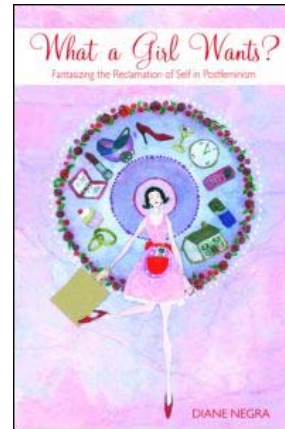


Diane Negra, **What a Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism**, Routledge, 2008, 191 pp., \$116.75 (hardcover); \$39.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Shawna Kidman Feldmar
University of Southern California



An analysis of the treatment of gender in contemporary popular culture, Diane Negra's newest book, *What a Girl Wants: Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*, treads familiar territory. Writing from a media studies perspective, Negra looks at a long list of "chick flicks" released over the last decade as well television, magazines, fiction, and a wide range of other media. Negra's extensive background in postfeminism — the subject of an anthology she edited just last year — heavily informs the work and provides the lens through which she reads the complex cultural landscape. While her close attention to the contours of postfeminist ideology — its truisms, tendencies and overall values — weaves through the book, her focus remains its manifestations in culture rather than its inner workings. In other words, Negra is primarily concerned with surveying popular media and approximating the experience of consumers as they encounter lifestyles normalized by mass media (p. 9). What she is explicitly *not* concerned with is locating an originary source or explanation for the rise of postfeminism, or assessing the lived impact this culture has on individual women or the population as a whole.

This almost exclusive preoccupation with the content of popular texts, as opposed to their production, reception and long term impact, positions *What a Girl Wants* squarely within a long tradition of feminist media analyses that focus on narrative breakdowns. Typically, such works assess how characters' actions espouse or reject the ideals of various feminisms and determine how storylines, particularly in the way their catharsis and resolution reward some femininities and punish others, work to establish and naturalize certain value systems. The best analyses over the last three decades, among them, Tania Modleski's theorization of soap operas (1979), Patricia Mellencamp (1986) and Kathleen Rowe's (1990) work on unruly women, Julie D'Acci's analysis of *Cagney and Lacey* (1994), and numerous articles by Lynn Spiegel, Denise Mann and Moya Luckett, tend to complicate easy interpretations. They identify possibilities for oppositional readings, point out contradictions between performance and narrative

closure, and locate within the texts moments that invite viewers to intervene or interact with the medium in new and different ways.

Diverging from this trend, Negra is not interested in exploring the polysemic nature of texts or possible points of resistance from within them (p. 4). And unlike her predecessors, she opts for breadth over depth. Her interest in the larger trends behind contemporary pop culture prevents her from delving into much detail. However, she is able to apprise dozens of films and reference examples from a wide spectrum of media, painting an extensive and illuminating, if not particularly nuanced, picture of postfeminism.

Several themes run throughout each analysis Negra undertakes. The first is a criticism frequently made of liberalism: that it undermines collective social action and structural improvements in economic and political inequalities by emphasizing individual solutions attained through consumer choice and self-improvement. As a classic liberal ideology, postfeminism has been especially guilty, advancing a discourse in which the actual and significant problems women face are concealed by misleading and superficial solutions that ultimately erode their status rather than empower them.

Second, and not unrelated, Negra probes the gap between reality and representation. She discusses the way in which recent pop culture overemphasizes the lifestyles of a narrow wealthy demographic. This tendency has the effect of normalizing and universalizing the concerns of rich, typically white, Americans at the expense of the middle- and working-class majority and the virtual exclusion of ethnic and racial minorities. This romanticization of Western aristocracy and meritocracy comes hand in hand with an insistent traditionalism that belies the increasingly fast-paced, constantly changing modernity that characterizes most women's lives. Lastly, Negra explores the persistent and aggressive recodification of female types promoted by contemporary media. This last theme provides the structure of the book, taking the reader through numerous categories — delineated by narrative possibilities, life stage, profession and consumer choice — that work to limit gender definitions.

The first "type" she visits is the "retreatist" woman, a narrative pattern Negra traces through film (in *Sweet Home Alabama*, *One True Thing*, *The Family Stone*), television (in *Gilmore Girls*, *Providence*, *Judging Amy*) and the popular press. Texts invested in this category, Negra argues, work to challenge the increasingly modern, global, mobile woman by representing female professionals who desert lucrative jobs in order to return to idealized hometowns. Once there, they reorient their career toward home and rediscover their identities as mothers, daughters and wives. Although their flight from high-pressure urban environments denotes some amount of discontent in the workplace, the solutions advanced by the text recommend that women accept the social and economic status quo and focus instead on finding spaces that remain livable within it. Unfortunately, as Negra notes, what tranquil places do still exist generally remain off-limits to a majority of American women who are neither wealthy nor white. Through a close analysis of the mediathon around runaway bride Jennifer Wilbanks, Negra goes on to suggest that the press is equally invested in this female "type" and frequently, more vigilant about enforcing it.

Negra subsequently turns to postfeminist texts preoccupied with notions of time. A number of recent chick flicks have used, as their central conceit, some form of time-travel, time-loss (typically via

amnesia or failed memory) or time-deficiency (occasionally via deadlines in the “dying woman” film). Negra argues that these narratives tend to amplify the current anxiety women feel over ticking biological clocks and daily limits on what they can and cannot achieve. Not surprisingly, while it is middle class women who most feel this crunch, these fictions tend to focus on the privileged, those most capable of avoiding it.

The postfeminist obsession with time has also reinforced categories delineated by life stage: the tween, the teen and the mother. Negra explores several results of this fixation, most notably, an overemphasis on female life milestones, like Sweet Sixteens, weddings and pregnancies, all of which are increasingly becoming the focus of booming industries and countless fictional texts. Popular culture mandates that these moments become the highlight of any woman’s life and, accordingly, tends to romanticize, even eroticize the adolescent girl, the pregnant body and the chic housewife. Left out are the single woman, frequently portrayed as near hysterical, and the “melancholic” older woman. While Negra locates the possibility of opposition in recent films that take an interest in this last “type,” she concludes that, although these characters are “legitimately melancholic about their respective predicaments” (p. 84), they are not a significant enough strand of culture to be meaningful.

Negra argues that recent media have also worked to recodify and categorize gender by profession. Specifically, recent films tend to take two possible approaches toward working women; either high-paid professionals decide to downgrade their ambition in order to better accommodate romance, or morally superior women with low status jobs help male romantic partners to overcome their own identity crises. Negra takes a particular interest in the latter narrative, specifically, in three increasingly visible low-status professionals: the porn star, the nanny and the flight attendant. Referencing dozens of texts that glorify and eroticize these jobs, she notes the ways in which they pay lip service to female empowerment while marking a reversion to pre-women’s lib subordination and Victorian Era values.

The appeal of these professions seems to be part of a widespread cultural trend that relocates feminine status symbols onto the body and the home, thereby transforming women’s social standing into a function of their innate femininity (i.e., their ability to nurture, please men and build a comfortable home). Negra recognizes this large-scale cultural revaluation of women — which, again, generally universalizes the privileges of a white, wealthy minority — in a wide range of recent phenomenon and trends, from the normalization of plastic surgery (specifically vaginal rejuvenation, labiaplasty, and the “mom job”) to the rising emphasis on the home as an expression of self. The most egregious architects of this trend, magazines like *InStyle* and personalities like Oprah, advocate a managerial relationship to life, call for women to enact a kind of studied femininity and reinforce traditional gender roles.

In general, Negra’s documentation and analysis of a wide swath of the contemporary cultural landscape provides a rich description of postfeminism. Her familiarity with the subject allows her to identify the many different forms this ideology can take and thus, for readers new to the topic, *What a Girl Wants* functions as a fantastic primer. However, while Negra’s understanding of postfeminism hits right on the mark, her characterization of popular culture as a whole, while intriguing, does not always feel accurate.

Looking exclusively through a postfeminist lens, she theorizes a kind of overall ideological impact, but repeatedly seems to miss the point of individual texts. For instance, in describing the way in which *30 Minute Meals* hostess Rachael Ray models a new domestic femininity by combining cheerfulness, sexiness and a return to traditional gender roles, Negra includes a full-page photo, reminiscent of soft-core porn, from *FHM*, and mentions her "patter about family" as evidence of her "nurturance." The argument is convincing on paper, but the photo she uses is quite antithetical to Ray's overall public persona — an aberration indicative more of the sexist leanings of *FHM* than anything else. In addition, while Negra mentions Ray's steady dialogue about family, she ignores the fact that the domestic icon spends as much, if not more, time talking about long hours that prevent her from having a traditional marriage, her dedication to her job, and how much she loves these aspects of her life.

Silences like this, refusals to acknowledge aspects of popular culture that may contradict the overall argument, appear throughout the book. Condemning postfeminism's obsession with makeovers, Negra criticizes *The Princess Diaries* for its compulsive attention to the details of the protagonist's transformation and its normalization of luxury spending. But she neglects entirely the film's sequel (released in 2004, so, well within the book's scope), specifically, an intriguing ending that flips the postfeminist narrative by undermining the central romance in order to demand structural change via the legal system (albeit, that of a fictional country). Similarly, referring to the *Gilmore Girls* retreatist conservatism, Negra references a quote from the pilot, which she reads as an attempt to conceal with irony the program's underlying, anti-feminist traditionalism. While her interpretation raises an interesting point, it also glosses over the complexity and ambiguity of seven seasons of episodes, which alternately advance progressive ideals around gender, fall back on conservative assumptions and explore the conflicting values of postfeminist life. Reducing the program to a single quote not only limits its oppositional possibilities but potentially misconstrues the reasons why it appeals to audiences and its overall impact on culture.

Furthermore, this reductionism prevents Negra from digging deeper into some of the issues her book so successfully raises. For instance, while she recognizes in the idyllic town setting of *Gilmore Girls* the postfeminist trope of retreatism, Negra never takes the next logical step, to ask *why* this trope exists in the first place. If it does not represent reality, then what is its purpose? Did a conservative writer use it to advance a personal misogynist ideology? Is it drawing from other pop culture references? Or is it an original that will in turn influence other texts? Is it there simply because it strikes a chord with audiences and thus promises higher ratings? If so, who is that audience (age, gender, social class), and why does this theme work for them? And how do we know? Did this title do well, did it flop, did it generate discussion in the popular press, did it inspire knock-offs? Not only does Negra not answer these questions, she never even poses them, with regards to this text or others.

If she had, *What a Girl Wants* could have been a 2000s' rendering of Susan Faludi's classic polemic *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, which painstakingly documents the complicated ways in which an anti-feminist philosophy spread throughout society during the 1980s. Faludi's interest in the *how* and *why* behind gender ideology, which paints an incredibly nuanced picture of culture, ultimately proves far more engrossing than Negra's focus on the *whats* of postfeminism: What does it look like? What values does it espouse? What media does it shape? Unfortunately, this latter

approach tends to oversimplify and potentially even minimize the pervasiveness of postfeminism. It also occasionally results in a kind of laundry list of what are presented as self-evident condemnations. For instance, various assertions — that there has been a huge rise in the number of day spas, that business class clients' experience on airplanes is characterized by "flight attendant chic," and that the popular press has recently spotlighted a rising trend in sleep deprivation of women — are made without strong evidence backing them and without clear reference to their ultimate significance. Speaking from a necessarily critical standpoint with regard to postfeminism, Negra too often assumes that these facts are negative in and of themselves, and, as a result, fails to delve into their meaning, significance and impact.

Overall, *What a Girl Wants* provides an intriguing look into the contours of postfeminist culture and thus may offer a number of interesting discussion questions for undergraduates or scholars new to the subject. However, its failure to probe deeper into the topic, to raise the difficult questions, and to allow space for contradiction ultimately limit its effectiveness as a piece of either feminist or media criticism.