

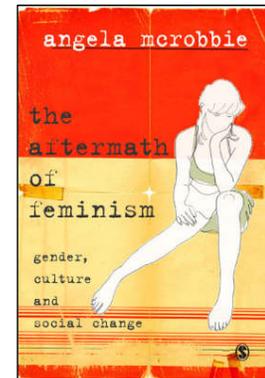
Angela McRobbie, **The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change**, Sage Publications, 2009, 192 pp., \$37.75 (paperback).

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In a 2004 essay titled “Feminism and Femininity: Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Thong,” self-proclaimed third-wave feminists Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards offer their analysis of the state of contemporary feminism. As the title suggests, Baumgardner and Richards make the case for a return to femininity and the enjoyment of feminine products, such as make-up, high heels, and of course, thongs. The authors propose “girlie” feminism as a way for young women to challenge socio-historical associations of femininity with weakness and subordination. Moreover, they argue that young feminists need not reject consumerism in order to “be political” (Baumgardner & Richards, p. 62); in fact, “girlie” feminists often embrace green nail polish, Hello Kitty, the Spice Girls, and Brazilian bikini waxes as they cultivate their new feminist identities. Ultimately, Baumgardner and Richards believe that “girlie” feminism is a can-do, sex-positive, all-access pass that allows women to be independent, strong, smart, and sexy — all at once.



For Angela McRobbie, author of *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009), the third wave re-appropriation of “girlie” described by Baumgardner and Richards is indicative of a deeply problematic attitudinal shift among young women, a shift that can broadly be termed “post-feminism.” McRobbie questions the “pro-capitalist femininity-focused repertoire” promoted by Baumgardner and Richards that “plays directly into the hands of corporate consumer culture eager to tap into this market on the basis of young women’s rising incomes” (McRobbie, p. 158). She argues that the flippant appropriation of “girlie” belittles the political strategy of re-signification and degrades an older generation of feminists, all while (decidedly un-hip?) analyses of inequality or racism fall by the wayside. McRobbie concludes that Baumgardner and Richards offer an ultimately anti-feminist argument — yet, in a post-feminist context, it makes perfect sense.

McRobbie sets out to explain this and other apparent paradoxes: How does it happen that this new feminism looks so much like the old, conventional femininity, but with a ramped-up price tag? When did feminism become common sense, and what ramifications does this have for contemporary feminist activism? How is it that “women are currently being disempowered through the very discourses of empowerment they are being offered as substitutes for feminism” (McRobbie, p. 49)?

Various authors have suggested that we should understand this current state of feminist politics as the result of a backlash against an older generation of feminists. While McRobbie sees the concept of backlash as important to understanding post-feminism, she aims to provide a “complexification of

backlash" by illuminating the ways in which feminism has also become instrumentalized and deployed as a signal of women's progress and freedom by media, pop culture, and the state. Not simply a rejection of bra-burning mothers, post-feminism draws on a neo-liberal vocabulary of "empowerment" and "choice," offering these to young women as substitutes for more radical feminist political activity.

Successfully integrating sociology, gender studies, and cultural and media studies in her analysis of contemporary feminism, McRobbie explores cultural texts, such as the popular film *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), women's fashion magazines, and the makeover TV show *What Not To Wear*, offering a rich and nuanced analysis of post-feminist femininity and the ways in which "an overarching framework of capacity, freedom, change and gender equality" (McRobbie, p. 51) conceals new modes of gender regulation.

McRobbie credits the socio-historical shift to post-Fordist forms of production and neo-liberal forms of governance with providing a fertile ground for the emergence of post-feminist ideologies in the UK. (Although McRobbie focuses mostly on the UK context, her analysis is applicable to the United States and elsewhere, especially those places that have experienced similar shifts.) As Lisa Duggan (2003) has argued, neo-liberalism prioritizes consumer citizenship at the expense of social welfare, using the seemingly neutral language of personal responsibility, empowerment, and choice. In the absence of direct institutional or governmental supervision, individuals — particularly women — are required to become more reflexive and self-reflexive, to scrutinize and assess their own lives and opportunities, as well as those structural and normative constraints that may affect them. McRobbie rejects the functionalist assertion that the de-stabilization of the old social order simply means more opportunities for choice and agency,, arguing instead that increased reflexivity often reinstates gender hierarchies and breeds new forms of patriarchal power (McRobbie, p. 47).

McRobbie does not suggest that feminism was ever a linear, agreed-upon movement, nor does she imply that all traces of feminist activity have vanished. Instead, she argues that, in a contemporary socio-cultural atmosphere that seems to have embraced certain feminist ideals (for example, "equal rights"), we can also locate a move — both in popular culture and in the academy — to discourage new forms of feminist activity from taking shape. As various feminist scholars critique claims about representation, foundationalism, and universalism, effectively "dismantling" feminism from within, the onslaught of wedding culture and porn star t-shirts in popular culture ensures young women that the feminism of old is something they can happily live without. The "equal opportunities feminism" taken into account by various institutions merges with scholarly and popular efforts to dis-identify with radical feminism, and young women are encouraged — from all sides, it seems — to adopt a "post-feminist" ideology.

Rather than understand "post-" literally as that which comes after, McRobbie suggests that we understand post-feminism as a kind of *substitute* for, or *displacement* of, feminism as a political movement. Young women today are (at least notionally) the beneficiaries of past liberal feminist victories, to the extent that "gender equality" now seems to be common sense. At the same time, they are told that feminism is no longer relevant — it is expendable, a thing of the past. For the sake of social and sexual

recognition, young women are expected to, as McRobbie says, take feminism into account, and then promptly push it away.

McRobbie presents Bridget Jones, the title character in the 2001 film *Bridget Jones's Diary*, as a classic post-feminist example: Modern, independent, and flirty, Bridget is also incessantly self-reflexive, weight-obsessed, and plagued by anxiety over finding a husband. Along with her fictional comrades Carrie Bradshaw and Ally McBeal, Bridget acknowledges her feminist predecessors, but is glad to escape the "censorious politics" they promoted and be free to revel in the trappings of traditional girlhood. These women and cultural texts "have taken feminism into account and implicitly or explicitly ask the question, 'what now?'" (McRobbie, p. 21).

This abandonment of feminism is rewarded with new opportunities for freedom and agency via a post-feminist gender settlement that McRobbie calls the "new sexual contract." Requirements for this "new deal for young women" include the following: occupying positions of visibility and agency through participation in education, employment, and consumer culture; abandoning a critique of patriarchy and relinquishing political identities; and engaging in a range of practices which are "both progressive but also consummately and reassuringly feminine" (McRobbie, p. 57). While previous gender regimes established what women ought *not* do, the new sexual contract operates through a "constant stream of incitements and enticements" and encourages capacity, success, attainment, enjoyment, entitlement, and social mobility (McRobbie, p. 57).

McRobbie argues that young women's increasing participation in the labor market is accompanied by a cultural politics of what Stuart Hall has famously called *disarticulation*. For her purposes, McRobbie defines disarticulation as that force which undermines potential inter-generational solidarities between and among women through the widespread dissemination of values which posit feminism as embittered and passé, the territory of ancient, furry, man-hating lesbians. Moreover, disarticulation works to foreclose potential cross-cultural ties and transmissions by imagining non-Western women as sexually constrained and victimized, in (false) contrast to "sexually free" young women in the West. The post-feminist celebration of a discourse which "celebrates the fashion-conscious 'thong-wearing' Western girls" (McRobbie, p. 27) works, according to McRobbie, to recreate and reinforce notions of Western superiority while disarticulating possible affiliations based on feminist post-colonialist critique.

McRobbie introduces the concept of "post-feminist masquerade" as one such form of dispersed and body-oriented gender power central to the (re)production of masculine hegemony. Exemplified by the "so-called *fashionista*," (McRobbie, p. 67) the post-feminist masquerade and its various incarnations — the well-educated working girl, the swearing and boozing phallic girl, and the racialized global girl — are adopted freely and self-consciously as statements of personal choice and female empowerment. Paradoxically, however, the post-feminist masquerade operates as an ironic, quasi-feminist gesture, while at the same time, warding off any potential threat to patriarchal authority. For example, while the miniskirt-clad phallic girl (Amy Winehouse, she's lookin' at you) is "free" to fight, puke, and have casual sex "like a guy," underneath this pretense of gender equality lies what McRobbie calls a "provocation to feminism," a "triumphant gesture on the part of resurgent patriarchy" (McRobbie, p. 85). Moreover, in its assumption of a white female subject and its suggestion that anti-racist struggles are a thing of the past,

the post-feminist masquerade, in all its manifestations, also works as a subtle mechanism of exclusion and re-colonization, effectively restoring whiteness as a dominant cultural norm.

For McRobbie, it is no coincidence that the post-feminist masquerade and a cultural politics of disarticulation both proliferate at this socio-historical moment. Rather, it is *because* women are now required to participate in working life (in Judith Butler's terms, because they now function as subjects in language) that this overtly stylized feminine masquerade emerges as a way to re-secure the gender (and racial) order. In other words, as women come forward in education and employment, the fashion-beauty complex must work even harder to ensure the stability of the heterosexual matrix and reinforce racial hierarchies. Drawing on feminist psychoanalytic theory, as well as on the oft-cited Foucauldian conception of power in late modernity as increasingly dispersed and directed toward bodies, McRobbie proposes that heterosexual patriarchy (or, in psychoanalytic terms, the Symbolic) becomes governmentalized, exerting renewed authority over young women. As processes of disarticulation reinforce the boundaries of (white) femininity, the post-feminist masquerade works to "re-secure the terms of submission of white femininity to white masculine domination, while simultaneously resurrecting racial divisions by undoing any promise of multi-culturalism through the exclusion of non-white femininities from this rigid repertoire of self-styling" (McRobbie, p. 70).

The repudiation of feminism evidenced by a cultural politics of disarticulation and the post-feminist masquerade is not without consequences. In fact, McRobbie believes that, by asking them to take feminism into account only to reject it in favor of a hyper-cultivated performance of self-centered femininity, popular culture is effectively driving women insane. Drawing on Butler's analysis of "illegible rage," McRobbie suggests that gender melancholia has been incorporated into the very definition of what it means to be a young woman. That is, the incessant effort it takes to embody the post-feminist masquerade, or to be "culturally intelligible" as a modern girl, is producing an entire generation of "pathological" young women. Moreover, in an even more troubling twist of fate, these "post-feminist" disorders (anorexia, depression, self-mutilation, low self-esteem) become normalized, rendering gender melancholia a routine state of affairs.

Again invoking feminist psychoanalytic theory, McRobbie argues that the fashion photograph is a site of such normalized pathology, "capable of generating this range of tensions and anxieties," and of creating "fantasy worlds for its female viewers" (McRobbie, p. 108). Fashion photographs, and the ever-melancholic models that inhabit them, represent post-feminist sites of regulation and injury which "keep young women locked into a hermetic world of feminine ambivalence and distress," all while preventing any serious critique of masculinity, patriarchy, or heterosexual norms (McRobbie, p. 111). According to McRobbie, the ubiquity of, and fascination with, fashion photographs, combined with cultural discourses of self-reflexivity, self-help, and gender equality ("girls have never had it so good!"), leaves many young girls confused, frustrated, and unable to identify the source of their "illegible rage" (McRobbie, pp. 98, 101).

Thus the contemporary young woman, self-reflexive and gender-aware, finds herself "confined to the topographies of an unsustainable self-hood, deprived of the possibilities of feminist sociality, and deeply invested in achieving an illusory identity defined according to a rigidly enforced scale of feminine

attributes" (McRobbie, p. 120). But, McRobbie tells us, it does not stop here: As women become increasingly active in labor markets and consumer culture, new modes of female citizenship emerge, further complicating the cultural politics of post-feminism.

On one hand, the "movement of women" into positions of visibility leads to increased agency, mobility, and a sense of self-importance for many women. On the other, as McRobbie points out in her discussion of the makeover TV show *What Not To Wear*, the movement of women into these new spaces also creates a need to re-draw the boundaries of class, race, and ethnicity among and between women. In dialogue with Bourdieu and Butler, McRobbie interrogates the ways in which "the production and reproduction of social division are increasingly feminized and . . . how the social categories of class are now materialized through reference to the female body" (McRobbie, p. 127). She finds that the "intra-female aggression" on this and other makeover shows is emblematic of the contemporary post-feminist climate in which women not only participate in the processes of disarticulation discussed above, but also adopt "a more 'modern' set of behaviors including competitiveness, bitchiness, and verbal violence" (McRobbie, p. 127).

McRobbie explains the unifying thread between each of the post-feminist cultural forms she has examined: Like *Bridget Jones's Diary* and the fashion photograph, *What Not To Wear* and other makeover shows

constitute a new and expansive form of gender power which oversees and takes charge of an economically necessary movement of women, by utilizing a faux-feminist language of 'empowerment of women' so as to defuse, refute and disavow the likelihood of a new solidaristic vocabulary being invented which would challenge these emerging forms of gendered, racialized and class inequalities. (McRobbie, p. 135)

These cultural forms show the extent to which feminism has been taken into account and discarded in favor of apathy, de-politicization, and even downright bitchiness, allowing norms of disarticulation, nostalgic whiteness, and female melancholia to proliferate across the fields of contemporary popular culture and media.

To those feminists who assumed that women's increased labor force participation and a handful of legal victories would, perhaps, engender a continuing commitment to socialist-feminist values, *The Aftermath of Feminism* is a sobering wake-up call. McRobbie's various references to films, television, magazines, and popular culture are not simply a stroll down a post-feminist lane; rather, these texts help illuminate the forms of gender power which help produce and reproduce women's continued domination and subordination. The book is an assault on "gender mainstreaming," or the idea that, though feminism may have lost popularity as a public protest movement, it is alive and well "behind the scenes" in the "practical world of women's issues" (McRobbie, p. 152). Conversely, McRobbie argues that, by disregarding the ways in which "feminist gains are and can be undone," by ignoring the real inequalities that continue to plague women at work and at home, and by failing to interrogate the heterosexual matrix, gender mainstreaming becomes, in fact, a major part of the problem.

In her introduction, McRobbie confesses a certain shift in her own thinking about the possibilities for a new feminist politics. Instead of paving new avenues of subversion from within the world of consumer culture, as McRobbie had once hoped, the defense of women's capacities for resistance and opposition through popular culture led to an all-out celebration of women's enjoyment and consumption of feminine goods, à la Baumgardner and Richards. "[T]he idea of feminist content disappeared," she writes, "and was replaced by aggressive individualism, by a hedonistic female phallicism in the field of sexuality, and by obsession with consumer culture" (McRobbie, p. 5). As "the power of popular feminism" continues both to threaten any potential for feminist subversion of cultural norms and to render a feminist critique of capitalism obsolete, McRobbie seems to have retreated into a space of lament.

Her disappointment, at least in this book, centers around the absence of theories of sexual power within contemporary feminist media and cultural studies (McRobbie, p. 3). As popular feminism has morphed into what McRobbie and others have dubbed "the mainstreaming of pornography," scholars have shied away from serious debate about "what widespread participation in sex entertainment by women means for the now out-of-date feminist perspectives on pornography and the sex industry" (McRobbie, p. 3). Clearly, this vacancy needs to be filled; however, McRobbie herself seems to foreclose this prospect from the start. By positioning pole-dancing as merely another form of post-feminist, so-called "empowerment," she denies the very real (if very troubling) pleasure that many women get from going to strip clubs, sexting, or — let's face it — wearing thongs. Though she calls for a scholarly dialogue about these issues, McRobbie's tone suggests that she has already decided where she stands. Her assessment of post-feminist girls as melancholic, hedonistic, and plagued by illegible rage may leave some readers — including me — cold. Moreover, her bleak prognosis for the future of feminism, while certainly justifiable, leaves little room for post-feminists *themselves* to begin engaging with questions of subjectivity, inequality, and power in neo-liberal capitalist societies.

McRobbie covers an astounding amount of ground in 170 pages, yet she leaves ample room for other scholars to further interrogate the many cultural forms that post-feminism takes. As McRobbie herself acknowledges, it is important to engage with the injuries incurred by post-feminism without indulging a feminist culture of victimhood (McRobbie, p. 163). It is crucial to call for a feminist politics of solidarity without ignoring or erasing the important differences in power, access, and experience between and among women throughout the world. For her part, McRobbie suggests the feminist classroom as a pedagogic "third space," a "contact zone" fraught with ambivalence, uncertainty, and potential — a place where women (and men) might come together through processes of educational migration and cultivate a new diasporic life based on post-colonialist feminist critique (McRobbie, p. 165). Ultimately, McRobbie does, at least, believe in the possibilities created by the contemporary "movement of women" across the globe and into new spaces of visibility, movement that may perhaps allow for a new feminist politics to emerge.

References

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