Meghan is never far from Kate's the new Princess of Wales, "traditional, bourgeois, White respectable femininity" (Weidhase 917). Meghan, even now after their separation from the royal family, still maintains a very cultivated public persona, and in her podcast that is supposed to represent her feminism and breaking down those stereotypes, balked at being called a "diva" by Mariah Carey ("The Duality of Diva with Mariah Carey"), refused to say the word "bitch" ("To 'B' or not to 'B'? with Mellody Hobson & Victoria Jackson"), constantly centers her roles as wife and mother, and barely shows anger even at stories where it is clear that her guest had been harmed by systemic misogyny or racism. Meghan almost perfectly fulfills the standards of a middle-to-upper class respectability and whiteness, which should enable her to be included into the British Royal Family, but her inability to be accepted shows how the Institution of the monarchy and imagined white Britain are still willing to continue to sacrifice women and people of color for its maintenance and protection.

4.2 The Failure of Popular Feminism

From Meghan's description of her own life, she was always able to accomplish the things she set her mind to do. From her feminist awakening letter-writing campaign to becoming a series regular on *Suits* to building her successful lifestyle blog, Meghan succeeded in competitive arenas where so many had failed. It makes sense that a white popular feminist ideology worked for her. Individual neoliberalism promises success to individuals who work hard enough. The maintenance of an idealized femininity literally made her money through her blog. The effortlessness that she projects draws people to her (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 3"10:38-10:45). And more recently, her reliance on her marriage and motherhood as key to her characterization is a rhetorical move that makes her sympathetic to public audiences while also giving her agency to protect and provide for them. At almost every turn in her life, Meghan has articulated and fulfilled ideals of a white popular feminism. On top of this, she is American and grew up in Los Angeles. While Americans do not have royalty, she herself has said she thought American celebrity was comparable to European royalty (*Oprah with Meghan and Harry).* Meghan went into the royal family believing from past experience that she could work hard enough and follow the rules well enough to assimilate into the British Royal Family. And the people around her were mostly validating this idea. Harry, some tabloids, and others saw the inclusion of Meghan, as a biracial American feminist, as a progressive turn for the royal family who was being accused of being outdated (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 3" 8:00-8:30; Andrews, Dowler & Bartos, Iqbal, and Yelin & Paule). Despite the racism from some, Meghan's inclusion was celebrated and inspired hope. What was not considered seriously by Meghan, Harry, or those celebrating this modernization was how

deeply white supremacy, patriarchy, and power are tied together to justify the historical and current imperial project that is Great Britain and the Commonwealth.

Again, white popular feminism is complicit in larger systems of inequality. It wants to empower individual women who fit within certain parameters to succeed in those unequal systems, to project good feelings and a shallow idea of progress while maintaining the status quo; "like a lot of oppressive precepts, white feminism is a belief system…It's a specific way of viewing gender equality that is anchored in the accumulation of individual power rather than the redistribution of it" (Beck xvii). Meghan had always been able to "win," "achieve," "overcome" with a white popular feminist ideology, so why should marrying Prince Harry be any different? Because of white popular feminism's complicity, it refuses to recognize structural racism and misogyny and sets them as unique instances of harm perpetuated by individuals who do not know better. Meghan, as a biracial woman, entered into the British Royal Family expecting to be celebrated for how she could assist in modernizing that family and Institution, and instead faced racism, harassment, and being scapegoated to protect other white family members.

We can see this hopefulness and confidence in one of her first royal engagements, before she and Harry were even married. Harry, Meghan, Prince William, and Princess Kate attended an event for the Royal Foundation. They are being interviewed, and Meghan is specifically asked about #MeToo and her support of "the empowerment of women and young girls, and promoting their self-worth." Meghan speaks freely in support of the #MeToo movement and her experience as an actress. Meghan, who at this point was not married and not technically a royal, made headlines for explicitly

supporting a political movement and breaking "royal protocol" (Abrams). Up to this

point, no royals had taken any stance on #MeToo with Kate avoiding wearing black to

the BAFTAs unlike other celebs who "were wearing black in support of the Time's Up

initiative" (Arnold). In the docuseries, it is noted that it was unexpected that Meghan

talking openly about this would be so controversial and "taboo" and implied that her

speaking out was not well received by the Institution (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 3"

31:40-32:30). After she married and became a working royal, Meghan continued to

advocate for gender equality, but it was often overseas, like her support of South African

women (Nicholl). Rarely did she point to the misogyny of England or the treatment she

received by the press. Clancy and Yelin note that

> Meghan's feminist interventions were depoliticized and 'co-opted' by the
>
> monarchy as part of broader projects of Institutional reproduction through
>
> philanthropy. Projects of women's empowerment became part of her 'work' as a
>
> member of the royal family, and as such were shorn of their radical or
>
> emancipatory potential. This meant that it was not Meghan's individual voice that
>
> was being platformed in her work, but rather an Institutional standpoint on vague,
>
> defanged, neoliberal issues of "empowerment." (Clancy and Yelin "Monarchy is a
>
> Feminist Issue" 5)

Despite the neutralizing of her feminism and activism and her effort to fit in with the

royal family, it was not enough and Meghan, because of her otherness due to her

feminism and Blackness, was allegedly offered up as a clickbait sacrifice. While Meghan

was the victim of racist and misogynistic lies and harassment by the tabloids and social

media, the Palace intervened to protect Prince Andrew, discussed in the introduction, and

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Prince William, which will be discussed later. These efforts to squash rumors or bad press about the white male members while refusing to intervene on Meghan's behalf exemplifies the Institution's values and how it protects itself at the expense of women and people of color. It also illustrates that Meghan was not treated as being fully part of this Institution even before she left.

In the first part of this chapter, we can see the promise of Meghan's white popular feminism to benefit her *and* the royal family. Their goals could have aligned and led to success on both sides, but this latter half of the chapter will detail (1) the failure of Meghan's feminism within the institution's long histories of domination, racism, and misogyny despite its desire to be perceived as modern and progressive and (2) the failure of Meghan's feminist narrative to recognize these harmful systems for what they are. It is an intertwined double failure that reveals the royal family's commitment to white supremacy and patriarchy and white popular feminism's instability and complicity with white supremacy. Despite the promise of white popular feminism, Meghan's Blackness and feminism could not exist comfortably within this system. While she and Harry have blamed the tabloids and worked to excuse the culpability of the royal family itself, it is clear that she became an easy target and a scapegoat that could take the brunt of the criticism and deflect from other white members of the family. The following pages detail some of the clearest examples of how Meghan attempted to invoke white popular feminism, but no matter how hard she worked at it, she could not assimilate that feminism nor herself into this institution. These examples also make clear how Meghan continues to abide by a white popular feminism and refuses to connect the misogynoir

she has experienced to larger systems of oppression and legacies of colonialism and slavery.

4.1.1   Grenfell Fire Victims

One of the clearest examples of Meghan's Otherness being used against her and delegitimizing her "feminist" pursuits is when Meghan began collaborating with victims of the Grenfell fire on a cookbook which turned into a media circus about how she was connected to Islamic terrorists. In June 2017, Grenfell Tower, a high-rise apartment in Kensington London, caught fire and over seventy people died (BBC News "Grenfell Tower: What happened"). What later came to light was the lack of basic safety features and negligence in updating and using proper materials for the high-rise (Global Resilience Institute at Northeastern University). Also, most of the residents of Grenfell were low-income immigrants who had immigrated from Sudan, Eritrea, and Syria (Maizland). According to the *Harry & Meghan* docuseries, the victims were being put up in hotels and given vouchers for fast food. Some victims, particularly mothers and other women who equated making food for their families as a kind of love and care, were frustrated with this arrangement. These victims found relief in the Hubb Community Kitchen, which was affiliated with a mosque, where they could cook together with other women to feed their families ("Episode 4" 17:50-19:08). Meghan connected with these women and through that relationship created a cookbook to help raise funds for the community kitchen and the fire victims (Halleman). Not long after this collaboration became public, *The Telegraph* published an article titled "Meghan cookbook mosque linked to 19 terror suspects including 'Jihadi John' in group's investigation" which led other publications, like *The Daily Mail,* to publish their own versions (Tominey). *The*

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Telegraph article makes unsubstantiated claims that come from a single neo-conservative political think tank that has faced criticism for being anti-Islamic (Bridge Initiative Team), but despite its lack of quality reporting, the clickbait headline went viral, demonizing the victims and Meghan. In this example, we see the xenophobia of the British tabloids targeting victims for their immigrant status and non-Christianity, playing on fears of otherness and colonial values of whiteness. We also see the work to discredit Meghan and her activism by associating her with ideas of racial and cultural otherness. There is also the added layer of the idea of terrorists who wish for the destruction of the West/whiteness that came from the War on Terror in the 2000s. While more egregious than some headlines about Meghan, this unfounded accusation demonstrates the white supremacy and ethnocentrism that is still critical in how Great Britain popularly conceptualizes itself. Meghan's positive impact was undercut by racism and both her and the women she worked with were harassed.

Within the racism and xenophobia that Meghan and these women were subjected to, there is never a substantial conversation about that racism and xenophobia. Even in the *Harry & Meghan* docuseries, the victims' status as immigrants or their religion is not seen as important; instead Meghan's motivations to help them come from their displacement, victimhood, and motherhood ("Episode 4" 18:15-20:08). Meghan notes their shared roles as wives and mothers as a connecting point, but the series refuses to recognize the greater systems and histories at play that victimize her and them. This approach connects to a colorblind ideology that refuses to engage with relevant discussions of harm based in racism and xenophobia. Meghan seems to be an intelligent woman who is not unaware of these systems of oppression even if she does play up

innocence for certain audiences (Gay and McMillan Cottom 15:10-15:35), and we know that she has read/reads books that explore and explain these systems of oppression. In the docuseries, Safiya Noble, notable scholar of racism and tech and author of *Algorithms of Oppression,* is featured as she talks about the online hate that Meghan received and how most of the hate came from highly coordinated and networked accounts (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 5" 28:10-30:00). And in her *Archetypes* podcast episode, "Upending the 'Angry Black Woman' Myth with Issa Rae & Ziwe," Meghan details how her friend gave her Noble's book and how eye-opening it was for her (00:00-02:50). While Noble's book does not discuss Grenfell that I am aware of, her book is about the projected objectivity of tech and algorithms but how they are very much influenced by histories of racism, colonialism, misogyny, and more. If Meghan reads these kinds of books like she claims, then she is not ignorant of the highly networked and systemic misogyny, racism, and oppression that targeted her and the Grenfell fire victims. While she was still a working royal, her need to remain politically neutral could justify not noting how the mistreatment of people of color and immigrants is a trend in British history. But after she and Harry have left the royal family and are trying to tell their side of the story, it feels like a missed opportunity for her to not connect the racism she experienced to the racism and xenophobia the fire victims were subjected to. Meghan may not be an expert, but she is aware and has chosen not to comment on systemic racism, misogyny, and more.

4.1.2   Black & White Motherhood

While the British tabloids had targeted Meghan with racism and misogyny throughout her relationship with Prince Harry, the harassment increased when it was announced they were expecting their first child, Archie. Meghan's pregnancy is one of

the clearest examples of the embedded imperial white supremacy that shapes popular ideas of womanhood, motherhood, and royalty. It reveals the ongoing beliefs of white supremacy and motherhood as a key component of maintaining that supremacy, and the inability of a monarchy built upon that white supremacy to fully include non-white royals. This targeted harassment was so clear that *Women's Studies in Communication* devoted a 2021 special issue to the "intersecting politics of race, gender, motherhood, and empire" as mediated through treatment of Meghan Markle (WSiC News). From a BBC broadcaster tweeting out a picture of "a couple holding hands with a chimpanzee dressed in clothes with the caption: "Royal Baby leaves hospital" (BBC News "Danny Baker fired by BBC over royal baby chimp tweet") to the constant comparisons to Kate Middleton to alleged concerns about the Archie's potential skin tone, Meghan's pregnancy revealed the limitations and ultimate failure of the British monarchy and white supremacism to incorporate Meghan's post-racial white popular feminism.

As established in the previous two chapters, motherhood is a key component of the maintenance of white supremacy. From nineteenth-century British mothers who literally and metaphorically reproduced the empire as they birthed white sons and raised their children to fulfill cultural expectations that aligned with imperial values (David 5 and Marcus 107) to the Victorian feminists who advocated for the social and political equality of white women at the expense of colonized peoples (Burton 16-17 and Spivak 93), white women's motherhood, their perceived ability to teach, nurture, and protect, was key to maintaining the British empire. In the present day, we still see this valuing of white motherhood and it being used to maintain white supremacy. Jessie Daniels argues that "white women are key to creating and maintaining white families and to hoarding

wealth, education and other resources" (169). Daniels cites Elizabeth Gillespie McRae's research on white women's advocacy to keep schools segregated and their defense that their actions were just protecting their children (175), but this argument also extends to groups like the modern Moms for Liberty, an advocacy group who claims to want to protect parental rights in their children's education, but mostly fight against discussion or even recognition of LGBTQ rights, historical or contemporary racism and discrimination, and other systemic inequalities in education (The GLAAD Accountability Project). From the mothers who fought for continued school segregation to Moms for Liberty, they collectively represent the continued maintenance of white supremacy and imperial values by white women through their roles as mothers and protectors of children. To continue that legacy of empire and power, the royal family's continuation is also entangled with these ideals of white motherhood. This is the context that Meghan stepped into when she announced her pregnancy in October 2018.

Because of the ties between literal and cultural reproduction, especially within an Institution like the monarchy that relies on the succession of biological children, Meghan's pregnancy was of high interest and critique. She faced constant comparisons to Kate and the late Diana Spencer, former Princess of Wales, and Meghan was often vilified where they were applauded. The main difference between Meghan's and their pregnancies was her race which makes sense considering the importance of white motherhood in general, but also Princess Diana's white motherhood specifically.[79] After

[79] There are more differences between Meghan and Kate and Diana like their careers before becoming royals, being American vs English, their ages that they started dating the princes, and more. But the biggest difference and the one that takes priority in almost every discussion of Meghan and Harry is her race. When people complain about her American-ness, it often tiptoes around her Blackness, and this happens with

Diana's tragic death in 1997, many were quick to forget how she was harassed by the press (Barnett). Instead, in death, she became a martyr and ideal white mother. In *Nice White Ladies*, Jessie Daniels discusses Diana in her chapter on "Protecting White Families," noting Diana's wedding to Charles as a "reinforce[ment of] their whiteness and their heterosexuality as taken for granted, as natural" and comments that Diana became "a catalyst in transforming white motherhood globally" (155). Citing Raka Shome's book on Diana, Daniels connects Diana to the construction of white women as "ideal mothers" and the reinforcement of that image as she was photographed with sick children of color all over the world (167). Similar to the discussion in the previous paragraph, there is a clear extension of the ideal of British white motherhood "civilizing the natives" and saving the Empire in the nineteenth century to Diana's white motherhood in the 1990s, and we see the attempted continuation of this image in Kate and Meghan in the 2010s and 2020s.

Because Diana became a martyred and idealized princess, Kate and Meghan were and continue to be compared to her. The parallels vary but they are made between the outfits Kate and Meghan wear that are similar in any way to something Diana wore (Adamiyatt), how Kate is following the Princess of Wales "playbook that Diana established" (Vanderhoof), and even how Meghan and Diana's "bombshell" interviews revealed "mental-health struggles, unsurvivable press attention, and faux, failed fairy tales" (Taylor). Whether Kate and Meghan meant to invoke Diana is kind of moot point as almost everything the princesses did was, and often is, compared to their late mother-

almost every complaint of Meghan being able to trace back to anti-Black racism. The problem that most critics have with Meghan derives from racism.

in-law. But one of the places where Diana was and continues to be used as the standard is in their roles as mothers, and this is most clearly seen in the drama surrounding the post-birth photo op on the steps of the Lindo Wing of St. Mary's hospital. This royal tradition began in 1981 with Princess Anne and her daughter Zara, but it was Princess Diana's photoshoot with newborn William a year later that continues to hold in popular memory. This photo op often takes place a day or two but even as soon as a few hours after giving birth, and there is an expectation that the princess will walk unsupported and look put-together in a full face of makeup with her hair done. William and Kate have repeated this tradition with all of their children, and Kate has even dressed in outfits that clearly invoke Diana, when Kate wore a polka dot dress or a red dress with a white collar like Diana's on the steps after the birth of two of her children (Pentelow). Kate was on the steps looking perfectly pulled together a mere seven hours after giving birth to her third child, Louie (Friel and Dawson). There is a lot that could be said about this tradition, but for this chapter, I want to draw attention to how there is an expectation of accessibility of the royals to the media even in vulnerable conditions and how it works to normalize the overlapping ideas of natural motherhood, whiteness, and femininity. Childbirth is often very painful, difficult, and messy, but here after only a few hours, the "perfect" princess stands tall with her husband holding their child with a beautiful blowout and a full face of makeup. The idea of making femininity and motherhood look "effortless" from chapter two is applicable here. This is one of the clearest examples of Diana being used as the standard and Kate meeting that standard, and even exceeding it – seven hours after giving birth is wild.

In contrast to Diana and Kate, we have Meghan who chose a Black OBGYN at another London hospital because Meghan, being over 35, had higher pregnancy risks. She was not willing to change her doctor to be able to give birth at St. Mary's. According to the docuseries, Harry and she tried to find a photo op spot near the hospital she was giving birth at to continue the tradition, but there were concerns about the photo op spot being too close to the emergency entrance (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 4" 42:00-45:30). When Kate and Diana gave birth, there were formal announcements to inform the press of when the photo op would take place, but for Harry and Meghan's child, the formal announcement from Buckingham Palace only stated that Harry and Meghan wished to "celebrate the birth of their child privately" and did not explain or even allude to the extenuating circumstances. Harry and Meghan, but mostly Meghan, were criticized for not following royal expectations nor upholding their part of the royal media contract. With all of this going on, it would be wrong to ignore the clear medical racism that contributes to the statistics that "Black women in both England and the United States have maternal mortality rates several times as high as those of white women… In the United States alone, Black women are more than three times as likely as white women to die of pregnancy-related conditions" (Firozi). When one considers the realistic trauma and risks of pregnancy and childbirth, Meghan's prioritization of her safety and comfort with her doctor makes sense, but according to the tabloids, she was selfish and failed to project the effortlessness of motherhood and change her plans for the whims and convenience of the press. Meghan failed to meet the standards and expectations set by Diana and fulfilled by Kate.

Not only did Meghan face criticism for not meeting the imagined standard of Diana, Meghan was constantly compared to her sister-in-law Kate (née Middleton), the former Duchess of Cambridge, now the new Princess of Wales, from the beginning of her pregnancy. And despite the similarities between Kate and Meghan, Meghan was almost always found guilty of some wrongdoing while Kate was often praised for similar things. One scholar, Mary McGill, has explored this contrast in her article, "Question of Contrast: Unpacking the Mail Online's Depiction of Meghan Markle's Royal Motherhood." McGill argues that the *Mail Online*, part of the British tabloid *The Daily Mail*, used the contrast between Meghan and Kate to cast Meghan "as "threatening" the monarchy and, by extension, traditional notions of British identity" (215). Also important to this comparison is how Kate, once the victim of the tabloid's denigration as the newest royal, was "imbued with a new cultural resonance that reconstruct[ed] her as an exemplar of "normal" (i.e., white, middle-to-upper-class) British femininity" and "Middleton's recuperation relies on Markle's vilification, where Markle's "failures" are contrasted with Middleton's "successes," which stem from her embodiment of "proper" British womanhood against Markle's supposed rejection of it" (McGill 227). *Buzzfeed News* also compiled moments of contrast just by headlines and a quick skim reveals the double standard that worked to villainize Meghan. In one egregious example, *The Daily Express*, notes Kate's love of avocados as a morning sickness cure in 2017, but then in 2019, the publication connects Meghan's love of avocado toast during her pregnancy to water shortages, illegal deforestation, and environmental devastation (E. Hall). This depiction of Kate's maternity inspires sympathy for her morning sickness, while Meghan's pregnancy is equated with global destruction. Again, the main difference between the two

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is Meghan's skin color. While Meghan is American and initially from a lower class, as an actress and lifestyle blogger, she rose through socio-economic ranks and her fashion and overall look does not differ much from Kate's upper-middle class upbringing (Burchfield).[80] While Meghan's Americanness may have been a problem if she did not project a white middle-to-upper-class feminine ideal in her dress and decorum, her skin color, and the cultural significance attached to it, is the most prominent difference between the two princesses.

In *The Roxane Gay Agenda* podcast episode, cited earlier, both Gay and McMillan Cottom laugh about Meghan's white passing and that "She has successfully played white at least as long as Harry has" (Gay and McMillan Cottom 3:17-3:41). Within this conversation, they discuss the Oprah interview revealing that someone in the royal family voiced concerns over Archie's skin color and how that concern is indicative of their fear of his skin color being too dark for royal standards and of his cultural inheritance (12:50-13:20). Gay and McMillan Cottom echo the idea that mothers pass down culture, and that this concern of his cultural inheritance would not be a concern if the skin color of Meghan's parents were reversed (11:50-12:40). Doria, visibly Black and much darker than Meghan, is very important to her daughter and takes an active role in Meghan's life. She was featured in the royal wedding photos and Meghan often talks fondly of her. Both Gay and McMillan Cottom note the importance of Meghan's mother, and it is clear they see and respect Doria and Meghan's efforts to navigate this white

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[80] As noted in an earlier footnote, critiques of Meghan's differences often connect back to anti-Black racism. Kate Middleton's family is technically upper middle class but she is not part of the aristocracy nor the descendants of the aristocracy. And while Kate's background was used against her by the press, she is now used as the example of the "English rose" to show how Meghan is unworthy and unqualified to be a British princess (Kupemba).

space (11:50-55). Despite these efforts, Meghan and Doria could not hide or choose their way out of Doria's very visible Blackness which threatens the whiteness of the royal family. Meghan and Doria seemed to try very hard to abide by white popular standards of feminism and femininity. At the wedding, Meghan and Doria were offered as "a comforting image of a cosmopolitan, postracial royal family, which values [their] exotic difference as an important modernizing move… to continue to "reflect" the [British] nation," but this move (1) "suppress[ed] any acknowledgment of systemic racial tension and prejudice" (Handyside 211), and (2) it became clear it had failed when it was revealed that the royal family was still concerned about Prince Archie's non-white appearance and cultural inheritance. Despite the effort by Meghan and her mother to reframe Doria away from stereotypes of the Black single mother and into an image of dignity, grace, and poise that reflects white standards of femininity, her Blackness could not be fully incorporated into an Institution built from white supremacy (Handyside 198). We see the failure of the Institution to embrace difference and Blackness, but we also see Meghan's failure to fully acknowledge that racism.

Even after the clear racism and colorism embedded in a question of how dark Meghan's child would be or the recognition of the double-standards between Meghan and Kate, Harry and Meghan's narratives give no recognition or even vague allusion to the colonialism or white supremacy that inspires this racism. The closest they get are often voiced by others, like Oprah asking Meghan the question about her inclusion into the royal family as a non-white person. In the Oprah interview, Harry acknowledges how over seventy female members of the British Parliament wrote an open letter condemning the "colonial undertones of articles and headlines written about Meghan" (The US Sun).

But Harry in this interview does not use this as a jumping off point to talk about those colonial connections, and instead he uses it to talk about how sad it was in comparison to his family's lack of condemnation of the harassment. Harry ends the thought with "Yet no one from my family ever said anything over those three years. And that . . . that hurts. But I also am acutely aware of where my family stand and how scared they are of the tabloids turning on them" (The US Sun). This brief part of the Oprah interview reveals a few things. First, that Harry and Meghan are not ignorant of the racism and colonialist sentiment guiding the attacks on Meghan, but that they are, publicly, avoiding that condemnation of the larger system and histories. Second, here we see a move like Meghan's in her podcast discussed earlier, the move to reframe the faces of the powerful Institution of the monarchy into individuals who are also victimized and deserving of sympathy. That last line quoted above does a lot to villainize the press and tabloids and works to excuse the royal family's (in)actions. If we are only considering Harry and Meghan, then this strategy works to leave room for reconciliation with the family. By separating individuals from systems, they leave space for individual royal family members to also be victims of the system. But Meghan and Harry have positioned Meghan as the feminist, activist, and modernizing force that appeals to the more progressive and other people of color of the Commonwealth. They have attributed that power to her, and yet, when there is great potential for impact and change, they avoid it. Meghan, being a biracial woman with intimate experience of the British Royal Family's racism and misogyny, has the potential to expose and connect the white supremacy of the colonialism of the past with the white supremacy of the present. Her (and Harry's) refusal to make those connections in their side of the story does keep options open for

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reconciliation for them personally but this also continues to align them with colorblind, white feminism and the racism of that ideology.

Throughout the docuseries, the tabloids are made the villains while members of the royal family are suggested to be trapped within the system that ties their hands. Now, the British tabloids are pretty ruthless, they led to the death of Princess Diana and contributed to Meghan's mental health crisis and suicidal ideations while being a working royal (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 4" 31:00-32:10 and Chaddah), so I am not defending them in any way. Instead, I want to point to this misdirection that assigns the lion's share of the blame at the feet of the tabloids while refusing to condemn the royal family or the systems they benefit from. At the end of the Oprah interview, she asks the couple, "So, in conclusion, if you'd had the support, you'd still be there?" (The US Sun). Both Harry and Meghan respond affirmatively, and they repeat that sentiment in the docuseries: "We would have carried on doing this for the rest of our lives" (*Harry & Meghan*, "Episode 5" 39:40-39:45). Meghan, who was seriously considering killing herself, was denied care by this Institution, and yet her and her husband both agree that they would have stayed if they had been treated better. This reflects a very white popular feminist approach, that they were able to overlook the systemic abuse, neglect, and harm if they, personally, had been treated better. Relatedly in the docuseries, Meghan reflects on the Oprah interview and the only addendum she adds is that she thought her depression would be "the biggest takeaway… But it was entirely eclipsed by the conversation surrounding race" (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 6" 31:50-32:20). I am personally skeptical that she did not suspect racism would be at the forefront of the conversation post-interview, but her claims that she expected her personal struggle with her mental health to be the focus does align with

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a popular feminism that champions the individual woman overcoming adversity. So whether she actually believes in that statement is somewhat irrelevant when it projects a neoliberal, popular feminist ideal. Meghan, and Harry, maintain a consistent popular feminism that champions Meghan as an individual who endured and overcame her mental illness, mistreatment, and harassment. They do not really condemn the royal family nor the white supremacist heteropatriarchy that supports the British royal family and empire. Their leaving the royal family was not a radical rebellion, but it was a move of self-preservation that transitions Meghan to a new space where she can be powerful, beloved, and respected, where she can use her popular feminism for her own social and monetary gain again. These moves also leave open the potential for a reconciliation and re-inclusion into the Royal Family sometime in the future.

Meghan seems to have believed in her own ability to assimilate within the royal family. She left her career, life, friends, and more when she committed to marrying Harry and becoming a princess. She explains how she "wrote letters to his family when [she] got there, saying, 'I am dedicated to this. I'm here for you. Use me as you'd like'" (The US Sun). But the promise of her popular feminism failed. No amount of effort was enough: "I tried so hard.. And it still wasn't good enough" (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 5"43:57-44:05). No restraint of her ideas, clothing, or self was respected because she was an outsider, American, feminist, and most importantly Black and thus could never meet the white imperial standards of womanhood.[81] Her family's security and income were

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[81] In "Episode 3" of the *Harry & Meghan* docuseries, Meghan notes that she wore neutrals for most of her time as a royal because there were rules about not wearing the same color clothing as a more senior member, so she chose neutrals to avoid clashing or causing drama over clothing. Once they made the decision to leave, she felt able to wear bright colors again (36:20-37:00).

stripped away leaving them exposed and vulnerable right as the Covid-19 pandemic was

beginning (The US Sun; *Harry & Meghan* "Episode 5" 48:20-49:10). She considered

killing herself to escape this system… and yet she refused and refuses to publicly

condemn the royal family, the racism, or the colonialism that led to her harassment, death

threats, and, allegedly, the miscarriage of her pregnancy between Archie and Lilibet

(*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 6" 18:00-19:00). Meghan's white popular feminism failed

against the long-standing white supremacy and patriarchy of the British Royal Family.

4.3 Conclusion

The failure of Meghan the Duchess of Sussex's white popular feminism was

momentary. With the help of Tyler Perry, Harry and Meghan received a place to live and

security to protect them while they figured out what their lives could look like without

the British Royal Family (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 6" 2:10-7:30). Oprah was willing to

do a primetime interview with them to give their side of this messy story, setting them up

to continue to sell their story. Then they created Archewell, a company to oversee their

charity work, media productions, and more. Meghan returned with her new family to the

Los Angeles area where she had family, friends, and a pre-existing professional network.

As noted earlier, she is poised to become "LA royalty" and "build her own empire" (Gay

and McMillan Cottom 6:50-7:21). Meghan and Harry have removed themselves from a

toxic environment and effectively monetized the story of their life to fund their post-royal

lives. At the end of their docuseries, they project a kind of fairy-tale happily ever after:

playing in the yard with their children, riding bicycles by the beach, the sun shining in the

large windows into their home, etc. It is a domestic bliss backdrop with a voiceover from

Harry saying he may miss his extended family but that he, and it is assumed Meghan, are

happy with their new lives and freedom. This narrative, given and repeated through the interview with Oprah, the Netflix docuseries, and Meghan's podcast, is a white popular feminist narrative. Meghan is positioned as the underdog, willing to do whatever it takes to be included/accepted who finally realizes she will never be enough for their impossible standards and decides to embrace herself and get her "happy ending" that includes her "prince charming," (potential) children, and a sense of security (be it economic, social, physical, or even all of the above). Is this a description of Harry and Meghan's love story or the plot of a postfeminist romantic comedy from chapter two? The story of Meghan becoming a princess and modernizing the monarchy might have an unhappy ending, but in the story where that is just the first act, she can still find her way to a happy ending that she can then sell for her family's safety, wellbeing, and wealth.

Meghan's adhesion to white respectability politics, attempts to fit in with the royal family, and commitment to never connecting instances of racism, sexism, etc. to larger systems of oppression should have made her the prime candidate to be a 21st-century feminist princess. She fulfills the values of a post/popular feminist ideal. Her biracialism allows her to fulfill an idealized diversity quota and "relate" to the non-white members of the Commonwealth. She projects a self-sufficient ideal that champions her own hard work, versatility, and ingenuity. Her role as a wife and mother has become central to her brand and a defining feature of herself. But the promise and potential of white popular feminism could not be sustained within the white supremacy of the British royal family. Meghan, as a biracial woman, could not escape the imperial values that still help to define who gets to be considered "British," "royal," or "worthy" of protection. The royal family, the tabloids, and some white Britons were willing to sacrifice her well-

being, mental health, and public opinion to maintain the white patriarchal Institution. The

Netflix docuseries reveals a meeting between Harry, William, their father, and

grandmother where William "scream[ed] and shout[ed]" at Harry. Around the same time,

a tabloid ran a story claiming Harry and Meghan were leaving because William "bullied

them out," and the same day, the Institution puts out a joint statement supposedly from

both brothers squashing that rumor. But according to Harry, he was never asked to give

his permission to release that statement, the Institution just put his name on it, and he

calls Meghan to tell her this and she supposedly "burst into floods of tears, because

within four hours, they were happy to lie to protect my brother, and yet for three years,

they were never willing to tell the truth to protect us" (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 5"

23:00-24:40). This story, like the steps taken to protect Prince Andrew, illustrates the

protection given to maintaining the positive public opinion of white men who are

descendants of the monarch that is actively withheld from a biracial woman. The

Institution of the Royal Family will lie and cover up the harm perpetrated by these white

men, but it will avoid taking steps to protect and even seemingly offer up the only non-

white royal as a sacrifice in their place. White popular feminism promised Meghan a

fairy tale where she could be part of the Royal Family, marry her prince, and continue

making a difference. But white popular feminism was and continues to be unsustainable

against systems that were made to harm and scapegoat women, especially women of

color like Meghan.

 While I critique Meghan for continuing to abide by a white popular feminist

ideology, I also want to note my respect for how she has utilized it to her advantage.

While she could not combine her biracial identity and popular feminism within the

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British Royal Family, she has used those values and ideals post-royal family to secure her family's finances and positive public opinion. She, a biracial American woman from a middle-class family, took on the British Royal Family and its legacies of colonialism and has not only survived but seems to be thriving. As noted earlier, if her desperation and removal from the royal family is the end of Act I, then her crafting of an Act II that prioritizes herself and her family easily aligns with the narrative structure of postfeminist romcoms and even the female-centered historical dramas I have discussed throughout this larger project. Cliched yet popular taglines of "finding her voice," "asserting her own power," and "prioritizing her happiness" come to mind as apt descriptions for Meghan's story and popular feminist media. And if the docuseries, specifically, narrates this story, then we see the "happy ending" articulated through her children and her hopes for her family's future: "And I want our kids to be able to do that and to be able to travel. And to fall in love, you know. I just want them to be happy" (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 6" 43:39-53:50). When she was part of the royal family, Meghan's Blackness was incompatible with the white motherhood of Diana and Kate, but removed from that context, Meghan's motherhood makes her identifiable, empathetic, and make parallel the popular feminist promise of "having it all." Meghan uses her motherhood to assert agency over what has happened to her and their exit from the royal family. In Meghan's narrative, we see the culmination of the discoveries of the last two chapters, and their application beyond explicitly fictional narratives. We can see how this white popular feminist ideology and narrative fail when faced with systems of white supremacy, colonialism, and patriarchy, but also its persistence and creativity. Meghan tapped into a familiar narrative arc that gave her agency to remove her family from a toxic

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environment and the ability to raise their children with privacy and privilege in California through selling that narrative. On some level, Meghan did become the popular feminist princess as detailed in popular feminist media like *The Prince and Me*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and *Bridgerton* as she prioritizes her family's happiness and fulfills a neoliberal American dream. White popular feminism, that prioritizes the individual and excludes the systemic from consideration, would posit that Meghan did succeed.

While I respect Meghan's ability to survive the royal family and the tabloids, I still critique her popular white feminism. She has and continues to position herself as the champion of the underdog; she was the woman who the British tabloids tried to destroy and she "won" overcoming odds and saving her family. I use her and her narrative in this chapter to demonstrate the impacts and consequences of a white popular feminism beyond the fictional narratives explored in chapters one and two. This chapter is not a condemnation of Meghan personally but of her alignment with and promotion of white popular feminism. She reflects the promises of white popular feminism but also its continued failures to do more. I do not want her to sacrifice herself and her family for the good of everyone else because that is unfair to ask of any single person, but I am saddened and frustrated by how well she fulfills a white popular feminist ideology and how comfortable she is to stay within those limits. There is a massive potential for white popular feminism to critique, dismantle, and reimagine how Western feminism and womanhood could work, but it would prefer to keep its privilege and power at the expense of others.

Meghan is not radical nor progressive in her charity work despite the claims of the feminist princess modernizing the monarchy and changing the game. Her feminism is

often self-serving and maintains unequal systems. She seems to invoke her Blackness when it best suits her (Gay and McMillan Cottom 3:20-4:15). Her ethos is neoliberal and champions a hard-working can-do attitude that actively ignores systemic racism, xenophobia, neocolonialism, and more. As throughout this project, the kind of feminism that Meghan articulates can still have positive impacts, but it is woefully unprepared and unwilling to imagine a different future from the past. Meghan's fulfillment of white respectability politics mostly excludes her from experiencing misogynoir in the United States, at least according to her own account, but even when she was a working royal and experiencing misogynoir she refused and continues to refuse to condemn the systems that enable that abuse and harassment. She had the privilege to get her and her family out and imagine a different future for them, but she continues to fail to use her privilege and safety to advocate for the women of color, especially the Black women, who do not have the privilege to fulfill respectability politics and/or escape. Meghan, formerly Markle, the current Duchess of Sussex, exemplifies how white popular feminism continues to be complicit to and non-disruptive of the systems of power and privilege despite projecting a feminist, feel-good facade. Again, Meghan is not solely responsible for the impact of popular feminism, but instead this chapter illustrated how Meghan, and women, products, and media like her, demonstrate the promises and failures of white popular feminism.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION: COTTAGECORE, VANILLA GIRLS, AND
GLAMOUR CHICKEN HOUSES: WHITE POPULAR FEMINISM ON SOCIAL
MEDIA

Within the Netflix *Harry & Meghan* docuseries, there is a brief moment where they

are discussing the social media harassment that targeted Meghan. Race and technology

scholar Safiya Noble, cited throughout this dissertation, is featured, and the series notes

how the harassment mainly came from a select few accounts but then that content was

disseminated more broadly by other users. Particularly, they note "it was done by people

who were just not the typical quote-unquote trolls. These are housewives. These are

middle-aged Caucasian women creating just constant attacks, from "Go back to

America," to basically, you know, "Why don't you die?" (*Harry & Meghan* "Episode 5"

28:33-30:06). This discussion of the harassment and racism is brief and gets reframed by

Meghan as a concern for her and her children's safety then the series is back to her

motherhood and new happier life, but I want to pull on this thread of white women being

some of the primary harassers of Meghan. I think there are a multitude of reasons why

white women in particular seem to hate Meghan so much, but I think many of the reasons

align with part of my argument from chapter one that cites Amanda-Rae Prescott's work

on how white women fans of period media use "historical accuracy" as a cover for their

racist critiques. Prescott argues "White supremacists already obsessed with perpetuating

historical myths have made period dramas another front in their culture wars" ("Period

Drama Karens"). Relatedly, in the week following the release of the *Bridgerton* spin-off,

Queen Charlotte, that follows a young Queen Charlotte's (who is Black in the series)

wedding to King George and their early love story, there are "fans" of period media

critiquing it for its lack of historical accuracy. This is despite the opening disclaimer that

states, "It is not a history lesson. It is fiction inspired by fact" (00:04-00:22). Ebony

Elizabeth Thomas, author of *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry*

Potter to the Hunger Games, tweeted about how "silly" it was that *Bridgerton* and *Queen*

Charlotte were being accused of "appropriating culture" by period media fans

(@Ebonyteach). Amanda-Rae Prescott quote tweets Thomas and adds, "This flawed

logic of claiming Black characters in period dramas are 'culturally appropriating' is a

dogwhistle common on FB period drama groups but is now spreading on Twitter"

(@amandarprescott). From Meghan to *Queen Charlotte*, we can see the threads of white

women policing fantasy, the monarchy, and Black women on social media. For these

white women, it seems that they have a particular white idea of the British monarchy and

history and will mobilize online harassment and critique to attempt to uphold that white

ideal. For this project, I want to note the parallels between the white women harassing

Meghan Markle because her Blackness disrupts their idea of the British monarchy and

those critiquing *Queen Charlotte* for not being historically accurate because it imagines

the Queen as a Black woman. Black royalty, especially Black women who physically

reproduce the royal family through sex and childbirth with white kings/princes, threaten

white women's ideas of who gets to be royal, who gets to marry prince charming, who is

worthy of that title and privilege. Through these social media examples, we can see some

of the ways modern white women attempt to maintain white supremacy culture through

the critique of Black art and media, or even just art and media that includes Black people

prominently, to the harassment and threats of violence against Black women. Social

media, no matter the platform, has become a space where white supremacy plays out and

white women attempt to continue to establish themselves as the ideal.

Idealized white womanhood and its maintenance extends beyond the more formal produced media that has been discussed throughout this dissertation, and it extends into informal spaces and content like social media. As noted in the introduction, I want to devote part of this conclusion to extending the arguments I have made throughout this dissertation into social media spaces. How do we see the continued impact of imperial white womanhood and white popular feminism beyond the highly produced narratives that this dissertation has explored? How does white collective memory get policed and upheld on social media? How do the valued aspects of imperial white womanhood (motherhood, individual, self-improvements, authenticity, etc.) get repackaged on TikTok or Instagram in the 2020s? How does white popular feminism get used to justify a variety of lifestyles, choices, and aesthetics? Among others. While these are large questions that this short conclusion cannot completely answer, I want to use this space to begin the exploration of these concerns as an extension of this dissertation. In the 2020s, popular culture and social media overlap and are co-constitutive; they build and rely on each other for their own maintenance and growth. This phenomenon has been termed convergence culture by media theorist Henry Jenkins, defined as the process "in which traditional and new media forms thrive together" (Thomas citing Jenkins 2-3). Ebony Elizabeth Thomas argues that "the ways that stories are told and retold in convergence culture are more significant than ever for shaping the collective consciousness" (3). To understand the cultural impact of anything, but especially something as naturalized and seemingly benign as white womanhood, we need to contemplate the social media representations and conversations that are happening alongside the more produced, and seemingly more official, media and popular culture.

On social media, everyone and anyone can share their thoughts and opinions and go viral for it. There is power from notoriety but also the monetization of content, and, in theory, anyone can take part in it. But social media and influencing spaces are constrained by the same networks of power and privilege that shape the world outside of social media. As noted in the introduction, scholars like Ruha Benjamin, Adam Banks, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Alondra Nelson, Safiya Noble, and Rukmini Pande (among others) have detailed how social and digital medias are built from the same social and cultural networks and contexts that justified colonialism, slavery, and other inequalities. So in a world and culture that is built from the empires and societies that benefited from colonialism and slavery, it should not be a surprise that white people benefit the most from social media content. What may be slightly surprising is the dominance of white women in social media spaces, and how their visibility often surpasses that of their white male influencer peers. An influencer is someone who "commodifies a lifestyle or an identity for the purposes of selling something, whether that something is a product of an idea or a belief or a way of being" (Petersen 4). Key to the rise and dominance of the influencer is the visual-focused social media sites like Instagram and TikTok. While the predecessor to influencers were online bloggers, this shift to the visual has created a culture where aesthetics are king, or should I say queen, of influencing culture (Petersen 5). Because of this move to visuals and the inheritance of colonial scripts and hierarchies, popularity in online spaces often reflects who is most privileged historically: white people. And while white men do dominate in some online spaces, this dissertation is about the power of white women and the content they dominate in. Since the Industrial Revolution and the rise of mass media in the nineteenth-century, images and advertising

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have targeted women, specifically white women, to establish ideals in dress, homemaking, and more which helped establish and reflect imperial values. Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* argues that "the mass-marketing of empire as a global system was intimately wedded to the Western reinvention of domesticity, so that imperialism cannot be understood without a theory of domestic space and its relation to the market" (17). In related ways to the mass-marketing of empire, so too do we see the establishing of racial and gender ideals and hierarchies within social media spaces today.

Because social media spaces are structured with similar conservative, imperial values, it follows that whiteness more easily circulates in online spaces than Blackness, people who abide by traditional gender roles circulate more easily than visibly queer people, white popular feminism circulates more easily than radical progressive feminism or anti-racism, etc. Who, or more appropriately what, determines what content circulates more broadly to get more views and attention are algorithms, the processes/rules computers, programs, or social media sites have that allow them to run. Algorithms are just computer programs, but they are programs that reflect the racism, misogyny, and bigotries of the coders that created them and the users who engage with them despite the projection that tech is naturally unbiased. Safiya Noble's research has shown how algorithms privilege whiteness, heterosexuality, conservative views on gender expression, etc. and often denigrate and are far more likely to flag or ban Blackness, queerness, and otherness as "inappropriate" or even "dangerous" (4-9). Algorithms also dictate if content has the possibility of going viral or a creator getting "shadowbanned," where the creator's content gets restricted from other users seeing it (Nicholas). When money in influencer spaces is dependent on views and audience engagement, a post

getting shadowbanned and no one seeing it or going viral and many people seeing it has material repercussions for influencers and the brands involved. Influencers and brands will do a lot to make sure their content is agreeable to the algorithms so they have a better chance of going viral and thus making money. This is where white popular feminism becomes important. White popular feminism, as has been established, feels empowering and feminist while also not rocking the metaphorical boat too much. White popular feminism more easily circulates because of this, so many feminine influencers reflect its ideals so they have a better chance of going viral and not getting shadowbanned or reported from other users angry at their politics. Like the media discussed throughout this dissertation, influencers, even conservative leaning ones, often invoke similar ideas and feelings of empowerment and personal choice for women, alluding to a vague post/popular feminism even if they do not use the word "feminism." It is fun and feel-good but not radical feminist praxis. Again, similar to the Victorian domestic space, these women have power and agency within this space, but that power is often devalued by broader society and they must work within specific limitations to achieve and maintain success.

Long-term success on social media is difficult and trends and topics quickly cycle through popularity, but I have chosen two case examples of recent social media trends and subgroups that center white women and use white popular feminism to cover their connections and sympathies with white supremacy and colonial ideologies. These chosen texts illustrate how my argument extends into the digital spaces of Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, etc. The first case example connects directly to chapter one's historical revisionism and playing with the past. In the 2020s, we have seen a continued rise in

popularity of content that invokes the past, specifically the aesthetics of the past to reframe them in fantastical ways to play with nostalgia and comfort. From influencers who dress in period clothing to educate or record funny skits to the urban homesteading and parenting accounts that preach a back-to-the basics idea that relies on traditional forms of homemaking, food growing, and parenting, this larger trend invokes and plays with ideas of the past through the aesthetics of American homesteading or European history. I extend chapter one's argument of the recreation of the past to comfort modern white audiences into these online spaces. The second case example will primarily build from chapter two's discussion of the evolution from 1990s postfeminism to 2010s-2020s white popular feminism through exploring social media's rapidly changing trends of femininity and how these trends also imbibe colonial scripts and white supremacy into female-focused content. Trends like Barbiecore, cottagecore, Bimbotok, Vanilla girl, balletcore, and more idealize femininity in ways that seem feminist and empowering, but like the postfeminist media explored in chapter two, continue to reaffirm very limited ideals of white femininity while championing consumerism and individualism. I do not include a companion to chapter three on Meghan Markle because her narrative and the media around her are happening simultaneously to the case examples in this conclusion. Meghan is attacked by some on social media while she is lauded by others for her fashion and motherhood. Meghan as a concept and topic of discussion in popular culture overlaps with these case examples, so instead it is more helpful to consider how Meghan Markle and her white popular feminism is part and parcel of these trends and subgroups with her and Harry's chicken house and "simpler" family-focused life and how she reflects ideal modern femininity and motherhood.

White popular feminism is fun, persuasive, and, above all, easy. It does not ruffle too many feathers and gives women a sense of control through the prioritization of their own lives and interests, and there is something radical in that prioritization. Sara Petersen, writing specifically about momfluencers and their carefully curated social media aesthetics, notes,

> Instagram allows mothers to curate their own versions of motherhood, to pick and choose scenes they want to represent themselves, to edit the content according to their personal aesthetics or belief systems… There's something empowering about mothers controlling their own narratives and imagery, when, for much of history, the story of motherhood was largely told (or wholly ignored) by men. (9-10)

I argue this can be applied to female-focused media more broadly. There is something radical about women being able to monetize their domesticity and womanhood to benefit themselves when, historically, it has been undervalued by men (Petersen citing Piazza 15). There is something freeing in being able to play with femininity or embrace girly aesthetics and prioritize oneself in a culture that constantly centers men and their narratives. The media and popular culture explored throughout this dissertation are popular for these reasons; they make women feel seen and feel able to play with their fantasies. The problem with them, as I hope I have demonstrated throughout this project, is how easily they slip into white supremacy and patriarchy. Instead of reimagining society, white women are given equal importance to white men in these narratives and media and the consequences of white women's own racism, classism, and bigotries are ignored. There is nothing inherently wrong with post-racial castings in *Bridgerton* or

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Bridget Jones wanting to have a partner or Meghan Markle monetizing her story, but they do not exist within a vacuum. This collective media relies on complicated histories and networks of power that unfortunately almost always trace back to colonialism. Empowerment, agency, and authenticity are based in constrictive ideals that prioritize whiteness and heteronormativity, and white women, the target audience and one of the largest groups to consume this media, then embrace that messaging and repeat it in their physical and digital lives. White women have a lot of power and privilege, but instead of using that power and privilege to dismantle systems of oppression, white women have consistently used that privilege to reaffirm our own places and privilege. This media collectively reinforces this and encourages white women to focus on ourselves and our families to romanticize our lives and histories in ways that reaffirm colonial scripts and white supremacy.

5.1 Historical Rememory and Glamour Chicken Houses

I opened the introduction to this dissertation with a discussion of Meghan and Harry's chicken house, Archie's Chick Inn, and connected it to the larger overlapping social media trends of urban homesteading, nostalgic historical remediation, glamour chicken houses, and "aspirational agriculture" (Hosken). Harry and Meghan's chicken house is one of many aesthetically pleasing chicken coops that are very common on Instagram in momfluencer and urban homesteading spaces. Related to chapter one's exploration of collective historical memory and projecting modern ideals onto the past, this social media subgroup thrives off of romanticized aesthetics of the past. This romanticization offers a distraction and a nostalgic comfort from the present that elides histories of oppression and structural inequalities for the mostly white female audience.

The media explored in chapter one were all major productions that had the backing of networks and media companies, but their reach extends far beyond their productions. Those media examples are part of a larger pop cultural trend that is overrepresented by white women: the fascination, and even obsession, of recreating an idea(l) of the past to escape contemporary concerns and stressors. For decades, there have been costuming and cosplay groups that would create community and share their creations at places like Comic Con; Costume College, an annual three-day costuming arts conference; or even the Jane Austen Society of North America costume balls, but social media and the success of projects like *Bridgerton* has enabled a farther reach and influence than maybe ever before (Kelly). Creators like @welldressedhistorian, @queen_astraea, @thesewloartist, @notyourmommashistory, and @naomiloveshistory on TikTok educate their audiences about historical dress and often perform skits in historical clothing. Instagram creators like @quietwilderness, @cosyacademia, and @waitingforalice post more static images of them running through a flower field or forest or curled up and reading in a window in long skirts that all invoke a fairy-tale-like aesthetic. Urban homesteading and "crunchy" parenting advocates like @ballerinafarm, @the.song.sparrow, @deercircus, @motherhenshomestead, @katiemetka, and @jill.winger invoke a similar "simplified" life (and social media) aesthetic and traditional approaches to homemaking and child-rearing. And finally, popular fashion trends like the viral Selkie dress with empire waists and puff sleeves and the home style and fashion aesthetic trends of dark academia, cottagecore, hobbitcore, among others invoke similar ideas of the past and simplified living with an emphasis on the aesthetics. While not often all discussed together as part of a larger subculture, I argue that these collective

subgroups and trends (1) invoke a white popular feminism and shallow female empowerment and (2) often fall into an idealizing of the past that aligns with white supremacy.

Most discussions of these various trends and media rarely make significant connections between the trad-wifery of accounts like @ballerinafarm versus the spunky princess skits of @queenastraea, but I argue they all tap into the popular, white feminism that emphasizes personal choice and remediated history that has been discussed throughout this dissertation. White women visually dominate this online space. There is a clear and overwhelming whiteness to these creators, as Catherine Fung, an Asian American Studies scholar who also participates in mostly historical European costuming, notes "Costume College is largely attended by white women. I am viscerally aware of my being one of the few people of color there when I see one of the white male instructors there dressed in a fake Native American costume, or when one of the white women wears a qipao to the gala." And @notyourmommashistory's Cheyney McKnight and @naomiloveshistory's Naomi Glaser are some of the few Black women participating in American historical dress online that have a comparable following to white creators in the same subgenre, and they are some of the few creators that I have seen willing to discuss slavery and power imbalances in historical clothing, grooming, and labor (McKnight [@notyourmommashistory] and Glaser [@naomiloveshistory]). Related to the backlash the post-racial casting in period media that was discussed in chapter one that had, again, mostly white women complaining online that colorblind casting was ruining the authenticity and history of these remediations (Prescott), Cheney McKnight and Naomi Glaser's Blackness and Catherine Fung's Asianness make them stand out amongst

the overwhelming whiteness of these physical and digital spaces. The visual component of these trends and subcultures is key, and there is often an assumption of white femininity, cultivated by the number of period media that have centered white women, that causes non-white women to often be seen as anomalies participating in these communities and spaces. These assumptions are slowly shifting as period media reflects more diversity and creators of color gain followings and visibility, but there is still a strong association between historical media and whiteness.

This subgenre of historical dress and living on social media is dominated by white women, and because of that, it often invokes white feminism. Themes of choice, empowerment, and self-sufficiency circulate within this media. The historical fashion-focused creators often attempt to educate and inspire women to learn to make and mend their own clothing which is positioned in contrast to fast fashion and overconsumption. Urban homesteading and crunchy parenting try to teach women to be more self-sufficient in-home maintenance and growing food for themselves and their families in a capitalist society that seems to constantly be on the verge of collapse and has a greater income inequality than pre-Revolutionary France (Carteron). The aesthetic trends associated with these movements also often validate women's desire to feel beautiful and use their imagination as adults. These trends can feel liberating, and there is something radical in women embracing hyper-femininity in a culture that values masculinity and taking up space in huge poufy Selkie dress when you have been trained to be as small as possible (Yaseen). But as noted earlier, these trends are dominated by white women who often fulfill idealized white femininity: straight, thin, conventionally attractive, and, often, blonde. And the rhetoric of self-sufficiency and empowerment, while initially appealing,

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only extends to individuals. In some cases, these creators do recognize parts of the systems of oppression that cause food insecurity and power imbalances, but they consistently fail to embrace or imagine collective effort to change the system. Isolated, these creators and the subgroups' negative impact seems limited, but taking all of these trends as a whole, they contribute to the historical revisionism and nostalgia argued in the first chapter.

This subgenre of media is very focused on the individual, and while it sometimes seems to project more radical ideals, it most often upholds a neoliberal, individualistic ideal. For example, Anna Sakawsky, an urban homesteader on Instagram, notes in one of her posts about the growing economic tensions and social crises in 2021, says in her caption "I reflected [on the tensions] a while back during the Black Lives Matter protests and was thinking about what I could do on my little plot of land to "fight the power" even if I couldn't be out marching in the streets. The answer came quickly: Grow more food" (Sakawsky). She goes on to say that this is a stand against the system and puts power "in the hands of the people" but also that she wants to be clear that she is not "advocating for one 'side' or another" (Sakawsky). Sakawsky's post wants to appear empowered and informed, but it is an example of a popular white feminism that wants to trend and be well-liked without any significant social or political action. She wants to be seen as engaged politically but from the comfort of her backyard, and while she recognizes BLM, she distances herself from it and positions her way of "fighting back" as superior when she claims the moral high ground of not choosing a side. "Fight the power" is reduced to individual action and personal responsibility. Sakawsky is not unique in using this rhetorical move; urban homesteaders and crunchy parents often position themselves as

radicals who are fighting back against harmful systems, but they too often ignore

systemic inequalities and their own white privilege. They present a facade of

empowerment and radical choice, but they fail and refuse to recognize systemic racism,

sexism, and other inequalities.

Related examples of white feminism can be seen in the historical dress and skit

creators. Astraea on TikTok, who uses the handle @queen_astraea, is a white woman

who creates a lot of skits of her as a queen, princess, or woman from a vague historical

period, and the skits often position her as a feminist princess who does not need a man.

They are funny and anachronistic, and they present a girlboss version of women of the

past. In one she is dressed for battle with a long sword and lip syncs the audio "You

know, men just don't get lost at sea like they used to" (Astraea [@queen_astraea]) and

another she uses audio from AppleTV's *Dickinson* where Emily gets scolded by her

mother for dropping an "offering" of a mouse on a suitor's lap like a cat and Astraea

regrets that "No, tragically, I am a woman" (Astraea [@queen_astraea] "The Queen was

scolded by the Queen Mother for scaring the ambassador"). These examples show a

projection of feminist empowerment onto the past through rejecting a suitor in a time

when marriage was the only real option for most women. Astraea's content also invokes

a feminist idea of embracing girliness and loving something "childish" like dressing up

and playing pretend unapologetically when the misogyny of society often dismisses and

belittles those kinds of things. Astraea is not alone, these kinds of skits are done often by

creators dressing as Greek gods or the Tudors (oftentimes a la *Six: The Musical*), and

often make jokes based on the historical inequalities between men and women or nobles

and peasants. This content, while amusing, relies on a surface level understanding of

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feminism and female empowerment; it resembles the postfeminist media explored in chapter two. It is fun and feels like girl power, but it still often centers whiteness and aligns with the ideas of a postfeminist Jane Austen. And in a perfect world, Astraea and others' content could just be fun and shallow, but because of these greater subgenres and their impact, this content still contributes to these incorrect and harmful ideas of history that validate white comfort and entertainment.

Like the first chapter, there are parallels to how these social media remediations of the past revise historical memory and provide comfortable narratives that avoid systemic inequalities and oppressions. This subgroup often projects a white feminist version of the past where if women personally *choose* to invoke the past and live their life in this way (and ignore the not so nice parts) then it is okay; even if they do not mention feminism explicitly, there is often a projection of empowerment through their personal choices that benefit them and their families. Like with the media discussed throughout this dissertation, on the surface, this social media subgroup seems benign, and even progressive at times, championing women's choices and embracing/celebrating femininity, but like the reality of colonialism and patriarchy that lurks at the margins of historical remediation, white supremacy also hides within these spaces. Even with the female empowerment and the high-value of choice and independence by these subgroups, there is a slippery slope between accounts like Ballerina Farm or Anna Sakawsky to tradwifery and explicit alt-right white supremacist content. Trad-wife content is an online movement "that's part aesthetic and part ideology, encouraging women to embrace supposedly feminine characteristics like chastity and submissiveness, and trade feminist empowerment for a patriarchal vision of gender norms." This movement gained traction

around the 2016 election and the rise of the Alt Right and explicitly rejects feminism while often embracing a 1950s nuclear family aesthetic (Cooksey). Similar to many urban homesteading accounts, tradwifery critiques capitalism and attempts to find alternative methods of living in a system that seems so broken (Hu). But as noted earlier with the discussion of Anna Sakawsky, this often relies on related systemic inequalities like individualism and patriarchy to try and circumvent the problems of late stage capitalism. Scholars like Carolyn Gallaher, Nancy S. Love, and Ashley Mattheis have made related claims about the use of white women in these alt-right, white supremacy online spaces as ways to soften and normalize white supremacy by aligning it with motherhood, domesticity, and these romanticized ideas of historical Europe. I do not argue that all historical remediated content is alt-right or comes from a place of white supremacy, but white supremacists are creating related content as a way to expand their group. As Safiya Noble has demonstrated how online algorithms can radicalize white male mass shooters (110-118), I argue that this online content can also push white women into more extremist spaces. This online content is not benign and must be put into the larger context to understand how white popular feminism and these historical aesthetics can quickly lead to white supremacy.

5.2 Trending Femininity and the Persistence of Postfeminism

As the romanticization of historical Europe and homesteading on social media continues to grow, in part, because of its seeming stability and consistency of decades and centuries past, we are simultaneously seeing the sped-up fashion and trend cycle that gives us new ideals of femininity. Traditionally, fashion trends have been known for following a twenty-year cycle and that has been pretty stable for decades. These trends

dictate ideals for everything from hair, makeup, fashion, to even body sizes and proportions. While thin, white and blonde was almost always on trend, there was some variance in what looks of femininity were most popular. But in the 2020s, we are seeing that cycle speed up or even be thrown away altogether as platforms like TikTok inspire microtrends with such frequency that it is difficult to distinguish between the trends (Jennings and Ewens). The frequency and overlap, with the help of fast fashion, has dramatically changed the yearly fashion cycle especially for female-focused fashion. While men's fashion does evolve from year to year, women's fashion, far more than men's, changes drastically from decade to decade to now from month to month. And in a white dominated culture like we have, the imagined audience is overwhelmingly white women; so what culture imagines as the ideal aesthetic for (white) women is almost constantly shifting. For this section, I want to discuss this social media-based trend cycle, how it connects to the postfeminism of the 1990s discussed in chapter two, and how it too helps to normalize white supremacy ideas.

As noted earlier, historical-based trends like cottagecore and dark academia use specific historical aesthetics to gain popularity on social media, but there are also trends like the Clean Girl, Vanilla Girl, Barbiecore, Y2K, and more aesthetics that widely circulate and sell certain ideals.[82] These trends cycle through peak popularity pretty quickly, but most of them contain very specific core values and ideals that almost always

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[82] The name, Y2K, is taken from the Y2K technical issue that could have caused major problems in banking, power plants, transportation, and other business that relied on computers when the date attempted to switch from December 31, 1999 to January 1, 2000 (Stanley), but now, Y2K represents the nostalgia of looking back to millennials' and Gen Z's childhoods and teen years. Most explanations of the 2020s Y2K describe it as the comeback of the mid-90s and early 2000s (Toolen and Feim).

support capitalism and reaffirm the white postfeminist/popular femininity explored in chapter two. Underneath many of these trends can be observed a wistfulness and nostalgia for the past that originated many of these trends, but there is also a particular postfeminist influence that combines consumerism, girlpower, and femininity into an appealing package. As discussed in chapter two, the 1990s saw the combination of capitalism and a postfeminist sentiment that rejected the more socio-political work of second-wave feminism and the Civil Rights Movement, and instead crafted a feminism that could be sold as part of a multimedia franchise (Hunting 145 & Hollinger 223). And as popular feminism has evolved from postfeminism, I argue we see this trending femininity have their core in the postfeminist media of the 1990s. We see it more explicitly reflected in media like Netflix's *Do Revenge* or HBO's *Euphoria* where the Y2K fashion aesthetics are prevalent and a self-serving female empowerment is key to the storylines. *Do Revenge* also very clearly nods to *Clueless* and other postfeminist films like *Cruel Intentions* (both referenced in chapter two), but, more importantly for this section, we see the core values discussed in chapter two reflected in social media trends like the Vanilla girl trend or Regency-core or balletcore. These trends almost always rely on whiteness, idealized femininity, and a choice feminism to circulate and sell. And like 1990s postfeminist media worked to neutralize the impacts of second-wave feminism, I argue we see similar moves now that use escapism and the constant change in what is "trendy" to keep white women distracted and focused on themselves which inhibits their potential activism and community-focus. While trends and idealized femininity were not new in the 1990s, I argue that the postfeminist need to capitalize on young women's buying power has helped lead to this expedited trend cycle and coupling of feminism and

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capitalism. Bridget Jones, Cher Horowitz, Princess Diana and more postfeminist icons are still idealized and invoked today within this trend cycle and present the facade of female freedom and liberation while instilling values that are not far from the white supremacist hierarchies and social values of the nineteenth-century British Empire.

Chapter two of this dissertation expands on three main values of postfeminist media and how the incorporation of Jane Austen and historical remediation helps to validate these values: (1) reliance on consumerism and the idea of self-improvement, (2) neoliberal/individualistic conception of selfhood and responsibility, and (3) the idea of authenticity and effortlessness and its ties to attracting a quality romantic partner. We continue to see these core ideals reflected in most of the viral social media trends in the 2020s. These can be seen in most interactions of popular female-focused media since the 1990s, but in the 2020s, with the sped-up trend cycle and hyper-accessibility of social media, it is easier to compare these trends against each other and not just compare trends to the ones that immediately preceded it. Also when the most on-trend ideal is always changing, what remains consistent about them reveals their importance and influence beyond the few weeks where the trend is the most popular. These phenomena give us the trending femininity and continued persistence of postfeminist media and ideals in the 2020s.

As with the postfeminist media of the 1990s, consumerism and wanting young women to buy are often at the forefront of these social media trends. Many of these trends gain popularity from being endorsed by social media influencers/content creators. As cited earlier, an influencer is someone who "commodifies a lifestyle or an identity for the purposes of selling something, whether that something is a product of an idea or a

belief or a way of being" (Petersen 4). Sometimes that is done by mothers commodifying their motherhood and domestic tasks or the previous section's historical recreation creators commodifying their craft and them playing dress up or, what most immediately comes to my mind, young women who commodify their youth and exploration into new adulthood. The latter group of women are almost always late teens to early twenties and their content focuses on them exploring beauty trends, friendships, and being an adult; beyond being young, they are often petite, conventionally attractive, and occupy middle- to upper-class status (and the buying power that comes with that status). Influencing, those who create it and those who consume this content, is dominated by women. Women often drive their family's spending habits, and if we recall from chapter two, since the 1990s postfeminist media was driven by the desire to franchise to sell narratives, fashion, makeup, etc. to young women (Petersen 15 & Hunting). This network of social media influencers, the brands who support them, and the fans who watch them are powerful, influencing fashion and beauty trends that amount to billions of dollars of commerce (Petersen 15).

Unlike decades past where advertising was in the hands of the corporations paying for radio, print, and television ads, in the 2020s, consumers are preferring to take their recommendations from individual influencers they trust. Stacy Landreth Grau's 2022 book, *Celebrity 2.0*, explores how social media influencing works and how companies can use influencers as part of their advertising strategy. Grau notes how influencing culture is based on a perceived relationship and trust between an individual influencer and their audience. Consumers are more likely to believe in and be loyal to individuals that they can see regularly and feel are "authentic" (Grau xiii). Sara

Petersen's book, *Momfluenced*, makes a similar claim "the key to success as an influencer has to do with a focus on authenticity, which to her means engaging in real time, and speaking up when motherhood isn't particularly photogenic" (6). Like in chapter two, what defines authenticity is slippery and sometimes contradictory, but within influencer culture, it signals a trust in the influencer and a belief that they are more genuine and their recommendations more honest than faceless companies. When "consumers are 92% more likely to trust their peers over advertising when it comes to purchasing decisions," utilizing influencers who project a more familiar and personal relationship works far better than traditional advertising (Little). There is a delicate balance between influencers making their lives sellable while also maintaining that trust through perceived authenticity with their audience. Sometimes there is overlap between more traditional celebrities from film and entertainment circles and social media influencers, but often, influencers are their own category, seemingly stemming from more *authentic* backgrounds, being seen as regular people whose online content more *naturally* appeals to audiences. I emphasize "authentic" and "naturally" because these words signal to the valuing of neoliberalism, of being able to master one's own life, also discussed in chapter two. The idealized democratizing power of social media assumes that anyone can go viral, anyone can be an influencer, anyone can gain power in this space, but in reality, like in chapter two, who has access to these ideals is not democratic and is severely constrained by whiteness, thinness, attractiveness, and wealth. Like with postfeminist media of the 1990s and early 2000s, the projected feminism and progressivism is constantly undercut with surreptitious values of whiteness and conservative femininity that can be traced back to imperial values.

In many ways, influencers often reflect the ideas and values of postfeminist media. Using vlogs and posts on social media, they often craft narratives built on showing their authenticity and relatability by documenting their struggles. The makeover montage is slowed down so audiences see the effort and products that go into that transformation. Audiences are given a viewpoint into influencers' lives that are not so different from the camera's perspective in a postfeminist romantic comedy. Most large influencers have at least one "confession"-type video where they apologize and cry for a wrongdoing they committed or explain why their public romantic relationship ended. This relationship between influencer and audience is often curated to feel vulnerable and honest despite the goal of the content often being to sell products. The monetization of social media content like "outfit of the day," "day in my life," "makeup/skincare/haircare routines," etc. from influencers is the monetization of their lives and themselves along with the products. This content is not far from the postfeminist rom-com narratives discussed in chapter two that follow our heroines' journey of self-discovery and happiness. Influencers themselves also often derive inspiration from female pop culture icons like Elle Woods, Princess Diana, Cher Horowitz, and Bridget Jones among others. There are many influencers who have recreated the opening montages of *Clueless* and *Legally Blonde* to aestheticize their own lives like these films (@michaila.c and @rileyblackk). Influencers have used Princess Diana and Bridget Jones to inspire contemporary outfit ideas (@gracetutty and @debabevoir) or have applauded Bridget Jones's Diary for "being ahead of its time" for showcasing a woman in touch with her

sexuality and "showcased a woman of a different size" (@imdbrigette).[83] These trends have been done by countless women on TikTok and Instagram, and they easily align with the other kinds of content that influencers produce, and through this content we can trace the influence of imperial white womanhood on postfeminist media and then on influencer culture of the 2020s.

Like with the idealized history accounts, on the surface, these are fun and even empowering trends for women, but it is their proximity to white supremacy and surreptitious valuing of whiteness and heteronormativity that are the problems. Two trends that more clearly align with whiteness and repeat colonial power imbalances are the Vanilla Girl Trend and the Clean Girl Trend. Both are fairly recent, really dominating TikTok in January 2023, and while other trends have risen since to take more attention, Clean girl and Vanilla girl continue to be popular. There is significant overlap between the two. There is an emphasis on looking "naturally"' beautiful with clear skin, minimal makeup with just a bit of blush and mascara, slicked back hair, and "(almost always) straight, blonde hair" (Lartey). These trends are minimal, preppy, and overwhelmingly white. The whiteness is the problem. First, creators of color, specifically ones from Black and Latinx communities, were quick to call out the clean girl aesthetic for claiming slicked buns and large gold hoops when Black and Latina women have been doing that look for decades (@_chismosa_). The refusal to credit Black and Latinx communities for the look and the use of "clean" brings to mind the colonial stereotypes of colonized peoples being unclean and the fetishizing of whiteness as cleanliness (McClintock).

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[83] In chapter two, I note the press attention that Renée Zellweger gained thirty pounds just to play the "overweight" Bridget Jones and how she already fit ideal standards of white femininity (Harzewski 72). Even 25 years later, this idea that Zellweger/Bridget was overweight at 132 pounds is persistent.

Relatedly, "the word 'vanilla' is linked to a specific color scheme and therefore a certain skin tone. 'Vanilla' has long been used colloquially as a metaphor to describe whiteness" while "chocolate," "caramel," and similar terms are used for deeper skin tones (Lartey). Academic studies have even been done on the online presentation of people of color and have shown how upper middle-class whiteness is seen as the ideal that people of color feel they must mimic, putting forward their "vanilla self" (Pitcan et. al.). These aesthetics are visually dominated by white women when you search the terms on Instagram or TikTok, but even their names reflect those long histories of white supremacy and the fetishizing of whiteness (McClintock and Monhanram).

The chapter "The Shallow Promise of the Wellness Industry" in Jessie Daniels's book, *Nice White Ladies*, explores similar issues of white women who use the wellness industry to uphold white supremacy. Daniels notes how Audre Lorde's famous quote on self-care as self-preservation and political warfare has recently been used by the wellness industry as a shallow promise to sell their products especially after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor (93).[84] Healing from racism is presented as an individual practice attained through workout regimens and salt scrubs (94). Daniels notes the white narcissism that seems to weave throughout wellness culture and its exclusion of non-white peoples from the ideal (95). Similar aesthetics, values, and stereotypes discussed in Daniel's chapter get repeated throughout these social media trends. While Daniels's focus is on wellness culture broadly, we can easily see the overlaps between wellness culture and influencing, as influencers try to sell supplements, detail their workout regimens, and

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[84] "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare."

go on various diets in their content. We see the connections in the use of "clean" and health conscious in ways that mimic a white, individualized consumer-based approach that reflects not only the postfeminist values explored in chapter two but also in imperial white womanhood from the nineteenth century. Part of Daniel's chapter explores the subset of the wellness industry, Pure Barre and "Barrebies," that promise a ballerina body to those who pay the hefty price tag for their workout classes inspired by ballet.[85] Daniels, citing cultural critic Cholie Angyal, states, "[ballet] itself is reproducing a version of white womanhood that adheres to a Western European aesthetic. Within this aesthetic, white women's bodies are all the same: thin, controlled, toned, but not too muscular" (103). I noted earlier that balletcore was one of the related femininity trends that have gained a lot of popularity in the 2020s. It is not a stretch to see the overlaps of clean and vanilla girl aesthetics with a trend like balletcore that also fetishizes thin, white controlled bodies. From clean girls to vanilla girls to balletcore, there are clear connections of a specific kind of white femininity that values petiteness, blondeness, and control that are not far from the nineteenth-century white womanhood ideals discussed in chapter two.

In this section, I have pointed out how these social media trends connect to the three postfeminist media values that were inherited from imperial white womanhood that I discussed in chapter two: (1) reliance on consumerism and the idea of self-improvement, (2) (neo)liberal/individualistic conception of selfhood and responsibility, and (3) the idea of authenticity and effortlessness and its ties to attracting a quality

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[85] "Barrebies" are different from Barbiecore, cited earlier. The former is the name for the devoted users of the Pure Barre workout regimen, while Barbiecore is a 2020s aesthetic that looks to the Mattel fashion doll for inspiration. Both draw influence from the Barbie doll and there is a surreptitious valuing of whiteness.

romantic partner. Influencers who showcase products along with the constantly changing trends push women to purchase fast fashion to keep up with what will make them better, prettier, fit in, etc. The clean girl aesthetic and balletcore highlight specific body types that encourage women to eat "clean food" and do certain kinds of workouts to self-improve to meet the ideal (Fatodu). Often, the closest these trends get to community and collectivity is taking an aesthetically-pleasing group photo for Instagram. If you cannot meet the goals of the trend or the aesthetic, then it is projected as a personal failing and not because the trends, skincare, and workouts are cost prohibitive for most people. And at the center of these trends is a fetishizing of the women who can make it look mostly effortless and project an authenticity that draws followers to them. And while attracting a romantic partner is often not the explicit focus of this content and these trends, it is implied that if you better embody these ideals you will construct the life you want, which may or may not include a suitable romantic partner. It is part of these trends embracing white popular feminism that on the surface projects the lack of need for a man, but underneath it very much idealizes heteronormativity. These trends embody these postfeminist values and project a popular feminist idea.

Because popular feminism has made feminism acceptable and accessible, many of the trends and influencers invoke feminism to validate themselves. In a discussion of the "Barbiecore" trend, the feminine trend that looks to the hot pink of the Mattel doll for inspiration, is described, "Barbiecore lies within the Venn diagram of BimboTok, fashion TikTok, and modern feminism: the aesthetic crusade urges people to embody the feminine and find joy in its playfulness — regardless of gender, race, or any other categories used by society to define a person." One influencer, who is a woman of color,

argues "[Barbiecore is] a feminist statement that empowers women to dress how they want without fear of judgment." This creator "notes that this can be particularly powerful for women of color, who may not have seen themselves in the original Barbie lineup, and that the trend has helped her personally to 'embrace femininity'" (Navlakha citing Chazlyn Yvonne). As I have stated throughout this dissertation, this media and these trends do have admirable qualities and sometimes are feminist in their celebration of femininity and empowerment of women. But the invocation of feminism is often shallow and is part of the aesthetic, not a socio-political ideology. Like with Daniels's discussion of the use of Audre Lorde to sell self-care products as solutions for the harms of racism (93), when these social media trends and influencers affirm that they value difference it is often to show how the trend or their content is not racist despite the clear privileging of whiteness. For example, Barbie is known for being a white, blonde woman with unrealistic body proportions (Navlakha). Ballet often assumes a white, petite ballerina (Fatodu). Vanilla girl trend's association with whiteness from clothing to skin color has inspired critique for its exclusion of deeper skin tones (Lartey). These 2020s trends have evolved from the postfeminist media from the 1990s discussed in chapter two, but now they embrace a white popular feminism while still hiding their commitment to nineteenth-century imperial white womanhood values. While these TikTok and Instagram trends superficially embrace diversity of color, body size, etc., it is not enough to hide the clear preference for whiteness and traditional femininity that support a white supremacy ideal inherited from British colonialism. Despite feminism evolving in popular culture, postfeminism and its connections to that British imperial ideal is still persistent,

continuing to influence media made for and by women and normalizing whiteness, heteronormativity, and individualism.

5.3 Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the overlaps between nostalgia, historical revisionism, white womanhood, white supremacy, and white feminism in modern American popular culture. It has traced the evolution and inheritance of British imperial white womanhood. It has taken seriously media made by and for women that is often disregarded or dismissed due to misogyny despite this media being critical to the socialization of American women and girls (Levine; Click; Bettis & Adams). In similar ways to how the cult of domesticity, British white women, and the domestic space were critical to the ideological maintenance of the British Empire, we see similar moves in this remediated content that use white womanhood to normalize white supremacy and the Alt-Right in our modern moment. A nation's culture "reflects the beliefs, values, norms" of that nation, and "White supremacy culture is the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of… our nation, teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value" (Okun). When modern popular culture continues to use British nineteenth-century female-focused literature and culture to create modern cultural texts, we need to treat them with serious consideration for how they use that past that relied on patriarchal and racist hierarchies to influence and idealize the present. Especially when, at our present in 2023, the United States is facing a crisis of women's rights to their own bodies with the 2022 overturn of Roe v. Wade, many states passing legislation that is hostile to women's reproductive and bodily rights, and the newer turn to remove no fault divorce by Republicans (Jong-Fast). The vilification of abortion rights

and no-fault divorce coinciding with the rise of tradwives and a cultural embracing of hyper-femininity are not happenstances but intertwined phenomenon that signal the conservative political and social moves to re-establish race- and gender-based hierarchies that privilege whiteness, masculinity, heteronormativity, etc. I have kept most of this dissertation firmly in discussions of popular culture and social media because the political realities quickly overwhelm me and eclipse discussions of almost anything else – truly, when my ability to make decisions about my own body is threatened, why would a discussion of *Bridgerton* be my priority? When climate disaster and infrastructure failure feel imminent, why would the importance of consumerism in *Clueless* be something worth discussing? Why focus on white popular feminism when we desperately need intersectional feminism? When almost every week we see a new Black person murdered and their death so easily circulating on social media, why should we care about Barbiecore or balletcore going viral on TikTok? To avoid getting lost and overwhelmed in these serious and fair questions, I have stuck to the cultural and mostly fictional narratives, but the content explored throughout this dissertation are a key part of this larger political emergency.

On the surface, the media discussed in this dissertation, from *Bridgerton* and *Emma.* to *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Clueless*, are fun, lighthearted, and often used as escapism from the terrifying social and political climate. The revival of Y2K and postfeminist media, the increase in popularity of social media subgroups and media like the homesteading accounts and historical playfulness, and the continued success of Austen adaptations and Netflix's *Bridgerton* franchise suggest that many people are turning to this media as ways to escape from our present circumstance by reflecting on

the perceived stability of the past. And, as this dissertation has argued, this collective media often leads us back to Imperial Britain, specifically to the ideals and standards of white womanhood that were used to structure and justify colonialism. To begin to answer the existential questions I noted above that I have put off for most of this dissertation: the escapism of this media is why we should care and pay attention. This media and its escapism allow for the surreptitious values of white popular feminism and white supremacy to become more normalized. The romanticization of love stories and idealization of motherhood that work to obscure the pressures to become a wife and mother and reframe them as independent, personal choices. Social media creators influencing women to spend money to aestheticize their lives so they feel they have control in a world that continues to undervalue them and deny them agency. White popular feminism makes white women feel empowered and radical while they ignore racism, income inequality, and more impacting their communities. But this fictional and social media is fun and beautiful and nostalgic. It presents a world and a history that works out for women, that prioritizes women's happiness. They center women's experiences, fears, and hopes. They do embrace a kind of feminism that centers women, and in a culture that is built on centering men and their experience, this media is radical in some ways. But which women and which experiences get centered and what hopes and fears get explored are almost always white women's. This whiteness, which does not announce itself, relies on the misogyny that overlooks women's media and the normalization of whiteness to exist on an unconscious level. And as a white woman myself, even one that tries to be aware and critically engaged with the media I consume, I still fall into these traps of white supremacy. I love a headstrong heroine who gets the

happy ending, but I also find myself romanticizing whiteness and cleanliness and other specific ideas about womanhood and motherhood. I follow these creators because I like them. I will and have happily given up an entire day of my weekend to binge watch the new season of *Bridgerton* and *Queen Charlotte*. If I think about it a little longer I can see their connections to colonialism and racism, but, often in the moment, I am watching for the escapism, the easy feminism, and the pleasure this media brings me. If I, or so many other white women, do not proceed with care and give effort to being media literate, we can easily support standards and ideas that align with white supremacy.

As I have stated throughout this dissertation, I do not wish to villainize this media, its creators, or the related trends on social media. Instead I hope this dissertation has adequately traced the histories of empire, the power of nostalgia, and the persistence of white popular feminism/white supremacy to show how these very fun pieces of media are caught within webs of meaning and sinister motives far beyond their own conception. I do not believe or argue that Shonda Rhimes, Meghan Markle, and other creators are actively scheming how to create media that comforts white supremacists, but I do argue that white supremacy, through white popular feminism, has so effectively shaped our culture that this media, to be comfortable, appealing and sellable means popular media almost always easily fits within white supremacist frameworks. White popular feminism so easily sells empowerment narratives that refuse to consider the complications of race, class, sexuality, gender expression, etc. which is part of their appeal to that escapism and stability. And to complicate the media, there is something admirable and empowering about women (especially women of color), whether they are as popular as Shonda Rhimes and Meghan Markle or are just small social media influencers, "controlling their

own narratives and imagery, when, for much of history, the story of [womanhood and] motherhood was largely told (or wholly ignored) by men" (Petersen 9-10). In a better world, this media could just be fun and entertaining, but we live in a culture that normalizes white supremacy that we must always be careful to not repeat racist, misogynistic, and bigoted hierarchies and standards.

I opened this introduction with Meghan Markle and Prince Harry's glamour chicken house, its alignment with homesteading social media accounts and aestheticized domestic space, and the feminist sentiment embedded within the scene. Meghan's narrative of the first British Black princess's in- and exclusion from the royal family, her and Harry's *choosing* a "simpler" life with chicken, dogs, and children, and the white popular feminism that unites it all in a neat empowerment narrative all stems from particular ideals inherited from nineteenth-century imperial white womanhood. These narratives are persuasive and appeal to valid feelings for escapism and nostalgia, but that appeal reveals their danger for all of us. Remediated history and the romanticization of the domestic space, marriage, and motherhood works to normalize imperial hierarchies and naturalize white supremacy-based ideals by using imperial Britain as their source. These fantasies, from *Bridgerton* to *Clueless* to the social media subgroups discussed in this conclusion, privilege individualism, heteronormativity, capitalism, and, most importantly, whiteness that assists in the acceptance and even celebration of our political present where right to bodily autonomy, sexual preference, no fault divorce, and more are threatened. Make America Great Again may be seen as a calling card for Donald Trump's racism, but it also nods to the greater media and pop culture trends that rely on the same nostalgia to sell an idea of a better, simpler, and more stable life. If women, like

myself, and others engage with the media explored in this dissertation without critical

awareness, we risk collectively sliding further into white supremacy and white

nationalism. White popular feminism, despite its projection of pink glitter feel-good vibes

and a female empowerment facade, presents a very real danger to us culturally that

should be recognized and further explored.

APPENDIX: LIST OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH REMEDIATIONS SINCE 1990 (PRIMARILY AMERICAN AND BRITISH MEDIA)

Films				
#	Name	Year	Era	Adapted from
1	The Muppet Christmas Carol	1992	Victorian	Dickens novel
2	Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights	1992	Victorian	E. Bronte novel
3	Bram Stoker's Dracula	1992	Victorian	Stoke novel
4	Wide Sargasso Sea	1993	19th C	Rhys novel
8	Mansfield Park	1994	Regency	Austen novel
9	Mary Shelley's Frankenstein	1994	Regency	Shelley novel
10	Persuasion	1995	Regency	Austen novel
11	Sense and Sensibility	1995	Regency	Austen novel
12	The Old Curiosity Shop	1995	Victorian	Dickens novel
14	Emma	1996	Regency	Austen novel
15	Jane Eyre	1996	Victorian	Bronte novel
16	Emma	1997	Regency	Austen novel
17	Jane Eyre	1997	Victorian	Bronte novel
18	The Woman in White	1997	Victorian	Collins novel
19	Oliver Twist	1997	Victorian	Dickens novel
20	David Copperfield	1999	Victorian	Dickens novel
21	A Christmas Carol	1999	Victorian	Dickens novel
22	Great Expectations	1999	Victorian	Dickens novel
23	David Copperfield	2000	Victorian	Dickens novel

24	The Hound of the Baskervilles	2000	Victorian	Doyle novel
25	The Royal Scandal	2001	Victorian	an amalgam of "A Scandal in Bohemia" and "The Bruce-Partington Plans".
26	The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby	2001	Victorian	Dickens novel
27	The Sign of Four	2001	Victorian	Doyle novel
28	Nicholas Nickleby	2002	Victorian	Dickens novel
29	The Hound of the Baskervilles	2002	Victorian	Doyle novel
30	The Case of the Whitechapel Vampire	2002	Victorian	Non-canonical Holmes story
31	The Importance of Being Earnest	2002	Victorian	Wilde play
32	Van Helsing	2004	Victorian	Shelly and Stoker novels
33	Vanity Fair	2004	Victorian	Thackeray novel
34	The Picture of Dorian Gray	2004	Victorian	Wilde novel
35	Pride and Prejudice	2005	Regency	Austen novel
36	Oliver Twist	2005	Victorian	Dickens novel
37	Mansfield Park	2007	Regency	Austen novel
38	Northanger Abbey	2007	Regency	Austen novel
39	Persuasion	2007	Regency	Austen novel
40	Becoming Jane	2007	Regency	loosely based on Jane Austen's life
41	Miss Austen Regrets	2007	Regency	Jane Austen's life
42	Sherlock Holmes	2009	Victorian	Doyle novel

43	The Young Victoria	2009	Victorian	Queen Victoria's life
44	Dorian Gray	2009	Victorian	Wilde novel
45	Alice in Wonderland	2010	Victorian	Carroll novel
46	Jane Eyre	2011	Victorian	Bronte novel
47	Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows	2011	Victorian	Doyle novel
48	Great Expectations	2012	Victorian	Dickens novel
49	Nicholas Nickleby	2012	Modern Drama	Dickens novel
52	Mr. Holmes	2015	Victorian	Doyle novel
53	Far from the Madding Crowd	2015	Victorian	Hardy novel
54	Pride and Prejudice and Zombies	2016	Regency	Austen novel
55	Through the Looking Glass	2016	Victorian	Carroll novel
56	Love and Friendship	2016	Regency	Austen novel
57	Holmes & Watson	2018	Victorian	Doyle novel
59	The Personal History of David Copperfield	2019	Victorian	Dickens novel
60	A Christmas Carol	2020	Victorian	Dickens novel
61	Come Away	2020	19th C	inspired from Alice in Wonderland and Peter Pan
62	Emma.	2020	Regency	Austen novel
63	Enola Holmes	2020	Victorian	Doyle novel
64	Ammonite	2020	Victorian	loosely inspired by the life of British paleontologist Mary Anning,

#	Name	Year	Era	Adapted from
65	Persuasion	2022	Regency	Austen novel
66	Emily	2022	Victorian	loose biography of Emily Bronte
67	Mr. Malcolm's List	2022	19th C	References Regency Romance's generally, particularly Austen
68	Scrooge: A Christmas Carol	2022	Victorian	Dickens novel
69	Enola Holmes 2	2022	Victorian	Doyle novels
Television Series				
#	Name	Year	Era	Adapted from
1	Hard Times	1994	Victorian	Dickens novel
2	Martin Chuzzlewit	1994	Victorian	Dickens novel
3	Middlemarch	1994	Victorian	Eliot novel
4	Pride and Prejudice	1995	Regency	Austen novel
5	The Tenant of Wildfell Hall	1996	Victorian	A. Bronte novel
6	The Moonstone	1996	Victorian	Collins Novel
7	The History of Tom Jones: a Foundling	1997	18th C	Fielding Novel
8	Our Mutual Friend	1998	Victorian	Dickens novel
9	Vanity Fair	1998	19th C	Thackeray novel
10	Aristocrats	1999	18th C	biography by Stella Tillyard of the four aristocratic Lennox sisters
11	Oliver Twist	1999	Victorian	Dickens novel
12	Daniel Deronda	2002	Victorian	Eliot novel

13	North and South	2004	Victorian	Gaskell novel
14	Frankenstein	2004	Victorian	Shelley novel
15	He Knew He Was Right	2004	Victorian	Trollope novel
16	Bleak House	2005	Victorian	Dickens novel
17	Jane Eyre	2006	Victorian	Bronte novel
18	Oliver Twist	2007	Victorian	Dickens novel
19	Cranford	2007	Victorian	Gaskell novel
20	Sense and Sensibility	2008	Regency	Austen novel
21	Lost in Austen	2008	Regency / Modern day	Austen novel
22	Little Dorrit	2008	Victorian	Dickens novel
23	Tess of the D'Urbervilles	2008	Victorian	Hardy novel
24	Emma	2009	Regency	Austen novel
25	Wuthering Heights	2009	Victorian	E. Bronte novel
26	Desperate Romantics	2009	Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood	inspired by and takes its title from Franny Moyle's factual book
27	Great Expectations	2011	Victorian	Dickens novel
28	The Mystery of Edwin Drood	2012	Victorian	Dickens unfinished novel
29	Dracula	2013	Victorian	Stoker's novel
30	The Moonstone	2016	Victorian	Collins novel
31	The Woman in White	2018	Victorian	Collins novel
32	Vanity Fair	2018	19th C	Thackeray novel

33	Belgravia	2020	Regency / Victorian (1815 and 1840)	Julian Fellowes novel
34	Dracula	2020	Victorian	Stoker's novel
35	Downton Abbey	2010 - 2015	Early 20th (1912-1926)	
36	Outlander	2014 - current	18th C	Diana Gabaldon novels
37	Penny Dreadful	2014-2016	Victorian	Various
38	Poldark	2015 - 2019	Georgian / Regency (1781-1801)	Graham novels
39	Dickensian	2015-2016	Victorian	Dickens novels
40	Versailles	2015-2018	17th C	construction of the Palace of Versailles during the reign of Louis XIV
41	Victoria	2016 - 2019	Victorian	Queen Victoria's life
42	The Crown	2016-current	19th C to 2000	Queen Elizabeth's life
43	Harlots	2017 - 2020	18th C	The Covent Garden Ladies by British historian Hallie Rubenhold
44	Anne with an E	2017-2019	late 19th- early 20th	Montgomery's novel
45	Gentleman Jack	2019 - current	Regency / Victorian	Anne Lister diaries
46	Sanditon	2019 - current	Regency	Austen novel

#	Name	Year		Adapted From
47	Dickinson	2019 - current	19th C	Emily Dickinson's life
48	The Great	2020 - current	18th C	Catherine the Great's rise
49	Bridgerton	2020 - current	Regency	J. Quinn's Romance novels
50	Tom Jones	2023	18th C	Fielding novel
51	Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story	2023	18th C	J. Quinn's Romance novels
Literary Web Series		Not all are 19th C British		
#	Name	Year	Adapted From	
1	The Lizzie Bennet Diaries	2012-2013	Pride and Prejudice	
2	Welcome to Sanditon	2013	Sanditon	
3	Emma Approved	2013-2014	Emma	
4	Emma's Journal	2013	Emma	
5	The Emma Project	2013-2014	Emma	
6	The Autobiography of Jane Eyre	2013-2014	Jane Eyre	
7	Frankenstein MD	2014	Frankenstein	
8	The Jo March Vlog	2014	Little Women	
9	The March Family Letters	2014-2015	Little Women	
10	From Mansfield with Love	2014-2015	Mansfield Park	

11	Elinor and Marianne Take Barton	2014-2015	Sense and Sensibility	
12	The Jane Games	2014-2015	Austen novels	
13	A Little Prince	2014-2015	A Little Princess	
14	The Adventures of Jamie Watson (and Sherlock Holmes)	2014-2015	The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes	
15	In Earnest	2014-2015	The Importance of Being Earnest	
16	East and West Vlog	2014-2015	North and South	
17	Project Dashwood	2014-2016	Sense and Sensibility	
18	Carmilla	2014-2016	Carmilla	
19	The New Adventures of Peter and Wendy	2014-2017	Perter and Wendy	
20	The Misselthwaite Archives	2015	The Secret Garden	
21	Baker Street	2015	The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes	
22	The Wunder Institute	2015	Alice's Adventures in Wonderland	
23	Northbound Series	2015-2016	Northanger Abbey	
24	The Cate Morland Chronicles	2015-2016	Northanger Abbey	
25	The W.H. Academy	2015-2016	Wuthering Heights	

26	Or So the Story Goes	2015-2019	Peter Pana horror anthology, each season brings to life a classic children's tale with a dark, modern twist; including Little Red Riding Hood, Peter Pan, Hansel and Gretel, Rumpelstiltskin, and Jack and the Beanstalk	
27	My Dear Watson	2016	The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes	
28	Edgar Allan Poe's Murder Mystery Dinner Party	2016	various authors are highlighted but many from the 19th century	
29	Away From It All	2016-2017	Far From the Madding Crowd	
30	Mina Murray's Journal	2016-2017	Dracula	
31	The Attic Series	2016-2018	Little Women	
32	The Emma Agenda	2017	Emma	
33	Maggie Hale's Corner	2017	North and South	
34	s[HER]lock	2017 (2 ep.)	The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes	
35	Middlemarch: The Series	2017	Middlemarch	
36	Earnest 101	2018	The Importance of Being Earnest	
37	Public History - A David Copperfield Web Series	2019-2020	David Copperfield	

38	Rational Creatures	2019-present	Persuasion	

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Response to "You Know What." After Two Years of a Global Pandemic and
Resulting Restrictions, Inflation, Mandates, Shortages, Political Divisions and
Stress on a Level That We as a Society Have't Seen before in Our Lifetime,
People across the Board Are Exhausted, Upset, Frustrated, Anxious and
Rightfully Feeling Disempowered and Disenfranchised. Tensions Hit a Boiling
Point This Week, and It's Really Had Me Thinking Again about What We Can
Do When We're Feeling like the World Outside of Us Is Spinning out of Our
Control and We're Powerless to Do Anything about It. I Reflected on This Same
Thing a While Back during the Black Lives Matter Protests and Was Thinking
about What I Could Do on My Little Plot of Land to "Fight the Power" Even If I
Couldn't Be out Marching in the Streets. The Answer Came Quickly: Grow More
Food. I Know, It May Sound Simplistic and Even Unrelated at First. But Being
Able to Produce Your Own Food and Provide for Yourself without Depending on
Larger, Corporate or Governmental Systems to Provide for You Takes Power
Away from These Systems and Puts It Back in Your Hands; In the Hands of the
People (Where It Belongs). I Want to Make It Clear (Because I Know I'll Get
Messages), That I'm Not Advocating for One "Side" or Another. What I Am
Advocating for Here Is for People (from All Walks of Life and All Points of
View) to Take Some of Their Power Back. While There Are Many Ways to Do
This, Growing Food and Working toward Greater Self-Sufficiency Is One of the
Most Effective Things We Can All Do on a Personal and Community Level so
That We Can Be Just a Little Less Dependent on the Systems That Are Meant to
Control Us and Keep Us Dependent. I'll Leave You with One of My Favourite
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PhD	University of Kentucky, English	(expected)	2023
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Teaching Assistant, University of Louisville, Department of English   2016-2018
Research Assistant for Professor Nicole Diederich, Department of
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SCHOLASTIC AND PROFESSIONAL HONORS
Provost Outstanding Teaching Award, University of Kentucky,
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Jean G. Pival Outstanding Writing Teaching Assistant Award, University of Kentucky,
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Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies Excellence in Teaching Award, University of
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PROFESSIONAL PUBLICATIONS
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