

Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, **Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture**, Duke University Press, 2007, 360 pp., \$22.45 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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In her 2006 work, "The Feminist in the Kitchen," Charlotte Brunsdon proposes that there is a genre of Ur-Feminist articles that scholars have been producing and reproducing at length in textual studies. The structure Brunsdon unpacks goes something like this: feminine text, teleological jog through feminism, "obvious feminist reading" leading to the text's inevitable failure, invocation of pleasure, and finally, complication of the text that ultimately delivers its redemption (Brunsdon, 2006, p. 44). These articles do double duty, both assigning a periodization to feminism and depicting second-wave feminism (as well as that familiar evil, the "patriarchal academy") as the oppressive logic of a bygone era in scholarship, "remak[ing] the cultural memory of the censorious feminist" and effectively claiming a *dis*identification from that image (Brunsdon, 2006, p. 45). Brunsdon's charge is a hefty one for feminist scholars and Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra's collection of essays is clearly haunted by it, the specter of the "Ur-Feminist article" hovering figuratively over nearly every essay, threatening to render its analysis a mere recycling.



While the Ur skeletal structure that Brunsdon delineates is indeed reproduced in several of the essays, the collection resists easy solutions and clean closures of the Ur article variety, making important headway in mining the assumptions and obligations of postfeminist discourse. Each of the contributing essays performs a careful examination of postfeminist articulations in contemporary pop culture texts, analyzing both the substance of each text and the feminine subjectivities it produces in its wake. Steering clear of both traditional dismissive critique as well as the celebration of pleasure, each contributor maps out a murky space where postfeminism manages a kind of slippery flexibility, reproducing and reinventing itself in the face of "empowerment" and "agency." The authors' own grappling with the limitations of these liberal concepts, in fact, seems to hinder their discussion of the role that race occupies in postfeminism. Consequently, a substantive treatment of racial otherness is, to some extent, sidelined in the anthology.

As editors of the collection, Negra and Tasker set out to complicate the familiar, teleological view of postfeminism as a latest incarnation of the backlash against particular discourses of second-wave feminism. Indeed, each of the articles grapples with the notion that postfeminism doesn't so much reject feminism as it alleges to move past it, embracing a sort of "get on with it already" mantra. It is precisely the claim that feminism has succeeded, as evidenced by all that rampant choice to consume available to middle-class, heterosexual, white women, that positions postfeminism as progressive, as the next natural

step in the trajectory toward a mythical equilibrium. Postfeminist cultural texts bring feminism into the fold, acknowledge its work and the significance of its accomplishments and then move past its political obligations, noting a completeness of struggle. These texts “incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism,” only to render them no longer necessary (Tasker & Negra, p. 2). The result is a drained feminist agenda, with the “the normalization of feminism prevent[ing] it from existing as a discrete politics”; instead, feminism “emerges as a kind of slogan or generalized ‘brand’” (Banet-Weiser, p. 208). Feminist rhetoric, in the form of slogans and catchphrases, is deployed as express recognition of contemporary women’s familiarity with feminist discourse invested in the language of civil rights, which both empties and popularizes these discourses. Naturalization of feminism in the form of “popular” oversees a dilution of politics that appropriates marketable slogans and “others feminism” as a politics (Tasker & Negra, p. 4).

It is this “othering” of feminism, which Tasker and Negra refer to in the introduction, that all of the collection’s contributors ultimately theorize. The same construction of the postfeminist agenda emerges in every essay: a disavowal of feminism and a subsequent “buying in” to an “empowered” and often ironically self-aware femininity that celebrates consumption. That is not to suggest that this mapping done in the collection is somehow redundant. On the contrary, each essay theorizes a different manifestation of the “empowerment” package in popular culture, identifying its closures and transgressive spaces. That postfeminist disidentification with feminism is the starting point for all scholars here can be read as an almost tangible sign of the scholarship’s push forward. Ironically, it is these scholars’ point of identification amidst incessantly fragmenting *dis*identification practices of postfeminism.

Disidentification (with feminist principles and mostly, their media representation) is entirely ritualistic, producing a markedly individualized, newly postfeminist female subject, who is the “AI” girl, the “privileged subject of social change” (McRobbie, p. 31). If consumption is to be offered up as a viable space for the expression (and containment) of agency, then the postfeminist text must invite the reader/viewer to invest in neoliberal individualism, meritocracy, self-monitoring, personal responsibility and the unflinching faith in capitalism that accompanies all of these practices. Empowerment — always in the form of sexualization or consumption, or both — cannot commence without a successful individualization and disidentification, leading “the new female subject . . . despite her freedom . . . to withhold critique in order to count as a modern, sophisticated girl” (McRobbie, p. 34). Choice, as a symptom of empowerment, becomes “a modality of constraint” (McRobbie, p. 36). The notion of choice then tempers what McRobbie calls the “anxiety” of this new subject; the anxiety that arises when women’s perceived (and celebrated) access to *anything* becomes a cultural mandate for *everything*.

Sarah Projansky’s essay on magazine cover girls sketches out the images of postfeminist girlhood on the covers of *TIME* and *Newsweek* magazines since 1990. Here, “youthful femininity marks a heightened vulnerability,” a notion that resonates nicely with Sadie Wearing’s piece about aging since the postfeminist woman is actually a girl (Projansky, p. 48). Aging, for Wearing, is both about a generational politics of disavowal, a continuum on which to differentiate the dated feminism of mothers from the progressive postfeminism of their daughters as well as a space where “‘rejuvenation’ is figured . . . as simultaneously necessary and impossible” (p. 278). If postfeminist femininity is defined as always young, embracing an ironic and self-reflexive to-be-looked-at-ness (Wearing, along with others, cites Mulvey’s

discussion of the gaze here), then the only route to femininity for aging women is through transformative rejuvenation, whether ideological (as in sexually liberating) or physical (as in plastic surgery). Reading the film script, *Something's Gotta Give*, Wearing reminds us that this process of transformation is policed by conservative principles of impropriety, reinstating the centrality of youth and locking transformation in magical fantasy. This notion of magical transformation has yet another life in the collection as it is taken up quite literally by Hannah Sanders. In "Living a *Charmed* Life: The Magic of Postfeminist Sisterhood," Sanders goes against the thematic grain of the collection, identifying the series *Charmed* as a space of "healthy postfeminist discourse that does not reject the emancipatory politics of second-wave feminism" (Sanders, p. 74). Interestingly, elsewhere in this collection "magic" would likely be seen as a fantastical tool figuratively offered anxious female subjects trapped in "postfeminist dialectic of 'having it all'" and having to *do* it all (Sanders, p. 74). Yet, for Sanders, revival of that "old feminist icon of unruly femininity" — the witch — enables viewers "to find new sources of spiritual identification, where spiritual identity and girl power are finally reconciled" (pp. 75, 76). For her, the kind of kick-ass-girl-posse motif that is so prevalent in witch narratives — witches are, after all, mostly in covens — is a gesture toward coalition and an answer to the individualization that McRobbie and Lisa Coulthard outline in this collection. In "Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Film Violence," Coulthard concludes that images of female violence and "power are those in which the violence is ideologically, visually, and fantasmically contained within some individualized, apolitical frame" (Coulthard, p. 167). It is precisely this individualization that assumingly precludes feminist coalition, leading Sanders to seek out traces of solidarity in postfeminist texts. While re-imagining the potential for feminist coalition in a time of incessant fragmentation, driven in large part by postfeminist disidentification is certainly a welcome cultural move, Sanders stops short of actually theorizing the exalted dream of "girl power." The assumption is merely that "girl power" is good (and admittedly, it is hard to argue that it isn't). What it actually entails however, outside of the realm of magic and representation is anyone's guess.

Sarah Banet-Weiser's essay on the post-racial and "postfeminist cultural economy" suggests that "girl power" is a brand, a marketable commodity where empowerment is defined by media visibility and the indoctrination into a tenable market demographic (Banet-Weiser, p. 202). Much like race becomes "flava," gender becomes "girl power," a style of self-expression that can be tried on at will, so long as it is purchased. To borrow from Rob Walker, "girl power's" ambiguity is its marketability, encompassing just enough projectability to sell (Walker, 2008). "Girl power" makes yet another ambiguous cameo in Anna Feigenbaum's discussion of Riot Grrrls, where she aims to, as the title suggests, locate the punk movement's "resonances" in contemporary creative production. Praising "the Donna's assertive, sex-positive music," Feigenbaum redeems the band's strange positioning as both commercialized product and peddler of "girl power" (Feigenbaum, p. 139). It is precisely the slippery openness of this ambiguity that seems to trouble Banet-Weiser; the same ambiguity that scholars like Sanders, Feigenbaum and arguably, Coulthard either celebrate or leave untouched.

The centrality of consumption in the girl-power-as-commodity discourse is further demonstrated in this collection by Steven Cohan's work on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and Martin Roberts' essay on *What Not to Wear*. Cohan's discussion of the affixing of consumption to the queer presence on reality TV serves as a necessary intervention into the mostly heteronormatively-oriented interrogations of postfeminism. The trope of the gay best friend, the "asexual good fairy," whose only purpose is to

reinstate and secure heterosexual coupling, deployed in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* suggests that postfeminist consumption happens on several levels (Cohan, p. 180). The queer presence is both the expert on accessories, teaching femininity and masculinity to post-ed subjects and *the* accessory himself. While he also addresses reality makeover television, Martin Roberts' exploration of the genre casts a wider net, founding his discussion on the notion that lifestyle TV is "about the self and the achievement of social distinction through consumption" (Roberts, p. 228). For Roberts, a program like *What Not to Wear* is a productive space for inquiry because postfeminism "articulate[s] a model of feminine identity unthinkable outside consumption . . . which in turn depend[s] on . . . the fashion and beauty industries" (Roberts, p. 229). Empowerment in this program and in postfeminist doctrine is all about "self-confidence and sexual attractiveness," which, needless to point out, Roberts, perhaps rightfully, denounces (Roberts, p. 229). According to Roberts, the type of "expert" knowledge, similar to the expertise of the queer guys in Cohan's essay, that makeover TV lionizes "is driven primarily by the agendas and interests of neoliberal capitalism" (Roberts, p. 231). In a socio-economic environment where "neoliberal" traffics as the carrier of all things culturally doomed and already appropriated, Roberts', Cohan's as well as others' in this collection suggestion that agency in consumption is a neoliberal agenda goes down rather easy: How can this form of empowerment be good — the logic goes — if its intentions are so clearly bad?

That female empowerment is always brokered by consumption in postfeminist discourse is mined by all the scholars in this collection. Each contributor carves out a space where political feminist subjectivity and a production of the self is both possible and contained in postfeminist pop culture texts, and most importantly, lays out a clear direction for future research: an examination of what "empowerment" really means. *Interrogating Postfeminism* manages to bring scholarship in the area of postfeminist discourse to a ripe critical juncture, where theorizing feminist scholarship's investment in liberalism is actually possible and even necessary in the next round. Contributors' complicated critique of a mediascape where neoliberal ideology fuels postfeminist discourse, manages two primary feats. First, it has the potential to render any future textual analysis that seeks to complicate the celebration/condemnation binary of a postfeminist popular text, a mere reproduction, skating closer to Brunson's "Ur-Feminist article." Secondly, the collection directs academic attention to the frequently deployed notions of "empowerment" and "choice" — buzzwords borrowed from liberalism and seemingly naturalized in the academy (what would Adam Smith say?). Although none of the feminist scholars address it directly, they seem hesitant to stake their politics in a vision of the *right kind of empowerment* (meaning, the non-consumption based kind), which activates an academic trajectory of critically examining just what it is that "empowerment" entails and why we're so culturally wedded to it. The work of *Interrogating Postfeminism* covers enough terrain to mandate a veritable return to the academic table.

In fact, perhaps it is this theoretical move that could treat the current paralysis of the discipline's stark whiteness and middle-classness. Kimberly Springer, in this collection's "Divas, Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women: African American Women in Postfeminist and Post-Civil-Rights Popular Culture," begins by outlining the landscape of scholarship:

To date, studies of postfeminism have studiously noted that many of its icons are white and cited the absence of women of color, but the analysis seems to stop there. Whiteness studies, a field that started with such a bang, appears to have dwindled to a

whimper when it comes to thinking about how, say Miranda, Carrie, Samantha, and Charlotte exact racial privilege when they have their sex in the city.

Interestingly, aside from Springer's own intervention, Negra and Tasker's collection of essays is guilty as charged. While Springer's work here focuses on categorizations such as the "black lady," the "diva" as well as the "black chick flick," the collection could stand to take a closer look at "otherness," a small dose reminiscent of bell hooks' critique of Madonna as enacting an empowerment at the expense of a sampled otherness. There are, of course, critical examinations of racial representation and commoditized otherness, as in Sarah Banet-Weiser's piece on "flava," which explores the problems with commodified pan-ethnicity as media representation, and Sarah Projansky's reflections on the role and novelty of race in victimizing girls as poster-children for social ills on magazine covers. Furthermore, Suzanne Leonard, in "'I Hate My Job, I Hate Everybody Here': Adultery, Boredom, and the 'Working Girl' in Twenty-First Century American Cinema" deals primarily with the contradictions "choice" poses in the context of working-class femininity (or rather, the denial of postfeminist femininity to working class women) and Martin Roberts' explication of *What Not to Wear* does indeed engage with the erasure of lower classness in favor of a middle-class ideal in reality makeover TV. For the most part, however, Bridget Jones, the *Charmed* sisters, Riot Grrrls, Bride from *Kill Bill*, the entire cast of *Something's Gotta Give* and the *What Not to Wear* duo are allowed to wear their whiteness and their heterosexuality without much question or critique. Certainly, it is unreasonable to expect that every essay tackle every identity formation comprising that politically correct string of identity constructs that always safely ends in "etc.": gender, race, sexuality, class, etc. What is clear, however, is that *Interrogating Postfeminism* has overseen a transition in feminist scholarship, where situating consumption-oriented agency in its politico-historical context just might manage to explore the noise that race, class and sexuality introduce into the equation of postfeminism's undeniable traction in contemporary popular culture.

References

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