Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture

Edited by Stacy Gillis
and Joanne Hollows

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Ann Oakley begins her *Housewife* (1974) with the remark that it is "obligatory for me to thank my own family for the experience of my oppression as a housewife" (x). And so we would like to thank our respective partners, Andrew and Mark, for their patience with this project, and for not contributing to any experience of oppression as a housewife.

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Introduction

Stacy Gillis and Joanne Hollows

The relationship between second wave feminism and domesticity was frequently troubled. Since the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, the idea that an investment in domestic life is contrary to the aims of feminism has structured much feminist debate and the figure most closely associated with the domestic—the housewife—often operates as the feminist's 'other'. While some second wave feminists clearly sympathized with the position of the housewife who was trapped in the home performing unpaid work for her family, the home was frequently portrayed as a prison and a constraint. As Judy Giles observes, it appeared as if domesticity "must be left behind if women were to become 'modern', emancipated subjects" (142). These assumptions have often shaped how feminism has approached popular culture. Many early second wave feminists focused on how 'false' images of women were created within popular culture, socializing girls into restricted definitions of femininity that were based around "hearth and home" (Tuchman 37). These critics argued for more accurate images of women in the workplace that reflected what women were really like, or, at least, what they *should* be like. If 'negative' images of women as housewives could be eradicated, it was assumed, that women would adopt more 'feminist' modes of femininity based around achievement in the public sphere. More complex understandings of the relationships between feminism, the media and lived experience emerged from the mid-1970s onwards, influenced by structuralism, psychoanalysis and poststructuralism. Often diverse in their intentions and outcomes, these approaches rejected the idea that texts could simply represent or misrepresent 'reality' and focused on how the meaning of gender differences was constructed through advertising, television, films, women's magazines and novels. These approaches played a crucial role in shaping a more complex and theoretically rigorous understanding of the relationships between feminism and popular culture.

Within this wave of feminist research, some critics explored 'women's genres' such as melodrama and soap opera, identifying how these popular forms negotiated the relationship between femininity and domestic life. Many early second wave feminist critics repudiated these forms because

they reproduced the idea that women were responsible for domestic life. However, later critics began to reinvestigate and revalue these genres, exploring how they validated the feminine skills and dispositions that women used to create and sustain domestic life and examining the pleasures they offered to female audience who were struggling with the demands of maintaining homes and families (Brunsdon 2000, 21). Yet, as Charlotte Brunsdon suggests, this research into women's genres that focused on domestic life did little to displace the opposition between the feminist—who had left home—and the housewife who remained trapped there. The idea that an investment in the domestic was antithetical to the ideals of feminism was revived in a forceful manner in the early 1990s as part of the 'backlash' thesis. A series of critics—most notably Susan Faludi—claimed that the emphasis on 'family values' in the US during the presidency of Ronald Reagan was part of a backlash against feminism. For Faludi, texts that supported the backlash demonstrated the negative consequences of women's entry into the workplace and abandonment of the home. These backlash texts, it was claimed, aimed to turn the clock back to prefeminist times by renaturalizing the association between women and home. Representations of damaged and deranged career women who threatened home and family in movies such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987) were used to legitimate the repudiation of feminism and the return of women to their true place in the home. From such a perspective, there was little hope of revaluing home as a site which might have something to offer feminism.

In Faludi's work, the popular culture of the late 1980s and early 1990s is postfeminist because it marks the end of the era of second wave feminism and an attempt to banish feminism from popular consciousness.[1] However, other critics have examined how postfeminism might be used as a "historically-specific term to mark changes in popularly available understandings of femininity and a woman's place" (Brunsdon 1997, 101). Critics whose work is informed by this understanding of postfeminism have identified the ways in which popular culture frequently draws on elements of feminism. Such an approach has enabled critics to look at "what emerges between feminism and femininity" in popular culture, identifying how elements of feminist and more 'traditional' forms of femininity have been articulated to create new forms of feminine subjectivity that are not feminist but are still partly shaped by feminism (McRobbie 1994, 8). Such approaches can be seen in Angela McRobbie's work on girls' magazines and Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Read's research into *Ally McBeal* (2002). However, this emphasis on relatively youthful femininities and/or protagonists who were primarily identified by their roles in the public sphere precluded questions about domesticity. While critics began to identify new femininities that emerged between the non-domestic and feminist femininities, there was no corresponding move to think about "what emerges between the feminist and the housewife" (Hollows 180). In modes of popular feminism, it is

frequently the girl or young woman—rather than the housewife, mother or older woman—who is the heroine.

This collection is broadly concerned with the question of whether it is possible to reimagine this relationship between feminism and domesticity. In doing so, the contributors explore how tensions surrounding the relationship between feminism and domesticity have been played out in popular culture. While our focus is on popular forms in the 1990s and 2000s, some of the early chapters also reexamine how different relationships between feminism and popular culture were negotiated in both popular culture and second wave feminist texts in the postwar period. But in our focus on the recent past, this collection also seeks to make sense of why quite so many popular female-centred texts are concerned with the desire to return home. The contributors debate whether this constitutes evidence of a continuing backlash against feminism or whether academic feminism might learn from the questions being posed within the popular about women's relationship to home and the wider value of domestic life. The purpose of this collection, therefore, is not to develop or sustain a monolithic and homogenous perspective on the relationships between feminism, domesticity and popular culture. Rather, we are seeking to open up discussions about these contentious, thorny and occasionally pleasurable relationships. Just as we, and the contributors, do not see feminism (and postfeminism) as a monolithic and homogeneous movement, neither are we hoping for a singular representation of the relationship between feminism and domesticity within popular culture. Instead, the chapters in this collection investigate the various ways in which this relationship has been negotiated, reproduced and reworked across a range of popular forms, texts and practices. And just as no collection can cover all facets of a debate, lacunae in this collection open the way for further investigations into this relationship. For example, questions of sexuality and race are only touched upon implicitly in many of the chapters; however, considering the dominant (and popular) histories of the Anglo-American women's movement, it is perhaps not surprising, if somewhat overdetermined, that the tensions explored here are largely confined to a white and heterosexual relationship between feminism and domesticity in popular culture. So while a central aim of the chapters is to explore the tensions between feminism and domesticity, we are aware that we are, in effect, enacting and enabling a particular form of feminism as well as a particular form of domesticity.

THE EMERGENCE OF DOMESTICITY

The identification of women with the private sphere from the late eighteenth century onwards played a central role in creating new forms of gender inequality and domesticity emerged as an ideology that legitimated these new gender inequalities. Prior to industrialization, the household

was often a site of both production (work) and reproduction (family life). While men and women were often involved in different kinds of labour, it is often claimed that men, women and children were all engaged in productive labour in the preindustrial home. Processes of modernization and industrialization, however, changed these relationships to home and work. As Tamara Hareven points out, "[F]ollowing the removal of the workplace from the home as a result of industrialization and urbanization, the household was recast as the family's private retreat" (35). Home and work were reimagined as distinct and separate spheres associated with specific values and functions: the private sphere was the site of home, family life and consumption and the public sphere was identified with work, industry, commerce, politics and production. For many feminist historians, the emergence of separate spheres represented a retrograde step in the history of women because the distinction between public and private was also gendered. The private sphere was imagined as feminine—the 'proper' place for women—while the public sphere was imagined as masculine. In the process, women became economically dependent on men as they were excluded from the public sphere of paid labour. Women's lives were thus solely defined by their responsibilities as wives and mothers.

Within this narrative, new ideologies of domesticity played a crucial role in reinforcing the association between femininity and the home and in convincing women that their 'natural' duties were domestic, naturalizing the association between home and femininity. Women's magazines, domestic advice literature and the writings of evangelical Christian religious groups provide evidence of how these ideologies of domesticity were promoted. Leonora Davidoff and Catherine Hall identified how English evangelical Christian groups in the nineteenth century promoted the idea that the home was "the basis for a proper and moral order" which provided a haven from the amoral public sphere (74). Women were seen as naturally suited to produce this moral world, naturally more nurturing and best suited to the role of guardians of morality. Domestic advice literature which offered advice on how to run homes promoted the idea that women could act as guardians of morality not only through their roles as wives and mothers but also through the very ways in which they created the domestic environment.[2] In this way, a range of homemaking practices were geared to representing and reinforcing the values associated with the private feminine sphere.[3] For some, it was precisely women's connection to domesticity that was used to justify the idea that women should be given more power. For example, rather than dismissing the significance of women's roles within the home, domestic feminists such as Catherine Beecher claimed that women's strength lay in their natural connection to virtue and self-sacrifice, qualities reinforced by their isolation from the immoral public sphere. As a result, Beecher argued that women should be given the authority to arbitrate on matters in the public sphere precisely because their investment in domesticity

made them morally superior to men (Hayden 55–56). While domestic feminists' claims about 'natural' gender roles are deeply essentialist, they demonstrate how domesticity has been imagined as compatible with feminism rather than its antithesis.

The idea that nineteenth-century femininity was organized around domesticity, however, becomes problematic when considering the politics of class, ethnicity and race. The ideology of separate spheres was clearly a specifically white and middle-class construction: a distinctively middle-class domestic culture was defined through distance from the public sphere of work. Yet this obfuscates the extent to which the middle-class home was also a place of labour. Middle-class domesticity was not defined in terms of the performance of housework. Instead domestic labour was carried out by working-class servants who were managed by the mistress of the house. While middle-class women acted as beautifiers and moral guardians of the home, it was servants who kept "dirt, chaos and disorder . . . at bay" (Giles 71) and "protected their employers from dirt and drudgery" (Dyhouse 107). For many working-class women during the Victorian period, there was little option but to earn a wage through paid labour and there were few opportunities to simply be economic dependents within their own homes. Indeed, when limited employment opportunities meant that many working-class women had to withdraw from the labour markets in late nineteenth-century Britain, the chance to be 'just a housewife' was sometimes welcomed.[4] Questions of race and ethnicity complicate the domestic/private relationship even more. Post-Civil War, many immigrant and African-American women became locked into work as paid domestic labour rather than being captive in their own homes (Williams 162–5). Because black women had been forced to work as slaves, an opportunity to invest in domesticity and become a full-time home maker could be understood as a sign of progress (Harley 347). While many second wave feminist narratives defined the quest for an identity in terms of paid work, everyday life has often, in women's history, been a source of identity and self-worth. The ability to care for a home and family—and to show the outside world they could do so—"were major sources of pride and status" for many in the black community (Harley 349), as well as for many white working-class women.

THE RISE OF THE HOUSEWIFE

The women's liberation movement in North America and then in the United Kingdom played a vital role in challenging naturalized assumptions about separate spheres. Rather than women being more predisposed towards caring than men, it was proposed that the ways in which men and women were allocated to different spheres played a key role in producing, reproducing and reinforcing gendered cultural differences.

Because the role of breadwinner had been allocated to men, this both limited women's opportunities to engage in paid employment outside the home on an equal basis to men and made women economically dependent on men. Finally, the notion of the home as site of respite from the world of work was addressed: the private sphere was, for second wave feminists, a site of unrecognized, and consequently unpaid, labour for women. Second wave feminism was, of course, responding to a qualitatively different experience of domestic life than were women in the nineteenth century. From the 1920s onwards, middle-class women were increasingly positioned as housewives who were responsible for both making and managing the home: this involved doing one's own housework, following the early twentieth-century decline in the use of servants.[5] Moreover, the twentieth century saw a significant shift in domestic advice: the new disciplines of home economics and domestic science advised women on how to be better (i.e. more professional) homemakers. These attempts to professionalize the housewife role by making it analogous to jobs in the middle-class public sphere also aimed to elevate housewifery beyond the domestic labour that had been performed by servants.

If the housewife was imagined as a woman who used knowledge from business, science and medicine to run her home in an efficient and rational manner, one who made intelligent use of new consumer products that promised scientific and technological solutions to household problems, what then were the problems perceived by second wave feminism? Simply, the confinement of women to the home rendered them isolated, powerless and, crucially, lacking a sense of identity derived from their own labour. For second wave feminism, domesticity was represented as "something that must be left behind if women were to become 'modern' emancipated subjects" (Giles 142). One of the clearest articulations of this position can be found in Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan portrays American suburbia in the 1950s as a world in which thousands of educated middle-class women had turned their back on the world of work to invest in domestic life. However, while popular culture promoted a feminine mystique which equated feminine fulfilment with being "happy, healthy educated, concerned only with her husband, her children, her home" (Friedan 66), these images of the "happy housewife heroine" masked the extent to which domesticity was itself a problem. For Friedan, suburban women were suffering from "the problem with no name" characterized by feelings of failure, of nothingness, of lack of completion. Investing in domesticity did women an immense amount of psychological harm: the drudgery involved in doing Sisyphean housework produced fatigue and breakdown and, because women were encouraged to see themselves only as wives and mothers, they lost any sense of their own identity.[6] Following Friedan, many second wave feminists believed that the only solution was for women to reject their investment in domesticity and to understand that it would never really bring them any real fulfilment. Friedan advised women to find

a 'real' identity by pursuing higher education, achieving a rewarding career and performing a meaningful role in the public sphere.[7]

Similar arguments emerged in other second wave feminist studies of the gendered and sexual division of labour. These studies played an extremely important role in documenting the extent to which responsibility for domestic labour is shared unequally between men and women; however, some also demonstrated a veiled hostility to the value of domestic work. A good example is Ann Oakley's suggestion that housework is not 'proper' work (1). Oakley argued that housework denied women any real sense of identity and was "directly opposed to the possibility of human self-actualization" (222). She opposed the identities of the feminist and the housewife, claiming that "an affirmation of contentment with the housewife role is actually a form of antifeminism, whatever the gender of the person who displays it. Declared contentment with a subordinate status—which the housewife role undoubtedly is—is a rationalization of inferior status" (233). As these examples from Oakley and Friedan demonstrate—and they were not alone in these articulations—an opposition was being created between the housewife and the feminist.[8] In many second wave feminist narratives, "'leaving home' . . . is a necessary condition of liberation" (Giles 141–2). The legacy of these second wave feminist positions on domestic culture from the 1960s and 1970s is important in understanding how feminism still encounters problems in coming to terms with domesticity. If the subject positions of 'the feminist' and 'the housewife' are seen as both mutually exclusive and antagonistic, then there are real problems in trying to articulate elements of the two identities.

THE ETHICS OF CARE/THE PLEASURES OF HOME

The two antagonistic categories of the feminist and the housewife have been further complicated by the politics of late twentieth-century feminism. Drawing on poststructuralist understandings of the performativity of identity, Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd argue that the housewife has come to be seen as "an inflexibly gendered *identity*" rather than "a form of gendered *labour*" (90; emphasis in the original). This formulation begins to offer a way clear of the impasse created by the discussion of feminism and housewifery as mutually exclusive and antagonistic. Indeed, more productive ways of addressing this relationship can be found in the work of those feminist critics who argue that we need to revisit the domestic as a site of important cultural values (although the responsibility for maintaining these values should not lie with women alone). For example, Iris Marion Young argues that an important strategy can be found in revaluing work within the home so long as one does not fall back on essentialist positions. While Young sometimes invokes a problematic distinction between "instrumental" housework and "creative" home making, she argues that the private

sphere is not simply the site of stasis, reproduction and monotony. Rather, personal lives are given meaning through domestic practices (151). Johnson and Lloyd pick up on this, observing that "in the making of home, developing its rituals and daily practices—including how and when the dishes are washed, the house tidied and the belongings are arranged—individuals and families are making meaningful lives for themselves" (156). Indeed, it might be argued, through these practices people may also "address the political issues that most affect our daily lives" which can form the basis for "subversion and resistance" (hooks 48). The fact remains, however, that there is a substantial difference between the material lived experience of domesticity and the rhetoric of pleasure and choice.

The rhetoric of pleasure and choice raises the spectre of postfeminism, for some the antithesis of 'real' feminism and for others the 'new' feminism. Just as we seek not to define feminism or domesticity monolithically, we do not seek to define postfeminism monolithically. We broadly understand it to refer to a particular moment in late twentieth-century feminist history which is simultaneously marked by backlash politics and by the pleasures and possibilities of 'new' femininities (often found in fashion and youth cultures). Both of these have been encompassed by the rhetoric of choice.[9] There has also been a return in postfeminist discourse to the figure of the girl—a figure which has had historically very little to do with domesticity. This may seem a rather odd statement to make considering the wealth of recent consumables targeting the single girl—from 'how-to' knitting guides to Martha Stewart's recommendations for decorating the bachelorette pad—but we wish to be clear that this experience of domesticity differs dramatically from the kinds of domesticity with which second wave feminism was broadly concerned. Much of the recent surge of interest in marketing the domestic to the capital-possessing girl makes clear that this version of domesticity ignores the ethics of care which are bound up in the cycle of housework and domestic duty. There may, as Johnson and Lloyd argue, be pleasure in this but we must be careful to distinguish between the market-friendly domesticities which circulate in popular culture from such repeated tasks as cleaning the toilet after being used by an incontinent elderly relative or scrubbing the kitchen walls after feeding a toddler.[10] As Susan Himmelweit has pointed out, "[T]he shift in emphasis from work to care may have to extend beyond household boundaries throughout the economy" (xxxiii). Like feminism, domesticity has many different forms and must always be understood in its particular historical and cultural contexts.

Williams identified this when noting that critics of the domestic, such as Friedan, risk "alienating women whose lives are defined by caregiving" (145). And whether or not the work associated with domesticity, such as caring and housework, can be understood as feminist, this work still needs to be done by someone. Here again we are confronted by the outcome of a late capitalist system: if we as feminists do not want to do

the domestic labour, and our labour in the public sphere provides us with enough disposable income to pay someone else to do it, can this still be understood as feminist? Some feminist critics, such as Carol Gilligan, have emphasized the importance of women's work as care, suggesting that women are better suited to the valuable work of caregiving within the home. However, such arguments tend to essentialize the differences between masculinity and femininity and can serve to legitimate the existing sexual division of labour.

One of the key arguments of this book is that there is a need to find alternative ways of reconceptualizing the relationship between public and private life within feminism. We suggest that we need to explore new ways of thinking about the role of domesticity in social, economic and cultural life that neither simply condemn domesticity as a site of oppression and boredom nor simply celebrate domesticity as an expression of feminine virtue. We must also be aware that, with the separation of spheres, domestic life became associated with cultural values such as caring that some see as not worthy of preservation. Johnson and Lloyd suggest that, rather than abandoning these values, "feminism has a responsibility to reassert the importance of these values in the public world in a way that challenges the separation of home and work life and the relegation of humane values to the home" (160). Furthermore, an understanding of the crucial role that domestic life plays in contemporary culture is necessary if we are to be able to address current concerns about the need for 'work-life balance'. As Linda McDowell *et al*. argue, "[A]n ethic of care needs to be part of policy" (232). By exploring how a range of tensions between feminism and domesticity are played out in popular culture, the chapters in this collection begin to answer the question of how feminism might conceptualize domesticity in different ways.[11]

READING DOMESTIC FEMININITIES

Part I of this collection, *Feminism, Postfeminism and Domestic Femininity*, provides a historical context for understanding the shifting relations between feminism, domesticity and popular culture in pre-second wave, second wave and contemporary feminisms. Rachel Moseley's chapter on Marguerite Patten examines the representation of domestic femininity in British popular culture in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Rather than offering an image of the happy housewife, the popular culture of this period also offered opportunities to reflect on the meaning of domestic femininity and domestic labour. Focusing on the highly successful TV cookery presenter, Moseley demonstrates how daytime cookery shows anticipated women's problematic relationship with the dual role of housewife and paid worker. Lydia Martens' chapter examines how a very different position on women's relationship to home and work emerged in some of the

early works associated with second wave feminism. She identifies how second wave feminism came to privilege women's roles as paid workers over their roles within the home. Focusing on the writings of Betty Friedan, Ava Myrdal and Viola Klein, Martens demonstrates how a particular 'feminist' position on domestic consumption emerged during this period. In the process, she highlights how the rejection of the domestic in second wave feminism was also tied to a rejection of consumer culture. The third chapter charts the changing meanings of domesticity as it moved from this second wave feminist context into what Stéphanie Genz terms a 'postfeminist' context. She takes as her starting point a second wave feminist position that saw the housewife as emblematic of the problems of patriarchy. Arguing that postfeminism is neither inherently positive nor negative, Genz examines how it has opened up a space to resignify both the housewife and domesticity. Her chapter explores these ideas by analysing a number of popular novels which offer alternative ways of understanding domestic femininity to those associated with second wave feminism. Genz argues that postfeminism offers the opportunity to rethink feminism and domesticity. In their excursions into the history of feminism, these chapters indicate how domestic femininities might be understood in the context of feminism.

The chapters in the second part, *Figures of Domestic Femininity*, all engage with these histories in their readings of specific figures in domestic femininity in popular culture: the mother, the widow, the older woman and the maid. Wendy Parkins' chapter focuses on the figure of the mother in popular novels and analyses how the representation of the mother negotiates ideas about contemporary femininity in relation to tensions around 'work-life balance'. These 'mummylit' novels, Parkins argues, not only try to imagine solutions to the choice between career or motherhood but also explore the desire for an identity beyond both motherhood and career. Like Parkins, Sarah Gamble's chapter also examines representations of domesticity and femininity in contemporary popular novels. She suggests that feminism has done little to challenge the representation of the widow, for which the home can only be seen in terms of loss. Focusing on work by Lolly Winston and Susie Boyt, Gamble argues that these novelists explore alternative ways of imagining the widow and her relationship to domesticity. Kristyn Gorton's chapter is concerned with the representation of older women on television, and observes how mainstream representations of older women frequently confine them to their role as carers within the home, with the desiring older woman frequently represented as a predator. She concludes by drawing on Iris Marion Young's ideas that feminists need to revisit the politics of home and explore how home might be reimagined in ways that are consistent with a feminist agenda. Finally, Suzanne Leonard examines how the entry of women into professional careers has been partly dependent on the labour of unprofessionalized and low-paid labour

of 'housewife substitutes'. Concentrating on recent Hollywood cinema, she explores how the representation of maids and nannies privileges the 'classically feminine' domestic worker who cares for homes, men and children over the 'bad mother', frequently associated with the upper-class career woman. By focusing on the effects of the caring domestic worker on the middle-class family, she argues that these films tell us little about the relationship between domesticity and globalization and the position of migrant labourers in the economics of the home. All these chapters demonstrate how representations of domesticity in popular culture seek to address a series of tensions about the value of public and private life in contemporary life and how these representations attempt to resolve problems around the value placed on care.

The third part of this collection, *Domestic Femininity in Lifestyle and Reality Television*, brings together chapters which examine some of the forms in which private life has recently taken centre stage in lifestyle and reality television. While clearly not all programmes that fall into these genres centre on domestic life, many lifestyle shows focus on home-making practices such as cooking, decorating, cleaning and gardening. Anna Hunt considers how contemporary television programmes are preoccupied with a return home. While some shows offer idealized fantasies of domesticity, she suggests that others explore the dystopian 'grim reality' of everyday domestic life, enabling the audience to explore undesirable domesticities. For example, in the British TV series *How Clean is Your House?* (2003-), participants are represented as victims of a failed domesticity. In the chapter by Helen Wood, Beverley Skeggs and Nancy Thumim, the more 'dystopian' reality shows such as *Big Brother* (2000-) and *Wife Swap* (2003-) are also considered. They highlight how these shows draw on elements from more long-standing 'women's genres' such as the soap opera while also making women's labour within—and responsibility for—the home visible on primetime TV. Drawing on interviews with viewers, the authors suggest that while female audiences recognize and empathize with the women featured in reality television, such programming also provides opportunities for female viewers to critique the ways in which women (including themselves) are positioned as those who care for others. The final chapter by Lise Shapiro Sanders situates Nigella Lawson in the context of postfeminism. While some of Nigella's critics have claimed that her model of the 'domestic goddess' represents a throwback to an allegedly prefeminist 1950s, Sanders argues that these critics miss the postmodern irony in the Nigella intertext. Rather than attempting to fix the meaning of domesticity and the housewife, Sanders suggests that Nigella strategically opens up discussion of the ambivalent regard for the domestic in contemporary women's lives. The chapter explores this theme through an analysis of discussions on the forum on Nigella's website to identify how Nigella allows women to debate the meaning of gendered relationships with domestic culture. Feona Attwood has argued that many reality and lifestyle shows make "the private space of the home . . . a public spectacle" (90), and

the chapters in this section explore the consequences of this move for feminism.

* * *

This meaning of domesticity should not be understood—no more than should 'feminism'—as stable or universal. Moreover, as these chapters clearly demonstrate, domesticity does not have fixed meaning within feminism, just as feminism does not have a fixed meaning within popular culture. The contradictions and ambiguities that lie between the chapters are testimony to the vital force of feminism in popular culture—and in understanding how the domestic circulates therein.

NOTES

1. The idea that there has been a backlash against feminism is still frequently invoked to demonstrate how feminism is repudiated in popular culture. Recent examples would include Angela McRobbie's work on the representation of young women (2004).
2. Sara Leavitt has identified how American domestic advice literature in the mid-nineteenth century advised women on how to use consumption practices to create a 'good' home. Women were advised about how "they could illustrate religious and patriotic values, such as piety, honesty and modesty, through furniture and decorative accessories. They wrote their texts to show readers the ways in which certain woods, certain fabrics, and certain ornaments could influence family life" (22).
3. These religious ideas helped to legitimize a sexual division of labour based on men as breadwinners and women as economically dependent home makers: masculinity was defined in terms of a "man's ability to support and order his family" while "a woman's femininity was best expressed in her dependence" (Davidoff and Hall 114).
4. Joanna Bourke notes that becoming a full-time housewife offered working-class women the opportunity to exert some control over their domestic environment and additional autonomy over how they spent their time (182).
5. The significance of the servant would reemerge in the late twentieth century, this time as a maid, an au pair, a cleaner, a gardener.
6. Recognizing the problems of domesticity was not, of course, unique to Friedan. Simone de Beauvoir had elegantly discussed the problems of domestic labour in *The Second Sex* (1949)—for more on this, see Andrea Veltman (2004).
7. Friedan ignores the extent to which these problems of gender are cross-cut by race and class. While being trapped in the home and investing in domesticity may have been experienced as a problem for white, middle-class women, bell hooks (1991) suggests that this may have seemed like an impossible dream to African-American women who had been denied the choice to be a full-time suburban wife and mother.
8. Charlotte Brunsdon later picks up on this, arguing that "the opposition feminist/housewife was polemically and historically formative for second-wave feminism" (2000, 216).
9. For a related perspective on postfeminism, see Judith Stacey, who proposes a historical explanation of why postfeminism emerged. She argues that the

explanation can be found in "the collective biographical roots of a particular generation of feminists" who had found the experience of combining being a feminist with building relationships and mothering painful and/or unfeasible (238).

10. Jean Gardiner, Susan Himmelweit and Maureen Mackintosh succinctly point out that "women are more likely to be full-time housewives when they have children under five, since pre-school childcare is still almost entirely done by domestic labour" (31). Regardless of the commodification of the 'Yummy Mummy' figure, the domestic labour of parenting—raising again the relationship between gender and the ethics of care—is still primarily done by women.
11. For Williams, feminism should not abandon domestic traditions but might bend "domesticity into new configurations" (198–9). She suggests that "we need to offer not a fated assault on domesticity but a new interpretation of it . . . identifying the parts of domesticity that must be left behind if we are to move closer to our ever-elusive ideals of equality" (160).

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Part I

Feminism, Postfeminism and Domestic Femininity

1 Marguerite Patten, Television Cookery and Postwar British Femininity

Rachel Moseley

The focus of this chapter is the British daytime television cookery programme in the 1940s and 1950s, and its participation in the discursive construction of post-war British domestic femininities.[1] 'Lifestyle' television in Britain has been increasingly a focus of scholarship and much of this work has focused on the role of this kind of television in producing historically specific gendered identities.[2] In this chapter, I take a key moment in the history of this television genre—the emergence of the cookery show after the return of the television service between June 1946 and April 1947—and explore its significance in constructing domestic British femininities in the postwar period. In particular, I am interested here in thinking about the ways in which the work of Marguerite Patten, one of the first British television cookery presenters and a prolific cookery writer, can be seen to have attended to questions we would now understand as engaging with a feminist agenda. In her concern with the life of the working woman, Patten acknowledged the difficulties experienced by the woman both running a home and doing paid work outside, and offered suggestions to help women manage their domestic and professional responsibilities. Equally, the practices of television archiving remain a feminist issue: little audiovisual material remains from this early period, and particularly from those genres which were clearly marked as 'television for women'.[3] I have used a combination of archival materials (papers, letters, memos and floor plans held at the BBC's Written Archives Centre at Caversham, and the *Radio Times*) and oral history methods—a long, semistructured interview with Marguerite Patten[4]—to think about the significance of these early programmes for women and to examine their role in addressing and producing British postwar femininities. These programmes work towards producing a vision of British postwar womanhood as, in a complex way, simultaneously in the home and outside it, a figure both with enormous responsibility and expertise *and* in need of (re)education and support. In the discourses surrounding this programming, there is both recognition of woman's knowledge and skill *and* emphasis on her role as a trainee within the home. In this respect then, Teresa de Lauretis' notion of "technologies of gender" remains eminently useful in thinking about the ways in which cultural products and practices shape

identity, representation and self-representation in particular, historically determined and determining ways (2). My particular interest is in Patten's perhaps unexpectedly feminist address to the figures of the housewife and the woman working outside the home—and the intersection of the two, which, while often obscured in popular memory and public discourse, has been recently attended to in scholarship and emerges as central to Patten's address to the woman watching daytime television in the 1940s and 1950s. Here, there is evidence of a feminist recognition of women's difficult dual role, and an attempt to address it in practical, everyday ways. In this chapter, I begin to explore, from a feminist perspective, the ways in which British television has simultaneously offered and refused an address to the woman working both within and outside the home.

Patten became a household name through her work in radio and then television, presenting cookery items within programmes including *Designed for Women* (1947), *Cookery Lesson* (1949) and *Cookery Club* (1956) on BBC television. Women's daytime television programming of the late 1940s and early 1950s was shown on one or two weekday afternoons on BBC television, under the umbrella of magazine programmes *For the Housewife* (1947–1950), *Designed for Women* (1947–1951), *About the Home* (1951–1958) and *Mainly for Women* (1955–1959), generally between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. Within these programmes there were several items including literature, art, music, fashion, shopping, DIY, childcare and cookery which varied with each programme. Patten is so important partly because she was one of British television's first 'public women' across radio, television, industry and food writing. She was an advisor in the Food Advice Division of the Ministry of Food, running their bureau at Harrods during the war, and was a vital and well-known presence on radio programmes such as the five-minute *Kitchen Front* (1940–1945) and *Woman's Hour* (1946–), in public demonstrations, and then later on women's daytime television in the postwar period. It is clear from the programme files that Patten was given the freedom to determine much of what was covered and discussed within her items and her detailed running order for *Cookery Club* for December 20, 1956 (a competition programme, of which Patten was president, where the housewife members sent in recipes, with the winning housewife coming in to the studio to make her dish on live television), included shot types and transitions and showed clearly that she determined some of the style of the programme and provided the captions.[5] Patten had an important didactic role in the wartime and postwar periods, and I want to draw out two aspects of her 'mission' on women's television after the war.

(RE)EDUCATING WOMEN: THE HOUSEWIFE ON THE HOME FRONT

Patten described her main job as "to help the wife at home cook properly" and her work brings some of the propagandist discourse from the Ministry

of Food into postwar television in the late 1940s and 1950s. This educative address was, of course, closely tied to the BBC's Public Service Remit and the impetus to "inform, educate and entertain" according to the Reithian values underpinning the institution. In particular, her work was centred on the importance of teaching and on educating (and re-educating) young women in the skill and craft of running a home and caring for a family, as well as, as she put it, "to help people through a difficult period". In interview and in her correspondence with the BBC, she talked a great deal about the need to teach women how to manage their home in the immediate postwar period when rationing was still in place and there was a highly reduced selection of foods to choose from. The focus of Patten's work, then, immediately after the war, was on showing women cheap, filling and exciting meals to make with what was available. When rationing ended, she saw the viewers of programmes like *About the Home* and *Cookery Club* as a community of women who had grown up without being educated in household management as a result of the war, and her job as to reeducate them about both shopping for food and what to do with it. In a planning memo from S. E. Reynolds to the Head of Talks in 1953, a fortnightly item on 'Cheaper Meats' within *About the Home* is suggested, with the rationale that "[h]ousewives for the past 14 years have not been able to select meat they require; many have no knowledge of anything beyond joint, chops, steak. It is proposed therefore that Mr Gerrard of the College of Food Technology, Smithfield, shall show them where the various parts of meat come from".[6] The 1954 BBC press release for this series suggests the lack of housewifery expertise of those women married since 1939: "It is not claimed that the programmes have done more than act as an introduction to a complex subject—much more work needs to be done to make present day housewives as knowledgeable and selective as their mothers".[7] Here, these women are positioned as 'lacking' in knowledge and experience, which television, through Patten, would provide. Patten also frequently used the programmes to demonstrate new technologies like pressure cookers and refrigerators.

While production files for the programmes on which she presented show that Patten did sometimes talk about entertaining, the focus was mostly on the skills needed for the working woman to manage everyday cooking. Television's role as a technology of gender is particularly evident in these files with comments such as this in a letter from Marguerite Patten to S. E. Reynolds, who produced many of these shows, in May 1952. She writes: "I wonder if someone thinks it's a good idea to do something to interest older girls in INTERESTING cooking, so they can acquire a liking for it from an early age?"[8] There is a clear anxiety here about the loss of a gendered skill, home economics, which as Penny Tinkler (37) and Elizabeth Wilson (33) point out, had long been an integral part of elementary and some secondary education for all but the most academically able girls. Indeed, this concern remained part of Patten's mission throughout her career, from her concern with "the young housewife"[9] and "going back to first principles—

how not to drown greenstuffs etc".[10] on television and in later books such as *The How to Cook Book* (1970), which was aimed squarely at the young, novice or 'even' the bachelor cook, "to give them a good knowledge of basic cookery, food know-how and kitchen equipment and utensils" (Patten, 1970: jacket). Patten saw her addressees in the late 1940s and early 1950s as two main groups in need of advice and retraining: on one hand, there were women who wanted to get back to traditional cooking after rationing had ended and ingredients were becoming available again, asking Patten in correspondence, as she remembered: '"I've forgotten how to make a good Yorkshire pudding, I've forgotten how to keep the meat nice and pink, I've forgotten how to get the crackling on pork and I want to make a really good Dundee cake'—that was as things came easier", and on the other, there were young women who had never been taught to shop and cook. These, she suggested, may have been women who had served abroad, often straight from university into the forces. These are suggested as middle-class women who had done professional work outside the home and who may have married during the war, but had never been taught about how to run a home, manage a budget, shop and cook for a family: "They'd never cooked, they'd never even shopped for food, so I had to teach them. 'This is stewing meat, now look at that and recognize it, it's such and such a cut. This is the kind of meat you can use for roasting. This is plaice', and I'd also got sole, 'this is how you tell the difference'." The clearest concern of Patten's television work in this period is the education and reeducation of the British housewife in relation to food and the economics of the kitchen. *About the Home* and *Cookery Club* also brought the ordinary woman into the television studio to participate in the broadcast.

It is useful to reflect on this significant shift in relation to the Ministry of Information food films from where Patten's instructional discourse clearly, in part, derives. Though little audiovisual material from these programmes remains, it is possible to observe both fundamental continuities and shifts from wartime food films to postwar television, some of which are, interestingly, the result of the shift in medium. The Ministry of Information's short food films were shown both as part of the regular cinema programme (five- and fifteen-minute films and one- or two-minute "Food Flashes" were for example distributed to regular cinemas to be incorporated into the regular programme), but also nontheatrically in film shows in village halls, factories and air-raid shelters, through the National Federation of Women's Institutes and other organizations and groups.[11] "Food and economy are largely women's problems. They will require information, help and guidance. Films directed to the existing large audiences of women in the country are today a fundamental need" (Anon. 9). The films produced for and by the Ministry of Information Films Division were domestically and home economically-oriented and clearly addressed to the housewife, with titles like *Herrings* (1940), *Potatoes* (1942), *Oatmeal Porridge* (1940), *Steaming* (1940), *Casserole Cooking* (1941) in the "Cookery Hints" series of films,

and *All About Carrots* (1941) being shown in nontheatrical venues. The format and purpose of these food films changed as the war developed, from the initial intention to help housewives make the most of home-produced food, and cheap, nutritious food like carrots and herrings, to make rations go further and save fuel, to their later purpose of reeducation. Later "Food Flash" titles included *How to . . . Bake* (1954), *Boil* (1945), *Fry* (1945), *Make Shortcrust Pastry* (1945), *Cook Green Vegetables* (1945) and the purpose of these propaganda films was clearly recognised in a short piece in *The Townswoman* (the journal of the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds) in November 1944, which commented that these films were designed "to teach the first principles of good cooking in the simplest possible manner; these are directed mainly to those young people at present in the forces or doing war work who will be reabsorbed into home and domestic life" (Anon. 45).

The Wartime Social Survey (1941), asking about whether housewives listened to the 8:15 a.m. "Kitchen Front" radio broadcasts, found that those women who listened preferred female speakers. This partly accounts for the popularity of the wartime "Gert and Daisy" cookery hints radio show, though it was felt that a male voice at the end might have been even more effective (Nicholas 75), and this delicate question of address is brought into clearer focus on viewing official short food films. The films are presented as demonstrations, for example of steaming an entire meal using only one ring and one pan on the stove, or of methods of boning herrings, and have voice-over commentaries, written and spoken by Max Munden. In *Herrings* (1940), the actions are shown in detailed close up, showing only the hands of the 'housewife' performing the tasks.[12] The camera shifts from extreme close-up of the hands to a medium close-up on three occasions only. The combination of an authoritative male voice-over, which, effectively, owing to its timing, means that the 'housewife' appears to follow his instructions, and the visual presentation means that the woman at home is practically elided from the film. One can see why the wartime housewife might have objected to the mode of address of the broadcasts and films intended to instruct her. Television cookery, however, as it developed post-war, was quite different. Patten brought discourses of education and reeducation to television with her, but her presentation as a housewife herself in an apron and in a familiar (if aspirationally modern) kitchen, directly addressing the viewer at home and the housewife in the studio, offered an intimacy and familiarity of address, which was very different. *Cookery Club* drew upon the possibilities of the new medium of television and the possibilities of blurring the boundaries between private and public space in its liveness, intimacy and copresence with the housewife watching at home, and was entirely unlike the wartime official food film, with its authoritarian male voice and semi-present housewife, in both feel and address. *Cookery Club* was extremely popular, with Patten receiving hundreds of letters each week through the

BBC, and gave the housewife, elided from those earlier official films, a voice and a presence on television, however circumscribed and managed. While the demonstration and education aspect remained strong in the programmes, the housewife became part of the presentation, and her role was increasingly recognized.

Production files for Patten's items suggest a very slow and detailed demonstrative technique of presentation and address. Shooting scripts for the programmes show the slowness of the presentation, in detailed stages, with a great deal of close-up and superimposition to repeat information, and often the use of real time and special effects. Patten, in interview, gave the example of producer S. E. Reynolds' innovative superimposition of the bone onto an image of a shoulder of lamb being carved by Philip Harben, to demonstrate the process in detail, and this is borne out in the programme files.[13] Patten had a full twenty minutes on *Designed for Women* to present one recipe—much longer than most cookery programmes today—and a letter to Patten in December 1954 from Doreen Stephens (editor of Women's Programmes) similarly suggests the slowness and care with which recipes were presented. In response to Patten's request to be involved in the Stephens' new experimental evening cookery programmes, she replied, "I'm afraid they will be rather differently conceived from those we are doing in the afternoon. They are to last for 30 minutes only and to contain at least five items, so I am afraid that for the time being at any rate the rather slower, more careful type of cookery demonstrations will not be possible".[14] In attending to the detail of the presentation of these early instructional programmes, it is evident that the mode of address was assumed by their producers as appropriate for different audience sectors. While the mode of address of the daytime programmes aimed at the woman in the home was one of attentiveness and involvement ("several viewers said they had learnt many useful tips from watching the close-ups of the mixing bowl"[15]), the evening shows were rapid and suggested a viewer with less time to view with concentration. The shift from daytime to primetime cookery was also a shift from instruction to entertainment, to a mixed gender audience and toward recognition of the woman working outside the home.

Indeed, Patten repeatedly wrote to programme editors and controllers in this period, asking for evening cookery programmes for "working men and women who entertain with little time or help"[16], using evidence from the letters she received to suggest the number of women who were in fact unavailable to view the afternoon programmes, because either they were busy in the home, or engaged in paid work outside it: "A point that I have raised a number of times and one that I think should be passed on to you, is from the number of professional women who are out during the day but who still have homes to run. So many of them have spoken to me and said 'do you not think it possible that at some time we could have cooking demonstrations in the evenings?'"[17] There was significant resistance, however, with BBC surveys assuming that the main viewer for these programmes

was the woman doing unpaid work in the home and targeting only them.[18] The Controller of Television Programmes, Cecil McGivern, responded to such requests: "20% of our audience is women with jobs. These are mostly youngish, not interested in domestic subjects in afternoon programmes [. . . .] if we were to include women's programmes in every transmission period, half an hour per fortnight would numerically represent the desire for them. This confirms me in my own view that it is far too early to make such a move".[19] Similarly, Doreen Stephens confirmed the deeply entrenched understanding of the 'ordinary woman' viewer of afternoon television:

> Thank you for sending me an outline of your own . . . I agree about the need to escape from the kitchen sink but the ordinary woman is the one who is left at home to watch the television in the afternoon tends to get irritated if she has her nose rubbed too much in the abilities of the extraordinary woman who overcomes her domesticity and makes a successful career.[20]

In contrast, a cookery show, hosted by Phillip Harben 'for men only' on carving and the carving knife, was deemed entirely suitable for evening transmission.[21] Television's role as a technology of gender is here eminently clear. Nevertheless, through her television work and in her cookery writing, Patten worked constantly with the apparently impossible—or at least remarkable, in BBC production discourse at least—figure of the working woman who also ran a home, in mind.

THE WOMAN WORKING WITHIN AND OUTSIDE OF THE HOME

There is a great deal of revealing correspondence in the BBC files which is suggestive of the agendas underpinning the programming discussed here. The following is an extract from a letter between Patten and producer Barbara Crowther about Patten's new cookery series for January 1956, and for which viewers would send in queries to Patten:

> With regard to Mrs Pearce [. . .] I would like to deal with her budget, give emphasis to the fact that she spends too much on cake, yet has not a great deal of time for making these, as she does part-time work. She also wants very quick lunch ideas—or recipes that can be prepared the nights before, to get ready on her return from work.[22]

Within this extract is, of course, the 'Mrs Beeton' aspect of dealing with budget and advising the housewife not to spend so much on cake, but it is the last part of the extract which is most interesting. During the war, the government openly acknowledged the burdensome position of the woman

working both within and outside the home, with advertisements and information in magazines like *Woman's Own* suggesting the importance of cooking in advance and buying cooked meats from the butcher, in order to ease the strain on the working wife (Noakes 19–20). As Judy Giles points out, dominant narratives that construct the postwar British woman as a housewife hide "a fundamental fact of modern life. That is that, during the war at least, many women were, simultaneously, nurses, secretaries, shop assistants and *housewives*" (132; emphasis in original). This dual role was not simply a wartime necessity, however, with married and unmarried women both wanting to remain in employment after the war and the government encouraging women to labour for postwar reconstruction, alongside anxieties over the declining birth rate (Wilson 22).

Throughout her correspondence in the files, in her cookery writing across her career and in my interview, there is evidence to suggest the strong interest that Patten took in the life of the postwar working wife and mother. The address of *500 Recipes for Working Wives* (1970), for instance, is clear: "This book has been written for the many housewives of today who run a home and have a part or full-time occupation as well . . . the housewife has considerably less leisure, and her housework, shopping and catering need to be planned carefully to avoid unnecessary fatigue" (4). Patten was herself a working wife and mother, described on this book jacket in 1970 as "a busy housewife who manages to combine a successful career with looking after her husband and running a home in Brighton", though, as she admitted in our interview, "I've always earned enough money to pay for an enormous amount of help". Patten had grown up in a single parent household; her mother was widowed and worked as an English teacher, coming home at lunchtime to cook for the family, and Patten, in our discussion, clearly understood this 'modern' position as a normal part of life: "[T]oday she would be called a single parent, she had the problems of balancing the budget, bringing up children, all these things, and nobody ever felt particularly sorry for her. It was a—we were used to it. And during the war, what, 50%, 60% of women were single parents?" Patten saw the programmes she made, and her purpose within them, as helping these women—women who, like her and her mother before her, had to juggle domestic and professional femininities—to manage the difficulties of their multiple roles within and outside the home. In her work is visible a modern, woman-centred understanding of this problematic role. The recognition of the dual role performed by many women in these periods extended from her focus in her programmes on the difficulties faced by the working woman running a home, with the frequent inclusion of items on planning and cooking in advance, casserole cooking ("meals you can leave to look after themselves, with or without modern gadgets"[23]) and so on, to her requests for daytime cookery programming for women to be allowed a space in the prime-time schedules.

There is also evidence of much discussion between her and her producer or the Head of Programmes for Women about showing women how to cook 'holiday' and occasion food, for example at Christmas—"cooking that can be done ahead to make it a real holiday"[24]—or for the Coronation in 1953—"a programme for viewers on Coronation day which would enable mothers in particular to enjoy television with the rest of the family"[25]—in ways which would allow them to participate in the celebrations rather than to spend all their time in the kitchen, thus acknowledging the gendered division of labour and leisure in the home. It is this proto-feminist address to the woman working both within and outside the home in which I am interested, and the worry, at least on Patten's part, about how this might be made more manageable through planning, preparation and the right advice. The story of the working woman running a home is not the commonly understood narrative of the 1950s housewife in Britain, and it is interesting to find it inscribed so clearly in television production files and oral history. Patten's efforts in this respect (often with the support of producer S. E. Reynolds) continued into the 1960s.[26] It is certainly the case that the mainly female producers of these programmes were working women themselves, and there is a fascinating history of women working in television yet to be written.

Programmes offering advice to the housewife were in decline by the late 1950s and the 1960s. Initially, Janet Thumim notes what she describes as a closing down of horizons for the female viewer as programmes increasingly began to emphasize the domestic realm rather than the outside world as women are encouraged back into the home (61). In the 1950s, for instance, *Designed for Women,* with its broad address to art and literature as well as cookery and the domestic, became *About the Home*. Later, as Patten commented, the BBC told her that "they felt women no longer wanted to learn about do-it-yourself, no longer wanted to learn about cooking, they wanted to spread their horizons further afield. It didn't say 'learn to climb Everest', but that was really the meaning behind it, that they thought we were too much in the home". It seems that as the 1960s (and the women's movement) progressed, there was an acknowledgement in the BBC that women's interests were spreading further afield and domestic programming declined accordingly. It would be easy to read this shift as a move from the private space of the domestic to the public space of modernity but, as Giles argues, "responses to the modern are to be found not only in narratives of the public city, but also in stories of, for example, the home, consumer relations, married sexuality, domestic service" (4). In this respect then, the narrative I tell here of Patten's work for and about the woman working within and outside the home, is also a story about the development of modern British femininities through the mass media. While the period which sees the decline of the kind of women's programming I have described here is contemporaneous with the emergence of the figure of the modern 'girl' of the 1960s, living and working alone in town,[27] the figure of the 1950s housewife working

outside the home, who haunts Patten's correspondence with the BBC and inhabits her cookery writing and conversation, is a significant modern figure, albeit one whom BBC television in this period seems to have found it difficult to acknowledge and address. Patten describes letters from women who had been in the services overseas, coming home to marry and wanting advice on how to incorporate the knowledge and experience of food they have gained abroad into their domestic repertoire, and of women asking for advice on how to manage their 'married' budget, having never had to do this while living in Malta, where there was no rationing, or returning from Malaysia.[28] These are stories of negotiation, between travel and modernity and the figure of the "cooking woman" (Duruz 16), immobile, tied to kitchen and home.

Patten, as one of the first public women of British television, has, in her relationship to work, travel and home, a concern with the woman working inside and outside the home which produces this modern figure of negotiation very clearly. This figure is unequivocally one of anxiety and disruption, which television discourse attempted repeatedly to contain. The gendered division of labour in television cookery was strongly marked in this period. When one looks at the *Radio Times* schedule for *Cookery Lesson* with male television chef Philip Harben and with Patten, the programme listing clearly associates Harben with science and food technology and Patten with recipes and home cooking: Harben demonstrates the "media of steam and water," and instructs on the significance of temperatures and their effect on food (April 4, 1950), while Patten demonstrates how to make soda gingerbread and doughnuts on the same programme (May 2, 1950). There was repeated anger over the presentation of Patten, seen by producer S. E. Reynolds as the better cook, effectively as Philip Harben's assistant on cookery lesson.[29] There was also anxiety registered over the appropriateness of Patten's appearance, with correspondence about Patten wearing nail varnish while demonstrating food on television. While Patten argued that it made it easier to see what was being done to the food, producer Mary Adams argued that it was unwholesome.[30] Similarly, Patten was asked to wear a "more serviceable looking apron. The one you had on . . . distracted the eye, without looking practical. I really feel it should have straps or reach higher towards your shoulders".[31] This exchange speaks to the ways in which certain modes of glamorous modern femininity are understood as problematic in conjunction with domestic femininities and food.

The figure of the working woman is even more problematic, and there is an extremely delicate negotiation going on in BBC programming of this period around the woman working at home and away, with programmes like Jeanne Heal's *Women of Today* (1950) presenting very public women like Joyce Grenfell in studio sets, built to present their real-life drawing rooms, and focusing on their taste in furniture, favourite recipes and leisure pastimes (tapestry, flower arranging and salads, for example), rather than on their public work and achievements.[32] Similarly, the programme

Women's Viewpoint (1951), "an unrehearsed discussion by women, for women, of subjects of special interest to women", dealt with delicate topics such as "women in politics", "Is woman's place in the home?" and "Married women at home—is it breaking up homes?", in a set designed to approximate a lovely, modern sitting room.[33] The topic of the working woman was clearly a sensitive one for the BBC in this period, as a memo from S. E. Reynolds to the Head of Television Talks about *Designed for Women* suggests:

> One topic I should like to handle is 'wives at work'. As you know, there will be a drive to get married women into factories to help with rearmament, but our local school mistress complains . . . because of the high cost of living the mothers just have to work. But the children suffer. You will appreciate that is this point of view is advanced, the Corporation can be charged with sabotaging the Government's re-armament programme.[34]

BBC television was walking a difficult line between contemporaneity and nation building, in which the figure of the working woman loomed large. Television as a technology of gender at this moment was being pulled between acknowledgement of modern social arrangements, traditional values and Government imperatives. Moreover, class is extremely difficult to map onto the discursive history of this programming, with working-class women, widows and divorcees having often worked as well as run homes, and housewifery only becoming associated with middle-class women as domestic help declined in the war and postwar periods.

THE CITIZEN HOUSEWIFE

This period then saw the importance of the "citizen housewife" (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 149) who was, importantly, a simultaneously public and private figure. Patten's address to the housewife through her television cookery programmes and her own public persona, was one of the few sites in which the complexity of British postwar femininity was acknowledged and addressed. At the same time, the particular kinds of femininity available to her were carefully circumscribed. These shows, through their producers, presenters and audience participants, operated as a hegemonic technology of gender, producing women as in need of education in their role in the home, yet acknowledging the demands on them within and outside of it. In these programmes, the postwar British woman is both producer and produced, her expertise simultaneously acknowledged, valued and publicly corrected and delimited by television. While some accounts of this period, as Elizabeth Wilson argues, emphasize the importance of the housewife as professional and technician in charge, as "the touchstone of

the social revolution", aided by new domestic technologies and equipment, in my account, she is also a trainee in need of help and knowledge (12). Ultimately, the production of the British postwar housewife is unstable and leaky. As a coda, it is significant that there is little mention of any of these programmes, or indeed of key personnel like S. E. Reynolds, Mary Adams and Doreen Stevens, in key histories of broadcasting in Britain, such as Asa Briggs' *The History of Broadcasting* (1979). Tise Vahimagi in *British Television* (1996) notes Philip Harben's *Cookery Lesson* (BBC, 1950) but none of the female-fronted daytime shows nor indeed Josephine Terry's early cookery programme *Josephine Terry's Kitchen* (1946) which preceded Harben's on BBC television and was repeated in the evenings. The work of scholars like Thumim as well as of Joy Leman (1987) and Michele Hilmes (2007) is vital to excavating the role of women on British popular television and how these roles intersected with the models of femininity circulating in the postwar period. We need to write back into histories of British television the important contribution of producers, presenters and audiences of women's television in the wider aesthetic and cultural history of British television. Through work of this kind, as I have demonstrated here, it is possible to trace the complex ways in which modern British femininities have been formed in relation to sometimes conflicting discourses from government, television, domestic literatures and the work of early 'public women' like Marguerite Patten. Through her 'feminist' recognition of the lot of the woman working in the home, a somewhat less familiar picture of postwar British femininity begins to come into focus, one in which we can make out the domestic realm and the 'outside' world of paid work in a delicate negotiation which women today may find all too familiar.

NOTES

1. Thanks to Marguerite Patten for her generosity in speaking to me about her early television work, and for giving permission for extracts from our conversation and from correspondence held at the BBC to be used here. All citations from Patten, other than those drawn from the BBC Written Archives, come from this interview. Thanks also to the BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham, and particularly Erin O'Neill, for facilitating my research and for granting permission to use the extracts cited here. This research was conducted in the context of a larger project with Helen Wheatley (University of Warwick) and Helen Wood (De Montfort University). References to the archival material will be given in footnotes.
2. As examples of this, see Charlotte Brunsdon (2003), Charlotte Brunsdon *et al.* (2001), Joanne Hollows (2003) and my work in the field (2000).
3. My work here draws upon the methodology developed by Jason Jacobs (2000) in his work on early television drama.
4. Personal interview with Marguerite Patten, OBE, Brighton, August 2004.
5. BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham Park, Reading (hereafter WAC), TEW/B600/300/771, Marguerite Patten (File 2 1956–1962), running order for *Cookery Club*, 20–12–1956.

6. WAC T32/1/4/TV Talks/*About the Home*/File 2B/1953, memo from S. E. Reynolds to the Head of Talks, 03–11–1953.
7. WAC T32/1/5/TV Talks/*About the Home*/File 3A/1954–1955, press release for *About the Home* Meat series, February 1954.
8. WAC TEW/B600/300/771, Marguerite Patten (File 1 1946–1955), letter to S. E. Reynolds, 26–05–1952.
9. WAC TEW/B600/300/771, Marguerite Patten (File 1 1946–1955), letter from Patten to Doreen Stephens about her new cookery book for the new young housewife, 1955.
10. WAC TEW/B600/300/771, Marguerite Patten (File 1 1946–1955), request for a television item on vegetables, 12–05–1954.
11. For more on this see Helen Forman (1982), Tom Harrison (1982) or Rachael Low (1979, 13).
12. The National Archives, PRO. INF 6/485. Shooting script for *Herrings* (1940), a Verity Film, directed by Jay Gardner Lewis for the Ministry of Information, photography by S. D. Onions, commentary written and spoken by Max Munden.
13. WAC T32/118/1 TV Talks/Cookery/Programme File 1 (General) 1947–1953, memo from S. E. Reynolds to Head of Television Talks about the proposed 'x-ray' carving sequence, 16–10–1950.
14. WAC TEW/B600/300/771, Marguerite Patten (File 1, 1946–1955), letter from Doreen Stephens to Marguerite Patten, 16–12–1954.
15. WAC T32/118/2 TV Talks/Cookery/Programme File 2, 1946–1950, BBC Viewer Research Report, 12–05–1950 on *Cookery Lesson* 4.
16. WAC TEW/B600/300/771, Marguerite Patten (File 1, 1946–1955), letter to Doreen Stephens, 15–12–1954.
17. WAC TEW/B600/300/771, Marguerite Patten (File 1, 1946–1955), letter to Mary Adams, 23–02–1950.
18. WAC T32/362 TV Talks/Women's Programmes/General, 1951–1954, survey 18–09–1954.
19. WAC T32/362 TV Talks/Women's Programmes/General, 1951–1954, memo from Cecil McGivern, 18–03–1952.
20. WAC T32/1,867/1 TV Talks/Women's Programmes General, 1957–1959, letter from Doreen Stephens as Editor, Women's Programmes, to Mr Frank Baker, Woodstock.
21. WAC T32/362 TV Talks/Women's Programmes/General, 1951–1954, memo from Television Programmes Organiser to Head of Television Talks on S. E. Reynolds programmes, 27–03–1952.
22. WAC TEW/B600/300/771, Marguerite Patten (File 1, 1946–1955), letter to Barbara Crowther, 19–12–1955.
23. WAC TEW/B600/300/771, Marguerite Patten (File 1, 1946–1955), letter to S. E. Reynolds with an outline for 'Economical but Interesting' series, 1955.
24. WAC TEW/B600/300/771, Marguerite Patten (File 1, 1946–1955), letter to S. E. Reynolds, 05–08–1954.
25. WAC TEW/B600/300/771, Marguerite Patten (File 1, 1946–1955), letter from S. E. Reynolds to Head of Television Talks about Patten's programme for Coronation food, 06–03–1953.
26. WAC TV ART 4, Marguerite Patten, 1963–1970, letter to Beryl Bradley, F.E. department, suggesting a Sunday morning educational series "on housekeeping for the modern working woman", 21–07–1965.
27. For more on the figure of the 'girl' in the 1960s, see Christine Geraghty (1992).
28. WAC TEW/B600/300/771, Marguerite Patten (File 2, 1956–1962), letter from N. Pugh to Patten, 15–01–1956.

29. WAC T32/118/1 TV Talks/Cookery/Programme File 1 (General), 1947–1953, memo from S. E. Reynolds to Head of Television Talks, 28–08–1950.
30. WAC TEW/B600/300/771, Marguerite Patten (File 1, 1946–1955), letter from Mary Adams.
31. WAC TEW/B600/300/771, Marguerite Patten (File 1, 1946–1955), letter from Helen Malinowska, 17–05–1949.
32. WAC T32/360/TV Talks/ *Women of Today*, memos from S. E Reynolds, 02–06–1950, and from Jeanne Heal to S. E. Reynolds about design of set for Joyce Grenfell programme (n.d.).
33. WAC T32/363/TV Talks/*Women's Viewpoint* 1951, press release and memos to supply manager, 09–04–1951.
34. WAC T32/125/4 TV Talks/Designed for Women/File 2B, memo from S. E. Reynolds to Head of Television Talks, 01–02–1951.

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2 Feminism and the Critique of Consumer Culture, 1950–1970

Lydia Martens

Feminist scholars have recently been thinking through the unintended consequences of the type of feminism which developed with the rise of the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[1] All deal with the home-work dilemma which became the central focus of postwar feminism, leading towards the problematization of domesticity and a concomitant appreciation and recommendation of 'a life' outside the home. Some have shown a specific interest in the ways home life is required to deal with the consequences of women going out to work and men not (yet) taking home life seriously while others discuss the decline of the family wage, the contemporary necessity for households to be dual earning and the legal and social expectation that single mums with young kids now go out to work. Still others return to the original discussions present in early second wave feminist texts in order to reinterpret these in view of contemporary theoretical debates and continuing dilemmas within feminism and its representation. I want to begin by examining one of these approaches. In *The Commercial Spirit of Intimate Life and the Abduction of Feminism* (2003), Arlie Russell Hochschild investigates the connections between feminism and capitalism, with the advice manual serving as a case-study. She illustrates how specific feminist values have come to be utilized in the discourses of these cultural texts for women, encouraging them to live their lives in a manner that reaffirms one feminist ideal, that of equality, and undermines another, that of 'emotionally rich social bonds' (2003, 15).

She interprets this as evidence of the contemporary cultural trend towards emotional cooling, described as follows:

> This trend is a curious, latter-day parallel to the very different cultural shift Max Weber describes in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Just as Protestantism, according to Max Weber, 'escaped from the cage' of the church to be transposed into an inspirational 'spirit of capitalism' that drove men to make money and build capitalism, so feminism may be 'escaping from the cage' of a social movement to buttress a commercial spirit of intimate life that was originally separate from and indeed *alien to it*. (2003, 13; emphasis added)

Hochschild's work has been inspired by the feminism which she here reflects on, and she has over the years engaged with one of the most enduring strands of the feminist critique of 'consumer culture'; that of the consequences of capitalism and capitalist expansion on women's lives. The core of her work has been to think through the consequences of the specific forms taken by capitalism in the late modern period for the intimate life of "the female individual" (1983), of intimacy within domestic life (2003), which is further related to globalization (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). Her interests connect with the nature of domestic practice and domestic life in an age where markets are continuously changing and expanding.[2] However, whilst her work is clearly closely aligned with patterns of consumption in late modernity, we find a curious silence on consumption within her work *per se*, and no engagement with theories of consumer culture and consumption practices as such. Hochschild's work is certainly not at all peculiar in this respect and I am singling her out only as an example of a wider trend. Indeed, I would argue that this specific focus on gender, feminism, intimate domestic relations, unpaid and paid work, and a concomitant silence on the meaning and consequences of consumer practices and desires in everyday life has been quite characteristic in specific strands of feminist scholarship (Casey and Martens 2007). Whilst it may be argued that the antithesis between capitalism and feminism is abundantly evident in the body of work developed by socialist feminism during the 1970s and 1980s, if we look at capitalism from the vantage point of consumer culture, there are rather few sources that would lend themselves in support of this opposition. Yet Hochschild's statement somehow sounds true. It conjures up a persistent vision of the historical antagonism between feminism and consumer culture which is also alluded to by Mica Nava, one of the few British feminist commentators who has made consumer culture central in her work, when she stated that "conventionally consumerism has been seen to confirm women in their subordination" (1987, 209).

My intention in this chapter is to examine Nava's statement more closely, arguing that the 'convention' she speaks of in fact connects with a very specific period in the history of twentieth-century feminism; a period alluded to by her, but which is not explored further. My concern will therefore be with *when* and *how* this conventional understanding of consumerism as confirming women's subordination arose, and what social, cultural and discursive transformations characterize it. I will start with a brief discussion of the chequered history of feminism's relationship to consumer culture and domestic consumerism. This finishes in the postwar years and pinpoints Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) as pivotal. The specific discourses on consumer culture, consumerism and domesticity in Friedan's text will then be drawn out through comparison with an earlier influential text on 'the woman problem': Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein's *Women's Two Roles* (1956). I will then engage with the debate about the degree to which these two publications have been perceived as radical, arguing that *The*

Feminine Mystique provides clear evidence of Friedan's radical leftist past. I will add, however, that her text was not solely addressed at middle-class women, but that its critique of consumerism illustrates how the direction taken in leftist academic thinking came to be out of sync with the priorities and expectations of the working-class population at this time. In conclusion, I propose that this phase in early second wave feminist thinking is at the root of the silencing of consumption as a facet of everyday life worthy of consideration and I argue that this connects with the directions taken in feminist scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s.

* * *

It is possible to sketch a trajectory of the ways in which feminists and women activists have responded to and engaged with consumer culture and consumerism during the course of the twentieth century. Discussions on the rise of the department store in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries connect with the role and place of women in society and one common theme is how the expansion and transformation of consumer culture might be interpreted as positive for women, opening up new job opportunities for working- and lower-middle-class women, and creating a new semi-public space in which wealthy women could move without compromise.[3] Working-class women had a prominent involvement in the development of the cooperative movement and, taking their role as purchasers for their families seriously, they wielded the power of their purse strings in attempts to influence the way 'business' was organized. In this way, they sought to influence the prices of everyday goods and services, such as rent and bread, and even the conditions under which their husbands laboured. As the popularity of first wave feminism waned, the inter-war years saw the "gradual reconstitution of the 'consumer', the 'consumer interest', and the consumer spokesperson . . . to be that of the middle-class woman" (Hilton 2002, 118). This was organized around a set of new and more conservative women's organizations like the National Federation of Women's Institutes and the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds.[4] This period coincides with the decline in domestic servants and middle-class women exploring ways of doing their 'own' home work. In women's magazines and also in a new literature on domestic efficiency, domestic appliances were hailed as a boon in housework.[5] Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has discussed how these women's organizations had an important consumer voice during the war years, whilst they subsequently complained about the restrictions to individual choice posed by postwar rationing (134–9). The story finishes in the postwar years with Matthew Hilton arguing that women did not have a voice in postwar consumer activism. He discusses how the Consumer's Association was set up by the sociologist Michael Young in the 1950s, with no prominent role played by women or women's organizations of any kind. This points to an impending disinterest in, and/or ineffectiveness around consumerism, within postwar feminism and women's lobbies.

Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* plays a pivotal role in understanding why, with the development of feminist and popular debate around "the woman question" (Caine 1997, 240), the postwar years saw rising ambivalence amongst feminists, not only towards domesticity but also towards consumerism. The historical context around the origins of *The Feminine Mystique* and the life of its author has, in recent years, become the focus of scholarly reevaluation and commentary. The interest is varied, and ranges from a questioning of the way in which this period has been sketched by Friedan as one which unequivocally furthered an ideology of domesticity, as Joanne Meyerowitz does (1993, 1994), to an investigation of the centrality in the book (and others of its time and kind) of the advocacy of the self-determining and self-focused female/feminist subject and the relationship between this and some recurring difficulties experienced within feminism as a political project, particularly around the home-work nexus, as Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd do (2004). Another angle is taken by Daniel Horowitz (1996, 1998, 2004), who has been particularly interested in Friedan's radical past and her role as one of the central figures of American Social Criticism of the 1950s and 1960s.[6] From Horowitz we learn that Friedan had an early critical interest in consumerism associated with her journalistic writing for college and trade union publications which focused on the plight of working-class women making ends meet in a society where the wealthy experienced full consumer citizenship and where marketers continuously tempted them with the wonderful products of modernity (1996, 7–15). It is clear that this facet of everyday life maintained its presence in Friedan's later work, like *The Feminine Mystique*. Like Horowitz, Mica Nava positioned this text as one of the most influential and radical critiques of consumerism in the postwar period, placing it on a par with Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964), and connecting it with domesticity, the suburban housewife, the critique of consumerism and McCarthyism (1987, 204–5). There has been yet, however, no real attempt to offer a comprehensive analysis of the thesis on consumerism found in Friedan's text, and to position this within the context of other feminist discourses at the time on 'the woman question', paid work, domesticity and consumerism. Doing so reveals how far Friedan's account was removed from the content of earlier argumentation, and of course, by featuring a prominent discourse on consumption, to those which followed.

CONSUMERISM AND THE 'WOMAN QUESTION'

Friedan's account starts with the emergent presence of a realization (or consciousness) that all is not well with women's existence in postwar America through "the problem that has no name". She sketches the roots of this problem as unrelated to any 'structural' factors, but as residing in the *feminine mystique,* which is best understood as the ideological and cultural dimensions

characterizing femininity at this time (68).[7] She continues by arguing that the feminine mystique is so powerful "that women grow up no longer knowing that they have the desires and capacities the mystique forbids" (68). She identifies two realms which support the mystique: firstly, academic perspectives on motherhood, the family and gendered identities in psychology, sociology and anthropology which operate in support of hegemonic ideas about the role and place of women in society; and, secondly, marketing and commercial cultural literature, like women's magazines. Crucial here are Friedan's elaborations in the chapter entitled "The Sexual Sell", which she starts with a quotation that reads like a conspiracy:

> There are certain facts in life so obvious and mundane that one never talks about them [. . . .] Why is it never said that the really crucial function, the really important role that women serve as housewives is *to buy more things for the house*? In all the talk of femininity and woman's role, one forgets that the real business of America is business. But the perpetuation of housewifery, the growth of the feminine mystique, makes sense (and dollars) when one realises that women are the chief customers of American business. Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that women will buy more things if they are kept in the underused, nameless-yearning, energy-to-get-rid-of state of being housewives. (206–7; emphasis in original)

After rejecting the idea that American business conspires to "keep" women in the "their place", Friedan offers an analysis of marketing research and magazines.

One of the characterizing features of Friedan's critique of women's magazines and domestic products is the way she concentrates on production, product and marketing stories. For example, she offers an account on apparent changes in editorial staffing of women's magazines after the Second World War, and uses this to 'explain' the changes in magazine content (45). Absent, however, is an analysis of the ways magazines are read and 'used' by its female readership, though there is an underlying intimation that magazine content matters to the way in which women conduct their lives. The same applies to her account of domestic products. "The Sexual Sell" is essentially an offering of a temporally specific body of marketing know-how, rather than an analysis of the postwar housewife consumer, and the ways in which new domestic commodities were appropriated or rejected by them. In all of this Friedan moves, almost imperceptibly, between discussions of the recommendations women receive on how to conduct their everyday lives and their purported practices and experiences. So, whilst "experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training, . . . how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, . . . how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting" (15), we also read

how "many women no longer left their homes, except to shop, chauffeur their children, or attend a social engagement with their husbands" (17). Also noteworthy is Friedan's operationalization of a discursive strategy which offers a seamless interweaving, right from the start, of housewifery, domesticity, consumerism, recommendation and reality. The perfect housewife was, amongst other things, a mother, wife, chauffeur, model of female beauty/beautification and also a fervent consumer. Like domesticity and the 'meaningless' jobs older women were now accepting in the postwar economy, consumerism was sketched as a problem. It certainly did not enhance or even facilitate, but rather stood in the way of women recognizing their 'human intelligence and energy', which Friedan argued needed to be "used for some higher purpose than housework and thing-buying" (232). Without doubt, *The Feminine Mystique* sketches consumerism as one of the worst possible interests a woman could have.

Friedan's contempt for consumer culture, and the discursive strategies she uses to sustain her onslaught on consumerism and domesticity stand out more clearly when her arguments are contrasted with Myrdal and Klein's *Women's Two Roles*. Published seven years prior to Friedan's text, one of the interesting aspects about these two publications is the exact similarity in the way they frame 'the woman problem'. Myrdal and Klein's notion of "feminine discontent" (10) is similar to Friedan's "problem with no name". The notion of the discontented housewife is introduced early in their argument and they return to it. In both accounts we find the argument that change is needed at an ideological level, and like Friedan, Myrdal and Klein worry about the impact ideological formulations of femininity and domesticity characteristic of the period have on women. Unlike Friedan, however, Myrdal and Klein's notion of domesticity encapsulates two worrying domestic ideals: those of the hardworking housewife and the Lady of Leisure:

> There is on the one hand the domestic virtues with the fragrance of freshly baked bread every day, together with the statistics showing a fourteen- to sixteen-hour working day. But there are also the costly cults of the lily-white hands, of the lavish entertaining, and of the changing one's highly fashionable clothes oftener and oftener—the much advertised dreams of all that goes with being 'well provided for' once one is married. (5–6)

Myrdal and Klein draw on a longer historical time frame in their discussion of the prominence of domesticity than Friedan, who is keen to locate it in postwar developments. Like Friedan, we find a scepticism of consumerism in Myrdal and Klein's work when they imply that women's magazines operate as discursive vehicles which "distort our attempts at rational thinking" (4). This is seen as particularly problematic for young women as it presents them "with a thoroughly false picture of the practical choice they have to

make for their lives" (6). Whilst Myrdal and Klein share with Friedan a scepticism of the role of popular media texts, this is apparent only through anecdotal observations which are not further substantiated. Friedan may be criticized for doing this more consistently, but it does illustrate not only the authors' awareness of the social criticism of consumerism at the time, but also their partial agreement with it.

However, Myrdal and Klein do not allow themselves to be drawn completely into the cultural criticism of consumer culture, and they appear to disconnect the consumerism that feeds women's dreams from the more practical aspects of domestic consumption. From the perspective of their content on consumerism, this is where the two texts are markedly different. Myrdal and Klein develop an argument which posits that domestic products potentially further the quest for greater freedom in the ways in which women can fill in their lives. This argument is part of a wider one, which recognizes not only that women are a diverse group of people whose priorities in life cannot easily be interpreted as being the same, but they also take women's paid employment seriously, regardless of whether it concerns the professional career of an educated middle-class woman or the low-skilled job of a middle-aged working-class woman. More so than *The Feminine Mystique*, *Women's Two Roles* is illustrative of the centrality of married women's paid employment in 'the woman question' of the time. For Mydal and Klein, the problem was how to deal with the remaining obstructions that stood in the way of women's ability to combine home and work life. Friedan, on the other hand, appears to appeal to the 'higher' goal of self-realization through worthy activities, and fails to recognize (or rejects) the fact that because of their diversity, women may not all share the same priorities in life. Of interest here is how little Friedan has to say on the phenomenon of rising employment rates amongst married women, apart from belittling what she saw as a move towards work-for-money-for-consumerism; a trend which she described as other-directed rather than facilitating the development of the self (15).

One of the important differences between these two texts is thus that Myrdal and Klein remained optimistic about the potential offered by domestic products and, as discussed at the end of the book, showed some enthusiasm for exploring commercial ways of organizing home and childcare. Whether this enthusiasm waned somewhat over the course of the decade between the first and the second edition of the book, which appeared in 1968, is debatable. In the "Preface to the Second Edition", Myrdal lists the factors which had contributed towards the expansion of married women's employment and comments on the interrelatedness of this trend to developments in consumer culture:

> Our highly industrialized society is geared to the ever-growing production of a vast range of consumer goods, most of which help to simplify domestic management. At the same time, they act as a spur for married

> women to seek gainful employment in order to increase the family income and be able to purchase these consumer goods. In this way, our economic system has, by its own momentum, set into motion a spiral effect: More household gadgets set more women free for employment, and more wives in paid employment increase the need—and provide the cash—for more and better domestic appliances. The pressures of mass production and competitive advertising have created a situation in which the employment of married women is, for large sectors of the population, the key to share in the much publicized 'affluence' of our society, and the conditions of the labour market are such that jobs of one kind or another are not difficult to find. (xi)

Whilst adhering to their earlier position, that "the vast range of consumer goods" were mostly helpful in the management of domestic life and work, they also purvey a sense of the contradictions around the rise of women's employment rates associated with the promises of affluence. However, the contents of the book did not change markedly between 1956 and 1968, and the theme of consumerism, which was not explored in great detail in the first edition, did not receive further attention in the second edition.

SOCIAL CRITICISM AND THE INVISIBILITY OF DIVERSITY

In *English Feminism 1780–1980* (1997), Barbara Caine asks whether the instances of 'women's activism' during the early postwar years may be interpreted as feminism, and she points out that, in relation to the radical nature of the women's liberation movement which took off in the late 1960s, it is hard to appreciate the earlier activities as feminist. The early postwar years are thus characterized by a measured version of feminism, one that did not seriously challenge the culturally prominent patterns of women's existence in society or the underlying social relations that gave rise to them. Caine argues that *Women's Two Roles* is an example of this considered version of feminism. So whilst Myrdal and Klein are argued to have been "unusual in their insistence on the importance of women working and combining family life with a career [. . .] they adopted what became a familiar tone in their assumption that women themselves were the problem, because they were now emancipated and hence could choose their own path" (247). They are therefore criticized for their limited questioning of the conditions of women's existence even though the book "inaugurated a new phase in the discussion of women" (248). Because her focus was on English feminism, Caine did not discuss Friedan's book. Had she done so, she would have concurred that *The Feminine Mystique* incorporated the same basic framework utilized in *Women's Two Roles,* and she may have concluded, as did others, that Friedan's work was anything but radical.[8] Unlike Myrdal and Klein, however, prominent in Friedan's account was

the critique of consumer culture and the "familiar trope of modernity in which the modern self leaves behind the banality or everydayness of home life" (Johnson and Lloyd 14–15). Read in this way, *The Feminine Mystique* offers a link to the work which Caine connects with the rise of the women's liberation movement in the UK, symbolized by the work of Juliet Mitchell and Sheila Rowbotham, and which she characterizes as more radical in the way it conceived of the 'woman problem'. Of interest here is her observation that these texts sought to find an explanation for the structural basis of gender differences and inequalities in Karl Marx's writings, as this positions feminist radicalism within leftist radicalism, and explains the rise of socialist or Marxist feminism in the 1970s.

Friedan's 'brand' of feminism has traditionally been contrasted with this, something symbolised by the emergent title of liberal feminism during the 1970s. Yet, Horowitz (1996, 1998, 2004) and Joanne Boucher (2003) have recently made a case for Friedan's clear radical leftist origins. Horowitz (1996) argues that Friedan's radical background and the manner in which the political culture of 1950s McCarthyism transformed the language and focus of the left are evident in *The Feminine Mystique*. He suggests that this has been overlooked in traditional feminist interpretations of the text; something which has been exacerbated by the fact that Friedan herself has persistently sketched an autobiography that obscured and downplayed her radical past. One obvious interpretation of this sequestration of experience was that in *The Feminine Mystique*, she pictured herself as a white suburban middle-class housewife who had direct experience with the feminine mystique. Whilst I find much of Horowitz's analysis insightful, I wish to take up one facet of his argument. This is his unquestioned agreement with the earlier feminist conclusion that, because of its focus on affluence and the white suburban experience, *The Feminine Mystique* was not only *about* but also *for* white suburban middle-class women. The book was, in fact, criticized for its middle-class bias right from the start.[9] But the reception and early interpretation of Friedan's book must not be confused with the author's intentions. It is no doubt true that Friedan researched middle-class women's lives. She conducted research with educated middle-class women living the life of housewife in American suburbs. She also spoke with college girls (presumed to be white and middle-class). The two quotations she used to illustrate that the feminine mystique affected women "of all kinds" were derived from another source (28).[10] However, the white suburban middle-class woman in Friedan's story operates most prominently as an image; an image which Friedan rouses women of *all* kinds to fight against.

> The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American woman and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. The American housewife—freed by science and labour-saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth, and the illnesses of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only

> about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfilment. As a housewife and mother, she was respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world. She was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever dreamed of. (18)

Though Friedan's argument is that most American women aspired to attain that image of 'perfect femininity' or the 'perfect housewife', the political gist of her story lies in her spurring women on to achieve a reality for themselves that rejects this image. In fact, Friedan warned women that the feminine mystique was at its most severe in women who seemed to have attained the ideal. The realization of excessive material desires was called upon to reiterate this 'fact':

> The women who suffer this problem have a hunger that food cannot fill. It persists in women whose husbands are struggling interns and law clerks, or prosperous doctors and lawyers; in wives of workers and executives who make $5,000 a year or $50,000. It is not caused by lack of material advantages; it may not even be felt by women preoccupied with desperate problems of hunger, poverty, or illness. And women who think it will be solved by more money, a bigger house, a second car, moving to a better suburb, often discover it gets worse. (26)

Calling upon women of all kinds to avoid the temptations of affluence and its incessant consumerism, Friedan's account could thus be read as a story for *all* women to avoid the trap of the mystique; an ideology which found its closest approximation in the lives of well-to-do white suburban middle-class women. Contrary to the common interpretation, *The Feminine Mystique* is a warning also, and perhaps especially, directed at working-class women, with its empirical research understandably focused on the group of women whose lives came closest to, and best illustrated the detrimental effects of the mystique.

This alternative interpretation of *The Feminine Mystique* does not necessarily move Friedan away from her earlier socialism or her interest in working-class women, as argued by Horowitz (1996, 39). In fact, *The Feminine Mystique* serves as an excellent example of the difficulties faced by left-wing thinkers in the postwar era to respond in a constructive manner to the promises of affluence. This is evidenced by the broad-brush theoretical propositions forwarded in the critique of consumerism alongside a methodology that avoided an analysis of 'the consumer' in preference for an analysis of the 'content' of products and marketing discourses. As argued by Lawrence Black (2002) and Dolly Smith Wilson (2006), the consequence of this was that New Left politics came to be out of sync with where working-class people were at, especially working-class women.

> The bulk of existing evidence demonstrates that women voters in the 1950s found the Conservative message more appealing and credible than Labour's. Carolyn Steedman attributed her working-class mother's affinity for the Conservatives to the Tory message that wanting the products of affluence was reasonable and moral behaviour. During this time, many in the Labour Party and the left, fearful of moral decay associated with affluence, seemed to imply that it was somehow betraying the revolution to want a washing machine. (Smith Wilson 23)

For working-class women, consumer citizenship seemed finally in their grasp, and leftist middle class commentators were not going to influence their drive, through participation in consumerism, towards making life that 'little bit better' (Giles 2004; 2007). I contend, therefore, that one radical reading of *The Feminine Mystique* was never accomplished because it was addressed at working-class women, who did not 'buy' the book's anticonsumerism. By contrast, consumerism had become inherently problematic by the 1970s, and along with the ideal image of the suburban middle-class housewife and domesticity, it was thrown out of the feminist bathwater. The long-term consequence has been that developments in consumer culture have not been theorized within feminism as part of women's everyday reality, resulting in an absence of a critical analysis that links an appraisal of 'the production of consumption' not only with its consequences on domestic and intimate life, but also with the diverse meanings inherent in consumption practices for women of different social and cultural backgrounds at specific temporal and spatial conjunctures.

FEMINISM AND CONSUMERISM

The focus in this chapter has been on Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique;* a text written by an American feminist and social critic, whose strength lay in writing a book which became tremendously popular. Friedan was not only from a somewhat younger generation than Myrdal, although not Klein, she was also American and showed an immediate interest in radical theory and politics when undertaking her university education in wartime America. Yet when these authors came to write their seminal texts on 'the woman problem', the basic framework around which they built their accounts was similar. Apart from the obvious point that Myrdal and Klein wrote a scholarly appraisal while Friedan wrote a book that appealed to a more popular audience, the main difference in these two texts centres around the social criticism Friedan utilised to buttress an analysis that ultimately posited domesticity and consumerism as averse to women's interests. Friedan's text was a 'call for action' and discursively glossed over major variations between women as a rhetorical device to take home this message. The story, which this chapter has started to unfold, about

the temporally specific advance of the antagonism between consumerism and feminism, should continue. Friedan was part of postwar American left-wing thinking; positioned at a specific cultural and political conjuncture in America's postwar history, and that ultimately culminated in the New Left.[11] British early second wave feminists Juliet Mitchell and Sheila Rowbotham were inspired by the British New Left. It remains to be seen how the radical political developments in these two cultures related to each other, and how they connected with academic criticism of culture and consumption. Yet, in the early writings of these feminists (Mitchell 1966, 1971; Rowbotham 1969), there are no references to the social criticism of consumerism. Friedan's critique of consumer culture was replaced by complete silence in later feminist writings.

This chapter has presented feminism as a set of discourses, the contents of which change over time. It has become possible to treat some much revered feminist texts as historical and cultural documents that lend themselves to questions such as what it is that makes some feminist stories more popular, prominent and dominant than others. In essence, this has been the concern of feminist inquiries like that of Joanne Hollows (2007) and Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd (2004), when they have considered why it is that Friedan's version of feminist practice as 'out-of-home-centred' has won over the 'home-life-is-valuable' type discourse also evident in feminist debates. As such, *The Feminine Mystique* and *Women's Two Roles* can be shown to be culturally, politically and temporally specific texts. My other concern has been with how specific feminist interpretations, like that found on domesticity and consumerism in *The Feminine Mystique,* have come to be so enduring or, to use Nava's words, how they have become a "convention" (1987, 209) which, even now, is located in an unquestioned manner, in feminist texts like that of Hochschild (2003). It is clear that feminist scholarship was divided across disciplinary domains almost from the start, limiting the kind of questions that may be asked. As a consequence of the downplaying of the significance of domesticity and consumerism in early texts, we first see silence, followed by a divide arising, where the 'important' issues of women's liberation are translated into a social science that does not engage with the themes of pleasure, fantasy and consumerism. It is time that these strands of feminist endeavour move more closely to those where such themes have been subject to discussion. It is clear, for instance, that capitalism could and has expanded since the 1960s, not by supporting and reproducing the home-based housewife, as Friedan claimed, but by getting her into paid work. With more household members in paid work, new avenues have opened up for the expansion of commerce into the intimate life of the family and the household. Arguably, one of the unintended consequences of feminism's simultaneous neglect of the topic of consumerism and the devaluation of domestic practice has been the advance of domestic commercialization. If this story about the silencing of consumer culture has made a point, it must be that it is useful for examining and reflecting upon such enduring feminist

'values', and for recognizing that aspects of life which are morally suspect must not be treated as irrelevant to scholarly interest and inquiry.

NOTES

1. As examples of this work, see Hester Eisenstein (2005), Judy Giles (2004), Arlie Russell Hochschild (2003), Joanne Hollows (2007), Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd (2004), Joanne Meyeritz (1993, 1994) and Linda Scott (2005).
2. Hochschild would here probably use unpaid domestic labour rather than domestic practice, a concept which I prefer because it challenges the notion that domestic practice is necessarily about work, and that, importantly, work, leisure activities, other activities and consumption overlap in domestic life.
3. See, for example, Susan Porter Benson (1988) on saleswomen in American department stores, William Leach (1984) on how the meeting rooms in departments stores were used as meeting places for suffragists, Margaret Finnegan (1999) on how marketing tactics of the new retailing were used in suffragist struggles and Matthew Hilton (2002, 2003) for an account of how consumerism provided a political focus for working class women and female activists.
4. For more on this, see Caitriona Beaumont (2000).
5. See Nancy Tomes (1998) for a discussion of germs in consumer life, Janice Rutherford (2003) for more on the notion of efficiency in housework, Judy Giles (2004) for an exploration of class, gender and domesticity at this period, and Lydia Martens and Sue Scott (2005) for a reading of the interconnections between domestic practices and products in *Good Housekeeping*.
6. American Social Criticism arose during the cold war years, and is associated for instance with the writings of David Riesman and Vance Packard. It has been described as the reformulation of communist-inspired leftist discourses in the context of McCarthyism (Horowitz 2004).
7. All page references to *The Feminine Mystique* refer to the 1963 edition.
8. See Sandra Dijkstra (1980) as an example of this.
9. For instance, see Jo Freeman (1973).
10. A footnote mentions Lee Rainwater *et al*.'s *Working-man's Wife* (1959).
11. The author wishes to thank Daniel Horowitz for pointing out that Friedan was not, in fact, part of America's New Left.

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3 "I Am Not a Housewife, but . . ."
Postfeminism and the Revival of Domesticity

Stéphanie Genz

> [I have] duties to myself . . . I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being just as you are—or, at all events, that I must try and become one.
>
> —Nora, *A Doll's House*

When *Cosmopolitan* magazine announced in its June 2000 issue that young twenty-something women had become the new "housewife wannabes", the relationship between domesticity and female/feminist emancipation seemed to have been turned on its head (Dutton 164). While for the last century women had fought to expose the oppression and subjugation inherent in their domestic subject positions and bring about a consciousness-raising 'click' moment, now it appeared that they were eager to reembrace the title of housewife and rediscover the joys and crafts of a 'new femininity'. Suddenly, domesticity became the buzzword of the new millennium and housewives, fictional and real, were emerging in all areas, determined to regain entry into their doll's house that, not forty years ago, they seemed to have left for good. From Nigella Lawson whipping up tasty treats on TV (and simultaneously managing to look infinitely glamorous) to Brenda Barnes famously giving up her job as president of Pepsi-Cola North America (and with this, her $2 million annual salary) to spend more time with her three children,[1] there was no denying that domesticity was experiencing a comeback, a twenty-first-century renaissance. Critics from all arenas were keen to comment on this cultural trend: while 'new traditionalist' politicians and journalists were welcoming this reaffirmation of family values, feminist critics denounced this retro-boom as a 'backlash' that returns women to the subordinate roles of a bygone, prefeminist era. Indeed, domesticity has reappeared as a fiercely debated concept in both popular culture and feminist criticism, proving that the meaning of 'home' is far from being domesticated and remains unresolved despite sustained attempts (from feminist, political and media quarters alike) to settle it.[2]

This chapter puts forward an alternative critical frame to interpret the revival of domesticity and the figure of the housewife: postfeminism. It contends that postfeminism offers a new mode of conceptualizing the domestic as a contested space of female subjectivity where women/feminists actively

grapple with opposing cultural constructions of the housewife. In particular, a postfeminist lens allows us to transcend a critical impasse (trapped by a dualistic logic) and reinterpret the homemaker as a polysemic character caught in a struggle between tradition and modernity, past and present. The postfeminist housewife is no longer easily categorized as an emblem of female oppression but she renegotiates and resignifies her domestic/feminine position, deliberately choosing to 'go home'.[3] As I will argue, postfeminism undermines static constructions of the housewife by reclaiming domestic femininity as a site of undecidability, of meaning in question. It is more challenging and rewarding to resist analytical convenience that looks for immutable definitions (or 'truths') about domesticity/femininity; instead, our critical efforts should be focused on the contingent and shifting relationships between women and the home—a venture that is made all the more difficult by how contemporary domestic femininities have been bent into configurations that intertwine positive and empowering elements with destructive, misogynist ones. The figure of the housewife is inscribed with multifarious significations, vacillating between patriarchal scripts of enforced domesticity and postfeminist reappropriations that acknowledge agency and self-determination. My intention is not to argue the case of postfeminist housewifery as either a new utopia or the trap of nostalgia,[4] but is to discover a postfeminist liminality that "moves us from the exclusionary logic of either/or to the inclusionary logic of both/and" (Rutland 74). It is less a choice between retro- and neo-femininity (and feminism) than an endeavour to examine the ambiguities inherent in a post-position.[5] It is in this in-between space that the potentialities and intricacies of the postfeminist housewife are revealed.

In what follows, I use the term 'postfemininity' to depict the contradictions surrounding modern-day femininity/domesticity and its complicated interactions with feminism and postfeminism. I deliberately choose to enlist the double-edged and often denigrated post- prefix in my discussion in order to bring attention to the multiple layers of meaning of the feminine conundrum. Postfemininity is not 'new' in the sense that it no longer bears any resemblance to previously acceptable and culturally dominant forms of feminine behaviour and appearance; nor is it an old-fashioned, retrograde reembrace of phallocentric femininity. By contrast, postfemininity carries echoes of past, present and future femininities—in much the same way that postfeminism encapsulates a range of possible relations that indicate both a dependence on and an independence from feminism. Postfemininity marks an important shift in our critical understanding that challenges us to rethink issues that still remain unresolved: Does femininity always entail victimization? Can feminism and femininity coexist? Can femininity be described as a feminist subject position? While a detailed elaboration and answer to these important questions is beyond the scope of this chapter, I here elucidate some characteristics of a postfeminine stance that accommodates the possibility of a '(post)feminist housewife'.

The place of the housewife in the history of feminism is a contentious one. Betty Friedan was instrumental in the exposure of the "happy housewife myth" that traps women as helpless prisoners in a "comfortable concentration camp" (or, the 1950s family) that uses "the pretty lie of the feminine mystique" to enact a denigration into "genteel nothingness" (245; 180; 89). Friedan's emotive and powerful language brought to light women's institutionalized subjugation and manipulation that deceived them into believing that "the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfilment of their own femininity" (38). The housewife in particular was singled out by Friedan as the epitome of female non-identity and passivity, a perfect illustration of patriarchal constructions of Woman as an apathetic, dependent and purposeless being: "I am convinced there is something about the housewife state itself that is dangerous. In a sense that is not as far-fetched as it sounds, the women who 'adjust' as housewives . . . are in as much danger as the millions who walked to their own death in the concentration camps" (264–65). *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) sparked a cultural revolution by foregrounding a domestic dystopia and soon, numerous feminist critics joined Friedan in uncovering and naming a supposedly nameless problem. For Germaine Greer, the housewife is no more than a "permanent employee" whose life is "not real": it is "anachronistic", "thwarting" and plainly pointless as it "has no results", "it simply has to be done again" (272; 312). Greer condemns the life of the full-time housewife as one of absolute servitude, turning women into "the most oppressed class of life-contracted unpaid workers, for whom slaves is not too melodramatic a description" (369). Once again, however, we are presented with what Susan Bordo calls "the feminist 'anti-thesis'" that applies an oppressor/oppressed model according to which "women are the *done to,* not the *doers*" (22; emphasis in original). This not only relies on a vision of a gender war between an evil patriarchy and a sisterhood of female victims but it also creates a dichotomy between private and public spheres, between the downtrodden housewife and the feminist revolutionary. Even more importantly, this binary logic also denies domesticity a place in the changing landscape of modernity and progress. The housewife statically remains in her old-fashioned, homely prison, unable to take part in the gender developments and transformations of a rapidly changing world. In this sense, a woman's domestic place and housewife status can only evolve in one possible way or direction, in that they are to be left for good: once her consciousness has been raised by a feminist awakening, she should be immune to the feminine mystique and resist its deceptively "protective shade" (Friedan 208).

Slaves, prisoners, schizophrenics or, even more dehumanizing, robots—these labels have been branded on the housewife by second-wave feminist critics, writers and filmmakers to the extent that now, it seems, the home has become an almost 'guilty' pleasure for some women. Without doubt, the antidomestic stance was an important and necessary phase in Western feminist history and politics as it uncovered the widespread subjugation and

entrapment suffered by the vast majority of women. The housewife emerged from these critiques as an instantly identifiable figure that epitomizes everything that is wrong with patriarchy. At the same time, this positioning of the housewife as a patriarchal object and victim meant that she became exempt from any feminist approval or appreciation as she was seen simplistically and one-sidedly as a nonfeminist. While there is no denying that the housewife was and remains a pillar of patriarchal control, I maintain that her relationship with feminism has to be reassessed in order to open up the realm of possibility that has been withheld from her. My point is not to provide housewifery with a radically new meaning that wipes out its previous significations of drudgery and confinement; in a sense, invent a neo-femininity that constructs a new domestic dream of female self-actualization. These subordinating elements relentlessly continue to haunt and restrict the female homemaker, reflecting her lack of power and social status. What I argue for is a reinterpretation of the housewife as a flexible feminist subject that is liable to change and eligible for innovation and progress. The 'unhappy housewife myth' now has to be demythologized in order to keep women from objectifying and pathologizing their domestic personas. In an uncanny echoing of feminist fears of denial and backlash, the contemporary homemaker is loath to admit her existence: "I'm not a housewife, but . . .". Countering fears of housewifely stultification and brainwashing, I want to underline the fact that domestic femininity encompasses a diverse spectrum of ways of being and living that need to be reexamined in (post)feminist terms.

POSTFEMININITY

Of course, to adopt a postfeminist frame of analysis is easier said than done. To start, the term postfeminism itself throws up so many riddles that a simple definition has proven to be elusive: backlash, Girl Power, 'do-me' feminism, poststructuralist feminism—the list of postfeminism's meanings keeps getting longer, with proponents as well as detractors wrangling and vying for their respective take on how a 'post-ing' of feminism can be effected and understood. What these debates centre on is exactly what this prefixation of feminism accomplishes (if anything), what happens to feminist perspectives and goals in the process and what the strange hybrid of 'post-feminism' entails. I choose to leave out the hyphen in my spelling of postfeminism in order to avoid any predetermined readings of the term that imply a semantic rift between feminism and postfeminism, instantly casting the latter as a negation and sabotage of the former. My own usage and understanding of postfeminism are less motivated by an attempt to determine and fix its meaning than by an effort to acknowledge its plurality and liminality. In this sense, the problem is not so much to choose between the various appropriations of postfeminism than it is to adopt a postfeminist framework that transcends binary divisions and allows for multiple

interpretations and resignifications.[6] Postfeminism is both retro- and neo- in its outlook and hence irrevocably post-.[7] It is neither a simple rebirth of feminism nor a straightforward abortion (excuse the imagery) but a complex resignification that harbours within itself the threat of backlash as well as the potential for innovation. This double movement is at the root of the difficulty of attributing *a* meaning to postfeminism and containing it within a definitional straightjacket; a futile endeavour in my view that ultimately serves only as a critical shortcut.[8] Regardless of how the term has been (ab)used, postfeminism's changeable life indicates a move away from binaries, including the dualistic patterns of (male) power and (female) victimization on which much feminist thought and politics are built.[9] Thus, postfeminism does not refer to a denial (or worse, death) of feminism but to an altered stage of gendered conflicts and transformations, a diversification of feminist issues that women face in a postfeminist age. As Rhonda Wilcox has recently put it, postfeminism denotes a cultural moment "after feminism has started, not after it has ended" (44).

To place domestic femininity and the housewife in such a postfeminist frame has a number of advantages: it both keeps intact feminism's critique of domesticity without foreclosing other significations and possibilities of renewal and loosens women's historic connections with *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* without breaking those ties completely, instead exposing the tensions between domesticity and feminism, home and work, tradition and modernity. In *Micro-Politics* (1994), Patricia Mann argues for the existence of a postfeminist "cultural frontier" that "bring[s] us to the edge of what we know, and encourage[s] us to go beyond" (208). Mann succinctly points out that living on the postfeminist border has become an unavoidable reality for most women:

> We may be described, without undue exaggeration, as operating within a tangle of motivations, responsibilities, rewards, and forms of recognition unmoored from traditional male and female, public and private identities. Given the chaotic state of individual motivations and responsibilities in this scenario, it may be wholely unrealistic to expect anyone to worry very much about establishing firm social identities—feminist, feminine, maternal, or otherwise. (115)

Once we have been propelled onto this frontier, there is no going back to previously stable and uncontested gender 'truths'. The housewife is caught up in this array of relationships and tensions within both domestic and public arenas, renegotiating her place in a changed social context. I suggest that we 'unsettle' femininity by pushing it over the postfeminist edge and I put forward the term postfemininity to highlight the challenges and paradoxes of a postfeminist femininity/domesticity that can no longer be conceptualized along a sharp split between feminism and housewifery, agency and victimization, work and family life.[10] This is

to acknowledge that femininity is changeable and can operate in a variety of ways, acquiring a range of different meanings that have come to the fore in our postfeminist present.[11] Post-ing femininity (like post-ing feminism) thus involves a certain amount of rethinking, not a reversal of well-established dualisms, but a process of resignification that threatens to reinscribe what it also transposes.

Postfemininity remains difficult to pin down and critics have often given in to the analytical temptation to retreat to a safe binary order that differentiates housewives from feminists, mothers from career women, domesticity from paid work.[12] Detractors often detect a veiled attack on feminism that hides behind the deceptively stylish façade of professional TV homemakers and domestic goddesses (most recently incarnated by the impossibly groomed but nonetheless desperate housewives of Wisteria Lane). Susan Faludi for example dismisses the renewed interest in the housewife as a conservative backlash that packages domesticity in feminist activist rhetoric (77). This is concomitant with "new traditionalist" discourse that articulates a vision of the home to which women have freely chosen to return (Probyn 152). New traditionalism centralises women's apparently fully knowledgeable choice to abstain from paid work in favour of family values. The domestic sphere is rebranded as a domain of female autonomy and independence, far removed from its previous connotations of drudgery and confinement. In *The Meaning of Wife* (2004), Anne Kingston comments on this romanticization of domesticity that lures the housewife into a dream of "mystique chic": "Increasingly, housework—an endeavour reviled for decades as drudgery, as the source of women's psychiatric problems, as the very root of female oppression—was presented as both fashionable and, even more perversely, a surefire route to female satisfaction. Call it mystique chic. Call it the ultimate backlash to *The Feminine Mystique*" (65). Kingston explores how in a chiastic reversal of the home/work dichotomy, domesticity has been mythicized into an Edenic space of fulfilment and freedom from the shackles of working life. Whereas work outside the home is now an inevitable economic requirement for most women, 'homework' has become the sanctuary of a few privileged, financially secure housewives. This refuge from the workplace is at best a nostalgic illusion and at worst a ruse to return women to "the same kind of idealized domesticity that, ironically, had given rise to the twentieth-century feminist movement in the first place" (102). These doubts and critiques are often justified and reinforced by contemporary writers and filmmakers who struggle to depict a postfeminine/postfeminist stance and instead present us with a number of compromises.

DOMESTIC POSTFEMININITY

In the aptly entitled *Having It All* (1991), Maeve Haran describes a wife's dilemma to reconcile the conflicting demands of public and private life,

"reveal[ing] everything we won't admit about being a working woman" (cover page). The main character, "high-flying executive" Liz Ward, finds herself "torn in two" and "pulled two ways" in her effort to personify "the classic nineties woman" who has "a glittering career *and* kids", a "brilliant degree", a "job in TV" and a "handsome husband" (1; 176; 70; 3; 96; emphasis in original). Having been appointed "the most powerful woman in television", the "first woman Programme Controller of any major TV company in the UK", Liz is determined "to show not simply that a woman could do it, but that a woman could do it brilliantly" (9; 31). However, in the pursuit of her professional ambition, she realizes that she has lost touch with "the things that really matter" as her "obsession with work" causes her to neglect her domestic responsibilities and duty to care for her husband and children (118; 32). Liz has also been remiss about her femininity and physical attractiveness and, by "playing men's rules" to advance her career, she has effectively "become like them" and "taken on their aggressiveness and their competitiveness" (225). While fighting "tooth and nail to be treated the same as men" and join their "club", Liz has deviated from her "natural" path as a wife and mother, denying that she "belong[s] to another species" and is essentially and fundamentally different from men (75; 6). Confronted with her husband's unfaithfulness and her own feminine failure, Liz has to reassess her priorities and admit that she cannot "have it all" but has to make a choice between "success and happiness" (80): "it was time to tell the truth. That women had been sold a pup. Having It All was a myth, a con, a dangerous lie. Of course you could have a career and a family. But there was one little detail the gurus of feminism forgot to mention: the cost to you if you did" (53).

In this novel, rather than improving and alleviating women's personal and social station, the feminist movement has placed them on double duty at home and work, saddling them with both female and male burdens. In a nostalgic search for a simpler life, Liz chooses to become a "mommy-tracker", leave her urban surroundings—"the whole melting pot of crime and dirt, greed and tension"—and settle in a "lovely, peaceful" rural idyll, "almost chocolate box in its beauty" (73; 195; 197). The novel is intent on depicting her "return home" as a quasi-feminist act: Liz "dares to be a housewife", despite her husband's assertion that he does not "want a wife at home", he "want[s] an equal . . . a woman who's her own person with her own life" (224; 177). After leaving her doubtful husband, the newly single Liz surrenders to "the joys of home-making . . . guiltily, as though she were taking a lover" (213). In this scenario, the domestic realm is redefined as an "enjoyable" environment, far removed from "the drudgery she'd gone to any lengths to avoid" (212). As a conscious and supposedly empowering lifestyle choice, this modern haven of "security and comfort" ends up seducing Liz's husband and luring him back to his wife and children (241). The novel integrates feminist ideas of social enfranchisement in a domestic tale as Liz decides to reenter the career path on a part-time basis and alongside her

husband as the Managing Directors of the employment agency "Woman-Power" whose motto is particularly appropriate: "half a woman is the best man for the job" (431). The dichotomy between women's private and public desires is resolved by this part-time solution that allows Liz to have the best of both worlds and enjoy "a life in balance" (539). As Liz notes, "Being at home *part* of the time gave a spice to working, and working made the time off seem all the more precious" (417; emphasis in original).

Family and job are described as congruous and reconcilable life components that complement each other in a symbiotic alliance. Reunited with her husband, Liz optimistically proclaims that "perhaps together anything *would* be possible": she could "have it all" and fulfil her dream of "a life where I had enough work to keep my brain alive, and enough space to enjoy my children, and fun, and sex, and food, and love . . . and gardening" (559; 453; emphasis in original). In this utopian vision, modern woman has achieved a compromise between her feminine and feminist personas, between professional and personal happiness. This resolution relies on a romantic egalitarian fantasy where men and women jointly abandon their excessive career ambitions in favour of an all-embracing partnership. Liz's short-lived spell as a single mother is portrayed as a necessary period of confusion during which wife and husband renegotiate the boundaries between work and family and then, reenter their stable and newly equilibrated relationship. Although Haran advocates the extension of women's qualities from the private to the public sphere, she also naturalizes their domestic role and reifies traditional notions that women's most important work is at home. As Liz notes, she "needed to work" but "never again would she put her career before her family" (347). Haran's endorsement of a part-time settlement of the feminist/feminine, public/private dilemma understates women's economic and social pressures that might prohibit such an equilibrium. "Having it all" is qualified and downgraded to "having it part-time", allowing privileged women to avoid the conflicts between professional and private fulfilment and providing a personalized answer that might not be relevant or achievable for the vast majority of working women.

A similar scenario is replayed in a number of narratives, with slight variations depending on the heroine's familial situation. In Allison Pearson's bestselling *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2002), protagonist Kate Reddy spends her time agonizing over her life as a working mother and her own failure to live up to the high, apple-pie-baking standards of the "Muffia—the powerful, stay-at-home cabal of organised mums" (50). In her own mind, Kate is constantly called before the "Court of Motherhood" that enumerates her shortcomings and chastizes her for the satisfaction she gains from her job as a fund manager. In "the grey survival zone" between work and home, she is taken to almost breaking point: "When I wasn't at work, I had to be a mother; when I wasn't being a mother, I owed it to work to be at work. Time off for myself felt like stealing" (104). Kate's cynicism for "equal opportunities" legislations—"Doesn't make it better; just

drives the misogyny underground" (124)—and her frustration with feminist idealism—"Back in the Seventies, when they were fighting for women's rights, what did they think equal opportunities meant: that women would be entitled to spend as little time with their kids as men do?" (273)—ultimately drive her to resign from her job and become one of "the domestic Disappeared" (176). Although the epilogue ("What Kate Did Next") points towards a potential compromise between job and motherhood (in this case, an opportunity for a global doll's house business), the underlying message is clear: high-flying women will have to be brought down one way or another as a successful businesswoman *and* successful housewife/mother remains a postfeminist conundrum.

As Imelda Whelehan has recently discussed, "mumlit" (the 'grown-up' version of chick lit where the singleton settles down and has children) is characterized by a particularly "anguished" tone as the heroines encounter a set of new, more serious, problems posed by the demands of their long-term relationships and their transition to parenthood (196). While such novels are successful at highlighting the limits placed on women and their unresolved struggles between workplace and home, they also show "depressingly, that there is no solution to the work/motherhood dilemma" (195–6). Pierson's novel is a case in point: Kate might find an individual solution to the conflicts of working motherhood but her recipe for resolution is ultimately conservative and utopian: drop out of the rat race, escape to the country and work from home. As Joanne Hollows notes, this "downshifting narrative" abandons urban in favour of rural femininities and promises the achievement of a "work-life balance" through geographical relocation (108). Obviously, this proposed change of lifestyle is not readily available to everyone and the rural idyll remains out of reach for the majority of city-dwelling mothers. As such, the downshifting narrative is "profoundly classed" and "thoroughly commodified" centring around "choices for those who inhabit specific middle-class femininities" (110–11). The restrictedness/restrictiveness of this move to the country is is reinforced symbolically by Kate's final choice of business as she ends up perpetuating the domestic dream, potentially indoctrinating a new generation of girls and confining them to the respectable confines of their doll's houses.

If guilt is not the right lever, then nostalgia will convince the working woman that home is where her heart should be. This is what drives Sophie Kinsella's heroine Samantha out of the courtroom and into the kitchen. *The Undomestic Goddess* (2005) depicts the domestication of a high-powered lawyer who 'downshifts' by fleeing her city job—interestingly portrayed as an abusive partner, "a bad relationship" (112)—for the "freedom" of being a housekeeper in the Cotswolds. Initially uneducated in the arts of cooking and cleaning, she is soon initiated into this secret world by "a cooking witch", the mother of Samantha's love interest Nathaniel. Samantha experiences this domestic realm as a revelation that transforms her "old conventional, monochrome" persona into a more colourful (that

is, blonder) and feminine self, "a new me. A me with possibilities" (162; 163). The novel does not engage in the home/work debate and is careful to avoid any standpoint that could be politicized. "What about feminism?" a journalist asks after Samantha's double life (a housekeeper with a degree from Cambridge and an IQ of 158!) has sparked a public tabloid discussion on "The Price of Success". "I'm not telling women anything", she replies, "I'm just leading my own life . . . I don't want to be a role model" (318; 326); tellingly the only openly and undeniably feminist figure in the novel is Samantha's mother, a successful lawyer who disapproves of housewives and unapologetically puts her career before her family. The solution sits well with a neo-liberal individualism that gives primacy to 'choice' ahead of all other political dictums. Samantha's final farewell to her city friend Guy is a telling example: "Don't define me! I'm not a lawyer! I'm a *person*" (361; emphasis in original). Yet, her desire for "a simpler life" (334), like "the Waltons" (329), cannot escape a smack of nostalgia that puts into question this conversion to domesticity.

Here the domestic is being held up as a rural fantasy that Samantha has unjustly and unnaturally been kept away from by her supposedly superior academic education and feminist enlightenment. As the media furore caused by the exposure of Samantha's double life demonstrates, in today's society 'being *only* a housewife' is no longer acceptable and, for a highly trained, successful professional, it is an unthinkable, forbidden pleasure. Samantha's voluntary domesticity is not only an anachronism but also an affront to her own mother and decades of feminist struggles. In this sense, the character's domestication can clearly be read in terms of a generational conflict that pits the domineering feminist mother against her rebellious postfeminist daughter. A model of a 1980s Superwoman, Samantha's mother is depicted stereotypically as a career-focused workaholic and strident feminist who is thoroughly antidomestic ("She disapproves of women taking the name of their husband. She also disapproves of women staying at home, cooking, cleaning, or learning to type, and thinks all women should earn more than their husbands because they're naturally brighter". [32]). She has no qualms about missing her daughter's birthday and her only maternal advice consists of a capitalist battle cry: "You have to be better than the others" (34). Samantha repudiates the values handed down from the feminist motherhood in favour of a long repressed domestic dream, a nostalgic site ruled by individual fantasy rather than collective reality. We are shown, yet again, that 'something's gotta give' in women's public/private predicament and in case of doubt, female ambition should always be directed towards hearth and heart.

THE POSTFEMINIST HOUSEWIFE

Perhaps it is not fiction then that we should be looking at in our search for a postfeminist housewife. On screen and in print, her biggest shortcoming

always seems to be her inability to come to terms with her chaotic situation and the impossibility of embodying work and home personae to perfection. The answer thus lies not in an attempt to fight and resolve the chaos that torments so many fictional heroines but in an acknowledgement of the latter as the starting point for an examination of the cultural contradictions that women face in a postfeminist age. We cannot limit our discussions of domestic femininities to a dualistic dilemma between home and work where popular culture champions the first half of the binary while feminism supports the second. The connections between domesticity, feminism and popular culture have to be understood in more dynamic terms where all three sites act (and mutually recognize themselves) as areas of change that inform one another. Moreover, we need to get away from laments about women's dividedness towards a recognition of their contradictory and chaotic wholeness. As regards the relationship between the domestic, feminism and femininity, we could start by abolishing the image of the self-sacrificing housewife who likes nothing better than baking pies and polishing floors. For most, housewifery will never have any utopian or dream-like quality but simply be a routine part of our lives. However, this does not imply that being a housewife has to be confined to a singular, unvarying meaning. As Jean Railla emphasizes in her "Crafty Manifesto" on her "feminist home economics" website (getcrafty.com): "Being crafty means living consciously and refusing to be defined by narrow labels and categories. It's about embracing life as complicated and complex, and out of this chaos constructing identities, which are feminist and domestic, masculine and feminine, strong and weak" (par. 23). The route to this new domesticity cannot be uncovered by approaching the housewife as a problem that demands an *either/or* answer and forces us to take sides.[13] To see the housewife through a multifaceted postfeminist lens is thus a challenge facing critics, writers as well as home makers in the twenty-first century. The housewife has to become again an object of enquiry that needs new ways of seeing and living. The task then is to rethink domestic femininity itself and analyse its various resignifications without resorting to predetermined definitions and demarcations. The key to postfeminist domesticity can be found in the myriad ways women deploy in their daily lives to negotiate their place in contemporary society. Postfemininity is not a fiction but an everyday reality.

NOTES

1. Barnes' parting line that she "didn't want to miss another birthday party" has often been quoted by new traditionalists who see the workplace as a source of female frustration and uphold the joys of home and motherhood as an antidote to work-related stresses (qtd. in Kingston 96).
2. In this way, the concept of domesticity plays a central part in the 'feminism and/in popular culture' debates that seek to understand the complex interconnections between the two sites and the viability of the term 'popular

feminism'. What makes the contemporary focus on domestic identities so equivocal and even contradictory is that feminism is now part of the cultural field and its meanings are increasingly mediated, to the extent that, as Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley note, "most people become conscious of feminism through the way it is represented in popular culture" (2).

3. Notions of 'choice' have become increasingly problematic in postfeminist rhetoric where on the one hand they resonate with an individualist perspective (politically aligned with the 'enterprising subject' demanded by neoliberalism) that emphasises empowerment and personal freedom whereas on the other, 'choice' has also been presented as a burden that makes women's lives more complicated and anxious. The question of how much 'free choice' women have needs to be examined and differentiated by issues of class, 'race', ethnicity, sexuality and status that all, to a varying degree, interpellate them as subjects.
4. For more on domestic nostalgia, see Stephanie Coontz (1992) who argues that the 'happy' 1950s household is a cover-up that is neither traditional nor accurate.
5. Linda Hutcheon discusses the paradox of the "Post Position" that signals "its contradictory dependence on and independence from that which preceded it. . . . It marks neither a simple and radical break from it nor a straightforward continuity with it; it is both and neither" (17).
6. Following Judith Butler, meaning can never be fully secured because "signification is not a founding act" (145) but a site of contest and revision that accommodates the possibility of resignification, a citational slippage or deviation that creates new and unanticipated meanings. The notion of resignifiability is important for my understanding of postfeminism and the housewife as it opens up the process of meaning construction and allows for multiplicity and polysemy without foreclosing any interpretations.
7. See Rotislav Kocourek (1996) for more the programmatic indeterminacy of the prefix post- in contemporary English terminology.
8. Postfeminism's "philosophical positioning of 'both at once'" (Harris 19) aligns it politically with New Labour's 'Third Way' that steers a middle course between right and left ideologies. For more on this politicised interpretation of postfeminism, see my essay on the topic (2006).
9. In this sense, postfeminism brings into question "the foundationalist frame in which feminism as an identity politics has been articulated" (Butler 148). As Butler notes, "The identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics . . . simultaneously work to limit and constrain in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up" (147).
10. For more on the relationship between postfemininity and postfeminism, see my *Postfemininities in Popular Culture* (2009).
11. Of course, the ways in which femininity signifies depend to a large extent on personal, social and cultural contexts, in particular issues of age, class, sexuality and ethnicity.
12. One particularly pertinent example of this withdrawal is the 'Mummy Wars' that are fought out in the media between stay-at-home mums and working mothers. The January 2007 edition of *Marie Claire* pointedly puts forward the question in its review article "Modern Mothers: Who's Doing It Best?" While the article mainly discusses privileged women who can afford to choose between staying at home and going out to work (such as Calista Flockhart and Vanessa Paradis), it also makes the important point that for most mothers, work is an unavoidable economic necessity: "There's a very narrow band of upper-middle class women who exercise choice. The rest of us simply try to make the best of it" (Moore 242).

13. This deconstruction of domesticity will necessarily also involve a restructuring of work, including changing the definition of what an "ideal worker" is. Joan Williams argues for a shift in feminist strategy that eliminates the ideal-worker norm and moves away from the "full-commodification model" that privileges market work over family work. Williams' goal is a "reconstructive feminism" (or "family humanism") that no longer separates home and work but instead reflects family values and "the norm of parental care" (85).

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Part II

Figures of Domestic Femininity

4 Shall I Be Mother?

Motherhood and Domesticity in Popular Culture

Wendy Parkins

The August 2005 edition of American *Vogue* carried a cover article on Madonna, entitled "Like a Duchess", describing her blissful family life in England and featuring Madonna's 1,000-acre estate, Ashcombe, on the Wiltshire/Dorset border, the place she now sees as "home" (Bowles 230).[1] Recounting her fondness for long walks on the estate in "sensible walking shoes" and her solicitude for the flocks of pheasants, partridges and chickens that populate the grounds, Madonna enthused that Ashcombe was a "bowl of comfort" and "a kind of buffer against the world" (230). To illustrate this she was variously photographed romping with her children and in tweeds on horseback (with husband Guy Ritchie as groom). The most striking photograph in this glossy spread depicted Madonna in Grace Kelly mode (chiffon cocktail dress with matching cashmere cardigan, pearls and high heels), framed against the gracious architecture and verdant rolling lawns of her estate, (implausibly) feeding the chickens. The recent retro-raunch of her disco queen persona had—at least temporarily—been replaced with the gracious living of this apparently contented and thoroughly domesticated wife and mother.[2] In this latest reinvention of herself, Madonna had, it seemed, 'downshifted'. But what does it mean that this mistress of the postmodern zeitgeist had now embraced downshifting? And what is the significance of the emphasis on motherhood and marriage in this representation of the rural idyll? In this chapter, I consider representations of motherhood and domesticity in popular culture which I argue represent attempts to resolve the dilemma of 'work-life balance' for women in a postfeminist era.[3] Focusing primarily on two recent popular novels of the mommylit subgenre—Allison Pearson's *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2002) and Danielle Crittenden's *Amanda Bright @ Home* (2003)—I will consider how, in these texts, full-time motherhood is contradictorily depicted as both a means of feminine self-fulfilment and a "sacrificial moral vocation" (Quiney 20) through the narrative resolution of downshifting, the answer to work-life balance.

UNBALANCED MOTHERS

While the "radical incommensurability of home and work" in everyday life has entered mainstream political agendas, it is a problem that seems especially to resonate with women (Talbot 11–12). Although increasingly cloaked in gender-neutral terms—as Angela McRobbie has argued, the word "woman" has recently been excised from political vocabularies and policies "in favour of the need for 'work-life balance'" (130, n. 2)—managing family and domestic commitments has traditionally been a feminine concern, regardless of women's employment status. Contemporary popular culture offers a surfeit of imaginary solutions to this problem of an unbalanced life, such as lifestyle TV programmes and media feature-stories on downshifting. Downshifting can be broadly defined as a voluntary, long-term change in lifestyle, involving a conscious decision to work fewer hours in paid employment outside the home, usually with the concomitant choice to consume less, and deriving from a desire to have more time for self and significant others. Contrary to the widespread myth of downshifting—that is, "selling up in the city and shifting to the countryside to live a life closer to nature"—most downshifters stay put in the suburbs, integrating downshifting into their existing, albeit modified, everyday lives (Hamilton vii).[4] Statistically, however, downshifting is a gendered phenomenon: women are more likely than men to complain about the fast pace of life (Shaw 132), and hence more likely to downshift (Hamilton vii). So an image of Madonna and chickens can seem as appealing (and unobtainable) as more traditional celebrity images of urban chic and opulence: each represents a desired lifestyle from which the ordinary messiness of the everyday has been expunged.

In the article that accompanied the images of country life in *Vogue,* moreover, Madonna renounced the "selfishness" of her life before marriage and motherhood, espousing the virtues of simple pleasures like watching her children sleep as a sign of true fulfilment and altruistic commitment (230). Such sentiments associate Madonna with another aspect of the gendering of downshifting, in which a retreat to so-called 'full-time motherhood' is seen as a means of resolving the work-life balance dilemma. While Madonna of course continues to pursue her public career through recording and concert tours, the imaginary spaces of a magazine feature can invoke the possibility of a balanced life in which there is time for solitary nature walks as well as lively play with one's children, away from the conflicting demands of the public sphere. It is not difficult to see the appeal of such images: in the UK, around half of women with children under five are now in paid employment (Clouting and Moorhead par. 2); in the US, 64 per cent of mothers have some form of paid employment (Warner 22); and in Australia, 62 per cent of couples with dependent children have both partners in paid employment (Sullivan par. 14). Rather than such realities leading to a widespread acceptance of mothers in paid employment and a

concomitant public commitment to supporting working families, however, popular media often present a different story. The past few years have seen a steady drip of media articles on high-profile women in executive positions leaving their jobs to spend more time with their children.[5] In New Zealand, a recent study picked up for media attention has shown an alarming discrepancy between approval for working wives and working mothers.[6] The increasingly vocal articulation of the benefits of full-time motherhood for women as well as children is also evidenced by voluntary organizations like the London-based *Full Time Mothers* which defines a full-time mother as "a mother who sees it as her personal duty and responsibility to organize her time around her children's emotional and physical needs" ("Time for Parenting", par. 1)

As is implicit in the rhetoric of *Full Time Mothers,* in the embattled everyday realities of work-life (im)balance women are often pitted against each other. Intractable debates about the intensification of work culture or the decline of community resources tend to be reduced to "ask[ing] whether stay-at-home moms think they frost their cupcakes more expertly than working moms [. . .] or whether working mothers think stay-at-home moms are stupid", as Miriam Peskowitz wryly observes (6). The so-called 'Mommy Wars' (a term that serves simultaneously to inflame and trivialize conflicts over parenting and work life), as played out in newspaper articles and popular nonfiction, fundamentally relies on the construction of two diametrically-opposed camps of mothers: those in and outside the paid workforce.[7] What is often overlooked in such media-fostered maternal death-matches, however, is that both sides (assuming for the moment there are only two) often share an assumption about women's right to choose which is articulated as deriving from feminism. While it may not be surprising to see women who are committed to professional career paths associate this life narrative with a feminist-inflected concept of autonomy, 'full-time' mothers who have relinquished career for parenting may also articulate 'choice' feminism as justification for their lifestyle. In the process, however, stay-at-home mothers also often distance themselves from a second wave feminism which they understand to have punitively limited women's choices by condemning the domestic as inauthentic.[8] Such rhetorical manoeuvres by both groups reflect a postfeminist context in which, as Elspeth Probyn has argued, women's everyday lives are increasingly negotiated within "conflicting discourses of choice" (282). In the name-calling of 'part-time mothers' and 'housewives', and the conflicting claims to feminism attributed to each faction, however, the crucial binary is that of selfish/self-less women (Warner 145).[9] Relinquishing career for parenting as a solution to maternal guilt, exhaustion and/or 'mommy track' careers, positions mothers as selfless, and by implication constructs career women with children as selfish but the concept of self at the heart of both of these labels remains uninterrogated. If 'work' is always shorthand for 'paid work' in these debates about work-life balance,

'life' seems to be equated—and conflated—with motherhood, as if the self is comprised solely of modes of parenting and/or labouring.

A 'choice' between self-less or selfish mothering, then, leaves little room for self. Balancing work and life seems premised on a disavowal of a female self defined *neither* by employment *nor* motherhood. At the beginning of the second wave, however, the quest for self, understood primarily in terms of autonomy and fulfilment, was named 'liberation' which it was argued would become possible when women identified the problem with no name. The problem did not remain unnamed for long; Betty Friedan's narrative made it clear that it was suburban motherhood and housewifery. In this context, women's liberation seemed to signify an escape from this mode of life to an unspecified alternative life (although it could be presumed that career would be a significant component). By 1981, however, Friedan was at pains to stress that feminism was not antifamily, as she reminded readers of *The Second Stage* (1981) that:

> All the years I was working on *The Feminine Mystique,* I would blithely stop writing when my little daughter came home from school, or my boys were in a Little League or basketball game, or to make a martini when my husband got home, fix dinner, argue, go to the movies, make love [. . . .]—the stuff of family life. (46)

In this revisionary account, the woman who formerly identified with housewives who had "a strange feeling of desperation" (1963, 21) has become the mother who blithely sidelined her own projects and interests when domestic duties (including martinis and sex) called. Friedan's picture of this kind of 'can-do' femininity effectively erased the powerful imagery of the blighted lives of suburban mothers she had described in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and situates feminine accomplishment in precisely the kind of task-juggling that contemporary critics of both the "motherhood religion" (Warner 132) and the "Taylorizing of family life" (Eriksen 132) associate with a diminished quality of life for women and their families.[10]

In the early 1990s, Ann Snitow lamented that "a more elusive discussion of what choice might mean if there were really two imaginable lives for women—with and without children" was already fading from feminist discourse (33). Into this vacuum came the genre of mommylit as an attempt to prise apart the confining options of contemporary women's lives by exploring fictional versions of possibility. The novel form, with its detailed attention to the development of subjectivity, could potentially present female readers with a mode of self (and motherhood) that was not defined by either solipsism or martyrdom. Like its little sister chicklit, mommylit could give women readers the opportunity to explore and confront (albeit in a light, humorous vein) a range of contemporary dilemmas of work, sexuality, parenting and domesticity in everyday life.[11] While both chicklit and mommylit are premised on a fantasy representation of women's contemporary

experience, the two popular genres marked a continued bifurcation of "imaginable lives for women"; each was squarely aimed at respective target audiences whose lives or aspirations were assumed to correspond to either the singleton lifestyle or the domestic chaos of the heroines. If the tone of mommylit was potentially darker than chicklit, due to the intractability of domestic struggles (Whelehan 196), chicklit's focus on female desire was also a significant difference in the two subgenres. From its emphasis on sexual desire, romance and relationships, to its loving descriptions of conspicuous consumption, chicklit encompassed "a wider desire to have all one's cravings fulfilled" (Whelehan 195). Mommylit, on the other hand, reduces women's desires to one: the desire to be a good mother. It is this desire that provides the narrative impetus, the cause of conflicts as well as the means to resolving them, and effectively asserts the primacy of good mothering over all else. The difficulties of parenting, career and relationships in mommylit novels tend to be resolved by the heroine finally realizing that her children come first and hence abandoning her "commitment to [her] own self-advancement" (Whelehan 195).

MY MOMMYLIT, MY SELF

Examining representations of the maternal self in the fictional conflicts between career and motherhood in mommylit reveals how the female self as subject of desire tends to be effaced. Through their focus on the heroine, these texts simultaneously reinforce the individual as centre of agency (fathers/husbands are peripheral in these texts) while also paradoxically stressing a self-less model of motherhood which requires sacrifice and relinquishment of a quest for transcendence. Rather than seeing such conflicts as simply about career or motherhood, they could be seen as disguised explorations of a *desire* with no name in contemporary popular culture; the desire for a self beyond motherhood or career. This desire may be represented through fictional scenarios of women's retreat from the obstacles of contemporary life which paradoxically reinforce "norms of female responsibility for domestic harmony" (Veltman 122). As a result, mommylit novels can best be understood in relation to an ongoing—if problematic—engagement and dialogue between forms of feminism, past and present, and a feminine popular culture in which claims to autonomy by the mother-self continue to be contested. Despite mommylit novels "vividly depict[ing] the incompatibility of motherhood and work" in contemporary contexts (Whelehan 196), the resolutions they offer are premised on a nostalgic belief that the domestic space can restore a sense of balance and wholeness to the lives of mothers and their families that harks back to a (prefeminist?) separation of spheres. Rural retreat from the rigours and alienation of big city life is, then, not only an option for pop divas but a resolution in Pearson's *I Don't Know How She Does It* and Crittenden's *Amanda Bright @ Home*. In Pearson's novel,

for instance, the key to the heroine, Kate, overcoming her conflict between a City career, motherhood and marriage is to relinquish career and the heavily-mortgaged family home for a Derbyshire farmhouse. The semirural location metonymically represents what Mommy Wars debates do not: women's desire for time and space for the self. In our post-Romantic era, such desire can still be evoked through rural imagery with its connotations of peace and tranquillity, which seems to promise a slower mode of everyday life in which fulfilment, creativity, work and community can potentially coexist. As Joanne Hollows has argued, the textual fantasies of downshifting can be a means of "magically resolv[ing]" the problems of work-life balance for women through geographical relocation and the replacement of urban femininity with rural femininity (164).

Despite the disparate locations of the two heroines (London/Washington, work/home), then, Pearson's and Crittenden's novels share a nonurban setting as a conclusion, as well as other significant narrative similarities. Both heroines have a frenzied home life with small children; experience marriage tensions due to a lack of quality time and the clichéd misunderstandings of heterosexual relationships; and conclude with the restoration of family harmony in a new home. For both heroines, too, negative perceptions of their own motherhood skills are derived from constant comparison to other mothers in their social circle as well as to mythical notions of motherhood they fail to achieve. At the beginning of *I Don't Know How She Does It,* Kate is 'distressing' shop-bought mince pies so they will look home-made for her daughter to take to her school concert. The reason why she is doing this, as she explains to the reader, is that

> Before I was really old enough to understand what being a woman meant, I already understood that the world of women was divided in two: there were proper mothers, self-sacrificing bakers of apple pies and well-scrubbed invigilators of the twin tub, and there were the other sort. At the age of thirty-five, I know precisely which kind I am, and I suppose that's what I'm doing here in the small hours of the 13th December, hitting mince pies with a rolling pin till they look like something mother made. Women used to have time to make mince pies and had to fake orgasms. Now we can manage the orgasms, but we have to fake the mince pies. And they call this progress. (4–5)

The novel's opening, then, clearly positions Kate as a foot-soldier in the Mommy Wars and throughout the first-person narrative she struggles with the options of quitting her job and staying home or continuing her career which she sees as a choice between putting her children or herself first. The demands of work, which leave her no time for her family and permanently sleep-deprived, is further contrasted with her husband whose own work life is much more balanced (he has time to make pesto) and who is constantly urging his wife to slow down.

While Kate shares her husband's desire for a slower life, his practical suggestions to implement small changes infuriate her as unachievable; instead, she resorts to studying rural property guides in the bath:

> I picture myself wafting through a wood-panelled library where there would be freshly cut blossom in tall vases on the way to the country kitchen boasting a blend of traditional cupboards and up-to-the-minute appliances. Standing next to the Aga [. . .] I would write dates on the labels of the jelly made from apples picked from mature fruit trees in extensive gardens while my children played contentedly in the recessed nook upholstered in tasteful fabrics. (87–8)

Unable to reconcile her self-professed love for her job—"the synapse-snapping satisfaction of being good at it, of being in control when the rest of life seems such an awful mess" (18)—with her perceived inadequacies as a parent, Kate can only knowingly indulge in domestic goddess fantasies. What such a fantasy also reveals, however, is the absence (or superfluity?) of the husband/father from this idyll: the complete world is mother/children/house. Just as Kate feels her husband's sexual interest is just another demand on her depleted time and energy, so she does not see him as a full partner in parenting: "Emily and Ben need me [. . . .] Richard [. . .] is their playmate" (Pearson 175). Whatever his skills and enthusiasm, a father is not a substitute for a mother in *I Don't Know How She Does It*.

While for Kate, driven by career ambition, her greatest fear is becoming "One of the domestic disappeared [. . . .] women who lost themselves in their children and were never seen again" (176), Amanda Bright has already become such a statistic at the outset of Crittenden's novel. Having exercised her 'choice' to relinquish career for motherhood—much to her staunch, second wave feminist mother's disgust—"Of course feminism is about choice [. . . ,] It was just never about *this* choice" her mother tells her (Crittenden 28; emphasis in original)—Amanda realizes early in the novel that it was actually "[g]uilt [that] had driven her to leave her job" (28). Just as Amanda's resignation was more a reaction than an exercise of free will, so the crises which precipitate drastic changes in the Bright family are all externally imposed (such as her husband's sacking from the Department of Justice), as Amanda drifts apparently without agency into a third pregnancy. Now at home, Amanda feels "asphyxiated", powerless to de-clutter her once charming character house (1) in a clichéd conflation of feminine competence with domestic cleanliness. In both novels, in fact, the heroines are surrounded by obstacles in the form of family life. Images of living spaces cluttered by food scraps and all the detritus of small children—"Lego shrapnel over a wide area" (Pearson 354)—are repeatedly described throughout both novels. This clutter of everyday life in such "toy in the handbag" narratives (Whelehan 194) stands for an inability to keep domains of life separate—finding time and space for the self requires first

waiting till the family is asleep before clearing the bath of "the ducks and the wrecked galleon [and] the alphabet letters" (Pearson 33). The office day is interrupted by domestic emergencies or special events (sick children, school concerts) while life at home is frequently life on the move, in the form of school pick-ups and last-minute supermarket runs.

It is not surprising, then, that the 'happy endings' of both novels relocate their heroines to spacious surroundings and settlement on a human scale: a farmhouse on the edge of a Derbyshire market town in Kate's case, and a new house on a semirural housing development in Seattle in Amanda's.[12] In their respective new lives, both heroines will have space as well as time in which all the family can flourish, outside the constraints of industrial time.[13] Despite the fact that both heroines leave their urban social networks behind them for their 'fresh start', their nonurban relocations are presented as a reconnection to a (more) knowable community. Past and present can be reconciled, it seems, if one only leaves the big city behind. Amanda's barely-finished home—eco-sensitive and "with *no history whatsoever* [. . . .] a four-bedroom modern rambler set in an acre of woods" (Crittenden 310; emphasis added)—is as much a fantasy as Kate's bath-tub dream of a wood-panelled library. Like Kate's nostalgic (if ironic) fantasy of domestic harmony and serene femininity in middle England, Amanda's hopes for her new life are based on an imagined (and imaginary) past, when the West Coast represented a space in which settlers could leave behind their imperfect lives and start again. What such relocation in the form of personal retreat also signals, as Whelehan notes, is that the "contemporary answer to encountering such [everyday] obstacles is to find a very individual way around them, rather than rail against the system" (196). After the traumatic premature birth of her third child, for example, Amanda explicitly refutes her best friend's insistence that her daily struggles have a social or political dimension: "'This is not my cause,' Amanda had found herself saying to Liz one day, after the birth of Samantha, 'it's just my life'" (Crittenden 318).

Amanda's passivity—often emphasized through the third-person narration—is represented as a calm acceptance of the vicissitudes of family life, and is finally naturalized through a strained metaphor of Amanda as a tree:

> Perhaps all Amanda could really hope for was that someday, years from this moment, there would be many, many rings [like those of a sapling maturing into a tree], and when she looked back, she would be astounded at how sturdy she had grown. (Crittenden 319)

Intended to invoke the nurturing stability of a desired form of motherhood, 'mother-as-tree' not only denies agency to Amanda but indeed any ability to make sense of her life in the here-and-now. Interestingly, in another context, Adam Phillips has discussed the 'mother-as-tree' as signifying a very different understanding of women's desire in relation to motherhood.

Phillips relates a therapeutic session 'with a couple and their first child', who was now a toddler:

> [T]he mother was describing how frantic her son made her by his clinging. She couldn't go to the toilet, or go shopping, or do anything without his hanging on to her, wound round her legs. Her description evoked in me the image of *somebody running who was gradually being metamorphosed into a tree*. She could 'never', she said, 'have a moment to herself' he was always [. . .] 'in the way' [. . . .] [T]owards the end of the session the thought came into my mind, 'Where would she be going if her son was not in the way?' So I asked her, and she replied quite cheerfully, 'Oh, I wouldn't know where I was!' The [. . .] question then is: How are obstacles unconsciously constructed? And the [. . .] assertion is: The obstacle is used to conceal [. . .] the unconscious desire. If the child is always in the way—and parents and children may cooperate to ensure that this is the case—then the mother can never find out where she would be going if no one was in the way [. . . .] [T]he only way to discover your projects is to notice—to make conscious—what you reckon are obstacles [. . . .] *The desire does not reveal the obstacle, the obstacle reveals the desire*. And if only it was as simple as this we could say to our patients, or to ourselves, 'Tell me what your obstacles are, and I will tell you what you desire.' (85–6; emphasis added)

In the two mommylit novels discussed here, the obstacle to the desired form of parent-child relationship is career. Despite the varying work lives of each heroine, both experience an increasing disillusion with career (in Amanda's case, this has already taken place prior to the novel's opening) and the priority of mothering is taken for granted. Kate may love her job, and both heroines toy briefly with the idea of an extramarital affair to atone for the lack of sexual desire in their marriages, but ultimately the only desire that can be fully acknowledged is the desire of/as mother.

Marriage takes a back seat to the primary concern to be a good mother, as it is assumed that what truly unites the married couple is their shared commitment to their children's welfare. Following Phillips, however, if the obstacle reveals the desire, the question might be "what is the desire that the obstacle of the clinging child reveals in mothers' lives?" Perhaps the desire that cannot be acknowledged—other than through the persistence of the obstacle—is the desire for a self not equated or conflated with the maternal self. In Phillips' clinical anecdote, the obstacle has become a kind of anchoring for the mother, a means of foreclosing alternative lives or selves and the threatening dislocation such alternatives could pose ("I wouldn't know where I was!"). As work culture is increasingly critiqued, it may have become less problematic for women to repudiate the myth of corporate success as a form of feminine achievement and agency. Instead of this leading to a proliferation of options for women with educational and professional

opportunities, it has to some degree led to a reinvestment in motherhood among privileged, middle-class women, an immersion in what Judith Warner calls "the culture of total motherhood" (52). We need to ask, however, what else might women desire that cannot be accessed either through career *or* children? What is left out in pitting these two domains of life against each other, either as mutually-exclusive options which offer what each side lacks, or representing the promise of balance if we somehow combine both? And what if *both* of these are obstacles to this (unstated) desire?[14]

In an examination of what gets left out of discussions of maternal experience, Lauren Berlant describes "the theft of ordinary life" which mothers can neither acknowledge nor mourn (151). In this suggestive phrase, Berlant begins to gesture towards another domain or mode of life that may be overlooked in the heated contestations over the subject positions of mother or career woman. Such a mode of life could exist in those spaces—both literal and figurative—of everyday life, which the demands of a culturally-valorised form of motherhood or an accelerated work culture threaten to engulf. Practices of leisure, creativity, spirituality or other forms of connectedness and sociality not defined by family, profession or duty could offer the space for projects of self-development or self-preservation which are seldom associated with mothers. In an article which reinterprets Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism for a contemporary context, Andrea Veltman argues that "[t]he principal obstacle motherhood presents to the free pursuit of transcendence is not the care of children itself, which can allow for self-expression and the creation of new values, but the tendency of motherhood to relegate women to activities of immanence" (126). To contemporary feminist ears, Beauvoir's valuing of transcendence over immanence may sound just as dated and problematic as the 1960s concept of women's liberation. But we are still left with the problem of understanding the large numbers of professional, educated women who, as Hollows notes, "have fantasies about giving up their jobs to make jam" (99) while they indulge in the fantasy of reading about women who do. For Hollows, "the downshifting narrative tries to imagine something between feminism and 'traditional' femininity, [as] it tries to imagine a solution to the problem of inhabiting contemporary femininities" (111). In the case of representations of mothers, it is particularly difficult to find 'something *between*' demonized and idealized forms of motherhood, a space for a pleasurable everyday life for mothers. Is it the case, as Warner argues, that "[h]appiness has never ranked high as a feminist political goal" (54)? Or is it rather that feminism cannot offer a account of motherhood without reinstating either individualism or essential motherhood (DiQuinzio 243)? In the postfeminist context of mommylit, the solution has tended to be domestic motherhood as a panacea for both women and children. Unlike the fatalism that concludes *Amanda Bright @ Home, I Don't Know How She Does It* ends on a more conciliatory note, with Kate preparing for

a return to paid work on a more modest (and local as well as ethical) scale, but in both novels a retreat from the city is largely a retreat to the sanctuary of the family home, signalling the underlying conservatism of such novels (Whelehan 196).[15]

CONCLUSION

Women in the early twenty-first century are still struggling with the problem of how to disarticulate saucepans and children, as identified by Beauvoir, in both feminist discourse and everyday life: "Given that one can hardly tell women that washing up saucepans is their divine mission, they are told that bringing up children is their divine mission. But the way things are in this world, bringing up children has a great deal to do with washing up saucepans" (Schwarzer 114). The obstacles of family life—or family life as an obstacle—continue to offer a challenge to feminists to better address women's desires for an enhanced experience of everyday life and to intervene in the "deeply contested cultural space" surrounding maternal subjectivity (Quiney 20). In their examination of feminism and the housewife, Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd argued that the success of *The Feminine Mystique* in the 1960s lay in the fact that it presented a linear narrative that seemed to resolve the conflicts between work life and family life for modern women by providing a biographical solution to structural problems (14). Contemporary mommylit seems to depict a similar trajectory but does not, like Friedan's text, propose remaking the feminist self as a self-determining, reflexive subject. Rather, these novels propose a solution in which the heroine reinvests herself in the home as a metonym of a reaffirmed motherhood. This conflation of home, motherhood and children, while obviously reactionary in some ways, also suggests, as Johnson and Lloyd argue, that we might need to begin with a greater acknowledgement of the place of domesticity in forms of social critique (160). Apart from fantasy destinations and resolutions of the obstacles of family life offered in popular culture, we are yet to discover, paraphrasing Adam Phillips, where mothers would be going if no one were in the way.

NOTES

1. I am very grateful for the insights and suggestions offered by Rachel Bowlby and the editors of this volume.
2. The emphasis on Madonna as mother has recently been reinforced by her very public (and controversial) adoption of a Malawian baby.
3. I follow Charlotte Brunsdon's deployment of the term 'post-feminism' to describe a historically-specific set of understandings of femininity and women's roles that developed from the 1980s onwards (101).
4. This myth of downshifting is perpetuated by escapist travel memoirs like Frances Mayes' *Under the Tuscan Sun* (1996) and TV programmes like

Escape to the Country (2002–). It is worth noting that many of the protagonists are women, suggesting the key audience appeal and identification in such downshifting narratives.

5. In the US, 20 per cent of those who have featured in *Fortune* magazine's list of most powerful women have since left their jobs, most citing the need for a better home life (O'Kelly par. 10). In the UK, Ann Grafton (creative director of Colefax and Fowler), Lisa Gordon (corporate development director of Chrysalis) and Helen Liddell (Secretary of State for Scotland) all received media attention on resigning their jobs which focused on family commitments as an important factor.
6. A Massey University study indicated that 83 per cent of respondents approved of married women working full-time before they had children but only 2 per cent approved of full-time work for mothers of preschool-age children (Anon. par. 1–2).
7. Coined in the late 1980s, the 'Mommy Wars' has since become a recurrent term used in popular media to describe divergent positions on child-rearing and work/family issues, with particular currency since the turn of the twenty-first century. Leslie Morgan Steiner's *Mommy Wars* (2006) led to media frenzy on the topic—not surprisingly, given its inflammatory subtitle: *Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families*.
8. On this point, see Ann Snitow (1992) on motherhood, Elspeth Probyn (1993) on the notion of choice and Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd (2004) on the domestic and the housewife.
9. For an examination of the historical conflation of selfishness and feminism since the 1970s, see Imogen Tyler (2007).
10. Friedan's formulation retains currency in recent analyses of the Mommy Wars. Judith Warner adapts Friedan's concept of the feminine mystique as the 'Mommy Mystique' to argue that "the private monologues that narrate our inner lives have remained to a large degree the same" (40). Miriam Peskowitz explicitly identifies the "problem without a name" as "women's frustrations with mothering" (5), thereby conflating housewife/mother.
11. In some cases, popular novels include elements of both chicklit and mommylit, as characters transition from one phase of life to another, or single childless characters are juxtaposed with mothers. See, for example, Jane Green's *Babyville* (2003).
12. Before mommylit, the backlash movie *Baby Boom* (1987), starring Diane Keaton, represented a similar narrative retreat from corporate urban life to a rural idyll of fulfilment and motherhood.
13. For a discussion of the ways in which 'family time' is often understood as opposed to or outside 'industrial time', see Jenny Shaw (2001).
14. In focusing on the kinds of fantasy versions of middle-class life typically represented in mommylit, I do not mean to suggest that 'desires' and 'obstacles' deriving from motherhood are limited to this class, although the forms they take may of course be class (and income) specific.
15. In this way, mommylit can also be seen to be a close relative of another subgenre of popular fiction for women—the so-called Aga-Saga (associated with authors like Joanna Trollope)—in which the domestic is foregrounded and the narrative of the female protagonist takes place in a "fantasy of village life" (Philips 1996, 48, 49). The conclusion of *I Don't Know How She Does It* may also exemplify Deborah Borisoff's argument that success for mothers "now means the ability to work part-time and perhaps to pursue full-time work eventually that won't compromise their commitment at home" (2).

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5 The Husbandless Home

Domesticity and the Young Widow in the Contemporary Novel

Sarah Gamble

In August 2006, the *Observer Food Magazine* published the winning photograph in a competition organized in association with the organic food label Seeds of Change. Entitled "Widow in Her Kitchen", the black-and-white photo by Ikuko Tsuchiya depicted a solitary elderly lady sieving flour into a mixing bowl. It is an image that poignantly reproduces many of the stereotypes surrounding the cultural perception of the bereaved woman, implicit in the photographer's attached commentary:

> Mrs Hobbs is now living alone after her husband died last year. For her, cooking is one of the most important aspects of the healing process. So I wanted to create an image about the relationship between Mrs Hobbs and food preparation. . . . She was sifting flour for her baking, a task she has been performing for over 60 years. It has become part of her being.[1]

Here, the widow's recovery from her bereavement is linked to her reenactment of her domestic role. However, one of the elements that make this depiction so affecting is the implication that the practical purpose behind Mrs Hobbs' fulfilment of such tasks as cooking has been lost—for who besides herself will eat the cake she bakes? Indeed, the absence of the former recipient of the widow's domestic skills is heavily underscored by the inclusion at the edge of the photograph of a man's hat and coat hanging above an empty chair. "Widow in Her Kitchen" thus encodes some traditional assumptions concerning widows: that they are elderly women who survive in a shadowy existence in which they can conceive of no new identity for themselves that does not in some way point towards the fact of their husband's absence. For this widow, baking has "become part of her being": to stop doing it, even though there is now no longer anyone to cook for, would be to surrender her identity as a wife. So while the home is conceptualised as a place of recovery in this narrative of widowhood, it is also the site of profound grief.

Helena Znaniecki Lopata has spoken of the ambiguities of domestic spaces for widows:

> Dinner-time becomes particularly difficult for widows, since wives organize their work in anticipation of the scheduled arrival of husbands. The right to have someone within the home to help in the tasks of its maintenance, which forms another side of the duties of the role of wife, is disrupted by the death of the husband. Not only does widowhood deprive a woman of an object for her duties of cooking and cleaning, but it removes the individual with whom the rights to reciprical [sic] action had already been established. (1973, 69)

For Lopata, it is within the sphere of the domestic that the widow is exposed to the most acute sensations of loss; and contemporary accounts of widowhood indicate that this is the case even for women whose identity is not necessarily centred upon the maintenance of a home. At the time of writing this article, the weekly British women's magazine *Grazia* is featuring a regular column on a young woman's experience of widowhood written by journalist Samantha Warwick. Entitled "After Him . . . ", it is an intimate account of Warwick's adjustment to her bereavement following the death of her husband in a climbing accident. Although the author would not categorize herself as a 'housewife' (indeed, her professional status as a journalist is strongly emphasized), her narrative nevertheless reasserts that it is in the home that bereavement is experienced most keenly: "I went into the bedroom and that's when it happened. Rob's work shirts . . . hung up on his rail, sleeve next to sleeve, all ironed and ready to go. . . . The fabric even though now forever empty of him was still familiar to the touch" (Warwick, 151). The issue of *who* ironed the shirts is unimportant: such a passage nevertheless asserts that, even for the younger, contemporary women, an inextricable link exists between domesticity and widowhood. Yet this may be a problematic claim within such a context, indicating that, despite inhabiting a world supposedly reshaped by feminism, the widow remains conventionally defined through retrogressive definitions that persist in placing narratives of feminine loss within the home. No matter what her role outside it, therefore, in popular representations the widowed woman is persistently pulled back to very traditional notions of femininity. Is this the postfeminist backlash at work—or could it be that feminism has simply never formulated a revitalized definition of widowhood?

REDISCOVERING THE WIDOW IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

I do not wish to deny the emotional pain and experience of social and economic depravation that characterizes the state of widowhood for many women. But widows do not constitute a homogenous category, and I am arguing that the fictional works discussed within this chapter offer narratives that disrupt such conventional—and implicitly negative—representations of

the widowed woman in order to explore alternative ways of imagining her that are not necessarily dependent upon evocations of her defunct domestic role. Its primary focus is on two contemporary novels, both published in 2004, which use the widow in the role of romantic heroine; a part more often played in popular women's writing by the familiar (and by now rather timeworn) character of the unmarried 'singleton'. The widows in these novels are not elderly, but in early middle age at most, and thus their bereavement can be depicted as a prelude to new and different configurations of family and domesticity which are susceptible to feminist readings. This may be a somewhat surprising development within a culture in which the figure of the widow has more than a hint of the archaic about her. For what is to distinguish a widow now from the never-married and the divorced, both categories of society now far more numerous than she, and with whom she shares substantially the same privileges and problems? In contemporary Western culture, widowhood—particularly young widowhood—is a comparatively rare phenomenon: in the national census of 2001, only 12 per cent of the female population of Britain were identified as widows. This is the lowest level of widowhood in the whole of recorded history: for example, Alan Macfarlane maintains that "from medieval times to the mid nineteenth century, about half of those who married in their mid-twenties had lost their partner before they reached sixty" (qtd. in Chandler 15).

There are many reasons for this decline in the number of widowed women. Most obviously, improved public health and medical developments have increased the life expectancy of the general population—there is a good chance that, excluding accident and war, we will not die young. The result is that most modern discussion of widowhood links it inextricably with old age. In her book *Women Without Husbands,* for example, Joan Chandler acknowledges that "[i]n contemporary society, death of a spouse is associated with old age" (18), and on this basis goes on to assert that "the discussion of widowhood merges with the wider debate on the problems of caring for and supporting the elderly" (19). But this, of course, has not always been the case. In the nineteenth century, according to Joan Perkin, "[d]eath, rather than desertion or divorce, ended most marriages, and this was often when the partners were relatively young. For the period up to 1850 there are no official statistics, but in the second half of the century one in twelve women aged 35–44 were widows, as were one in three women aged 55–64" (132). Increased longevity and a decreased chance of losing one's husband while young unarguably represents a distinct improvement in women's lives, but the novelists whose work I am discussing here examine the pressures put on those who constitute the unlucky minority: pressures which in fact arise directly out of their minority status. Chandler has memorably described widows as "women tainted with the aura of death" (18), wrestling not only with the personal experience of bereavement, but also with a society that is increasingly wary of mortality. Just as graphically, Carol J. Barrett describes

them as "suffer[ing] because they are perceived to be carriers and transmitters of the reality of death" (856). Because widows, and particularly young widows, are now uncommon, they have lost any recognizable social role that ameliorates what they truly represent: the uncomfortable reminder of the inevitability of loss.

Lopata's claim that "there is no permanent role of widow in American society" (1996, 221) is also pertinent to Britain as well, since the mainstream cultures of neither country retain any prescribed set of rituals that exist in order to identify the widow to others—and, just as importantly, to define her to herself. This is a significant and relatively recent cultural shift, since for most of Western history widowhood has been clearly identifiable as a distinctive social role: one, moreover, based securely in the marital domestic space. In the nineteenth century, a period in which the cult of elaborate mourning reached unprecedented heights, it was possible to instantly recognize a widow from her social behaviour and her clothing. A respectable widow did not venture out into society at all for more than the first year of her mourning, and then reentered it only subject to strict codes regulating her dress and her conduct. Yet in the same era which saw the widow's role ritualized to almost fetishistic levels, a movement was gathering pace which was ultimately to contribute to her cultural invisibility. The first wave of the women's movement launched an influential attack upon the institution of marriage, resulting in a series of Parliamentary Acts which allowed women to keep personal property within marriage, and easier access to divorce.[2] Once it was perceived possible for women to have an identity and role outside of marriage, and to be no longer tragically redundant if she remained a spinster, the widow began to lose her singular and specific status. From the early twentieth century onwards, she was only to regain it in connection with particularly traumatic events—as a war widow, for instance[3]—or on an individual basis as the widow of a public figure. Such a shift demands the question of what role, if any, the figure of the widow has to play within feminist debates, for in many ways she recalls the very overidentification of women with marriage that feminism has consistently fought against.

Considered within such a context the widow appears anachronistic: for why cling to a posthumous identification with a dead husband when there is so much more for a woman to be and to do? Surely, no modern woman would even wish to be designated by a term which, as Sandra M. Gilbert describes, "comes from the Indo-European *widhwe,* meaning 'to be empty, to be separated,' to be 'divided,' 'destitute,' or 'lacking.' Death has entered the widow, this etymology implies, and she has entered death, for she is filled with vacancy and has dissolved into a void, a state of lack or non-being" (24–5). What is interesting, then, is that in so-called 'postfeminist' era the widow is reappearing as an object of representation within popular culture. Several novels featuring the young widow as central figure have appeared, including *PS, I Love You* by Cecelia Ahern and *The Space Between* by

Rachel Billington (both published in 2004), Joan Barfoot's *Luck* (2005), *Housewife Down* by Alison Penton Harper (2005) and Marian Keyes' *Anybody Out There?* (2006). In addition, the widow has been incarnated as a movie action heroine in *Flightplan* (2005), and as comic lead in such American TV dramas as *Desperate Housewives* (2004–) and *Weeds* (2005–). Furthermore, relinquishing her traditional position as cloistered in the silence of the household in mourning, she is increasingly speaking for herself. Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* and Sandra M. Gilbert's *Death's Door* were both published in 2006, and both combine social and cultural analysis with a deeply personal exploration of the authors' own experience of bereavement. Perhaps this reawakening of interest means that the widow can be thought of as a distinctively 'postfeminist' figure. Relatively ignored in feminist theory precisely because of her problematic ties to marriage and domesticity, she is being (re)discovered in a postfeminist age itself caught up in an exchange with patriarchy and feminism which is characterized by shifting patterns of contradiction and collusion.

The novels under discussion in this chapter, then, exemplify contemporary representations of widowhood that are clearly informed by current views regarding women's roles and rights, yet neither can be said to have a relationship with feminism which is in any way straightforward. Neither Lolly Winston nor Susie Boyt are classifiable as distinctively feminist authors: their novels are not published by feminist presses, and make no overt feminist statements. If anything, they fit within the broad category of the ideologically neutral middlebrow, and although there is indebtedness to feminism to be found in these novels, it is implicit rather than openly stated. Nevertheless, Winston's *Sophie's Bakery for the Broken Hearted* (2005) and Boyt's *Only Human* (2004) can be read as interceding within debates that seek to place the young widow within a contemporary context at least partially (in)formed by the influence of feminism. The nomenclature 'postfeminist', which itself is uneasily poised between denoting the demise of feminism and its continuation in a revised and reconsidered form, may therefore function as an appropriate classification for these works, which both use the widow as a device to reposition women within a domestic setting. While they are very different kinds of middlebrow novels—*Sophie's Bakery for the Broken Hearted* is light romance, *Only Human* a dense and static meditation on bereavement—their portrayals of the state of widowhood are remarkably similar. Both texts present it as a liminal condition which, in marking the ending of a relationship central to the life of each novel's widowed chief protagonist, also offers them the opportunity to begin a new, and different, existence. In struggling to come to terms with the loss of a husband, the widows in these novels come to reassess all aspects of their lives, and in particular the roles they play as wives, lovers, mothers and daughters.

This process is similar for both Winston's and Boyt's characters, even though they have lost their husband under different circumstances, and

are situated at different stages of the mourning process. In *Only Human,* Marjorie has been widowed for seventeen years following her husband's death in a traffic accident; which, one might think, differentiates her from the newly-widowed Sophie, the eponymous heroine of *Sophie's Bakery for the Broken Hearted,* who is adjusting to her single status having nursed her husband through the terminal stages of cancer. Yet the authors focus on similar themes—grief, the reconsolidation of existing relationships (particularly with other female figures in the family, such as daughters and mothers or mothers-in-law) and the forging of a new sexual identity. The relative youth of these characters—Sophie is thirty-six and Marjorie forty-two—make fresh romantic relationships a real possibility, if not a virtual certainty. In fact, neither of the books can resist following, to a greater or lesser extent, the trajectory of the romance plot, albeit in a modified form, as these women contemplate the reawakening of their sexuality after a celibate period of mourning. The results are texts that not only concentrate on examining personal trauma following bereavement, but also move to reconfigure the domestic and emotional spaces within which the widow is situated. Both Sophie and Marjorie end their novels having renegotiated their place within the home, both in terms of their actual domestic role, and also with regard to the familial relationships conducted within its walls.

In this investigation of widowhood, (post)feminism and domesticity, I use Rachel Bowlby's essay "Domestication", which seeks to deconstruct simplistic understandings of that term. Within second wave feminist discourse, she argues, domesticity is configured in negative terms, and the message that "[t]rue selfhood is attainable only by moving beyond the domestic, local, private boundaries" (78) is reiterated in both theory and representation. In response, Bowlby traces a variety of narratives of home and the domestic which do not necessarily replicate "the inside/outside opposition between home and world" (84) upon which feminist critiques depend. I find Bowlby's reappraisal of domesticity useful precisely because dominant cultural understandings of widowhood, as Tsuchiya's photograph demonstrates, are inextricably bound up with our cultural understandings of the home and women's place within it. But if, as Bowlby asserts, the domestic is not necessarily in a dichotomous (and from a feminist point of view, intrinsically antagonistic) relationship with the world 'outside', then new narratives of widowhood also become possible which free the widow from restrictive stereotypes that confine her to a static interior environment within which she mourns for the wife she once was.

THE WIDOW AS DOMESTIC GODDESS

I begin my analysis of the novels with the one that is not only the least challenging from a literary point of view, but which is also most directly

comparable with the stereotypical depiction of domestic widowhood I discussed at the beginning of this chapter—it is, after all, subtitled 'A Novel of Love, Grief and *Baking*' (emphasis added). What this novel offers the reader is a depiction of domesticity at its most comforting and conservative: what Bowlby terms a "narrative of nostalgia", in which "home is imagined as a place of peace, stability and satisfaction that has subsequently ceased to be; but also as a withdrawal or seclusion from a 'real' world envisaged as a source of the energy or the troubles or the mobility that are absent from the home" (76). Yet to dismiss this novel unthinkingly as 'chick lit'—a term which tends to carry pejorative force within a critical context—would be a misreading, as it nonetheless does attempt to evolve a more positive understanding of the widow as an active agent rather than as merely the passive subject of loss.

It is true that, whereas feminist novels of development would tend to construe 'liberation' as release from the domestic, *Sophie's Bakery for the Broken Hearted* proceeds in the opposite direction. Before her bereavement, Sophie is a professional woman, with a job as a public relations manager for a medical technology company based in Silicon Valley, but the loss of her husband Ethan acts as the catalyst for her redomestication. This is initially a defensive response triggered by shock and grief, in which barricading herself within the marital home constitutes a pathetically hopeless attempt to cling onto her prior role as wife. On her return from Ethan's memorial service, Sophie finds it impossible to separate the material solidity of her *house* from the ideal of *home,* which her husband's death has demolished: "I couldn't believe that the house was still *there*. How could the clocks tick? How could the air-conditioning run?" (98; emphasis in original). When she attempts to return to work she suffers a spectacular mental breakdown and is given an indefinite leave of absence, which allows her to adhere to her resolve not to "leave the house anymore" (60).

Subsequently, Sophie does 'move on' in the most literal of terms when she sells the marital home and relocates to Oregon, but although this marks the beginning of her emotional progression away from debilitating grief, it brings her closer to a very traditional ideal. Her new home is a perfect parody of the domestic: "a Queen Anne house painted a hopeful powder blue with white gingerbread trim and a picket fence surrounding the yard" (132). In spite of her doubt as to whether there can "be a nuclear family in my future without Ethan" (217), Sophie goes about assembling one: the teenage delinquent Crystal, and Sophie's mother-in-law Marion (who, suffering from progressive dementia, functions as a kind of second daughter) both eventually come to live with her, and she supports them by opening a bakery, which becomes a highly successful local business. Thus, Sophie's domestic ability is professionalised: it ceases to be "an interminable task with no lasting result or addition" (Bowlby 79), and becomes both public and profitable. In having her cake and eating it too (in both the literal and the metaphorical sense), Sophie dismantles the boundaries between public

and private, remunerative and nonremunerative forms of labour within a narrative that takes on the characteristics of what Joanne Hollows terms the 'downshifting' narrative, in which "[t]he pressure to 'have it all' and the problems of achieving a 'work-life balance' are magically resolved through the process of relocation" (108). But if *Sophie's Bakery for the Broken Hearted* thus implicitly resists the kind of feminist narrative in which home is merely something to be left behind, it also clearly seeks to avoid a return to an unreconstructed definition of the domestic. Sophie's widowhood opens the door to the kind of idealized homeliness drawn directly from the pages of *Martha Stewart's Living* magazine. However, the fact that she presides over an all-female domestic arrangement which she supports financially through her own endeavour indicates the way in which the book gropes for a resolution that does not wholly conform to the happily-ever-after paradigm of the romantic novel.

This oppositional, but not necessarily antagonistic, relationship with a female literary tradition of domestic representation replicates the generational dynamic so frequently inherent in postfeminist debates, in which the feminist foremother is acknowledged, yet also critiqued.[4] Although Winston's novel presents itself as a novel about being a widow, that becomes overshadowed by a preoccupation with being a daughter, for Sophie's memories of Ethan become steadily echoed by her memories of an earlier (and, it is suggested, more profound) bereavement—the loss of her mother, who died in a car accident when Sophie was thirteen. If the state of widowhood may be construed as lack, then the state of motherlessness constitutes an intensification of that loss; a conclusion implicit in Sophie's statement that: "I'll never miss Ethan any less than I did on the day that he died. I know this, because I don't miss my mother any less than the day she drove off the road twenty-three years ago" (326). It is Sophie's recollections of her mother, rather her husband, that provides the perspective from which to understand her concern with domesticity. In her preoccupation with baking and home making, Sophie is—in true post-feminist fashion—not mimicking her mother, but differentiating herself from her. For Sophie's mother borders on the negligent: an "imperfect mother" (53), she was:

> more interested in reading Russian novels than in keeping house. She'd spend hours in the basement laundry room, ironing and listening to art history books on tape. Everything in our house was neatly pressed . . . but caterpillar dust collected on the blinds and our kitchen floor was always sticky with something. She was a dreadful cook. (52)

If we do the sums, Sophie, thirty-six in 2004, would have been born in 1968, which places her mother in the beginning of feminism's second wave. Sophie does not claim a feminist identity for her mother, but her mother's studied neglect of the home is by implication placed alongside the second wave's rejection of the role of housewife: "the rejection of domesticity has

seemed a principal, if not *the* principal, tenet of feminist demands for freedom" (Bowlby 78; emphasis in original). Sophie's mother is profoundly mourned by her daughter, but that mourning is tinged with feelings of betrayal, for the mother's death is directly attributable to her desire for an identity outside the home. The car crash that kills her occurs "on her way to work", and thus, reflects Sophie, "my father and I were left to fend for ourselves" (11).

So when Sophie creates an alternative family for herself within an overidealized, overdetermined domestic space, she is becoming everything her imperfect—and possibly feminist—mother was not. Within the ideological parameters of the novel this is not seen as a retrograde step, but rather as an assertion of empowerment: "I want to be strong for Marion and Ruth and Dad. For Ethan. Strong for people I haven't even met yet, for prospective customers, future grandchildren. Strong for me" (352). This new identity does have room for romance, but, again, it does not constitute the narrative's ultimate aim. By the end of the novel, Sophie has begun a relationship with a new man, but he is subsidiary to the achievement of her main objective, which is to evolve a positive definition for herself as widow. The novel begins with the question "How can I be a widow?" (4). But at its end she reminds her mother-in-law that "you and I are both widows" (384), an acknowledgement that signals that the term has been significantly rethought over the course of the narrative. Rather than redundancy and lack, it has come to denote active agency, and an ability to negotiate the boundaries between the public and domestic spheres. Furthermore, it comes to represent reconciliation with the problematic figure of the mother which does not preclude difference, even dissention.

THE WIDOW IN THE HAUNTED HOUSE

If *Sophie's Bakery for the Broken Hearted* configures the domestic as sanctuary, a place in which housewifely arts are practiced in order to bind together a micro-community that can lay claim to the definition of 'family', then *Only Human* presents a shadow side—the home as haunted house, infested with the threat it fruitlessly struggles to lock out. Furthermore, it invests the widow herself with uncanny attributes to the point where she herself may be the very menace the domestic seeks to exclude. Marjorie Hemming does not at first appear to be an obvious candidate for such a negative definition of the widow: "[d]ark-haired . . . with exceptionally creamy skin" and "built on a generous scale—excessively curvaceous—her body a keen accumulation of flesh" (2), she conveys an impression of both sensuality and motherliness. A single parent and marriage guidance counsellor, she seems to be defined by her capacity to nurture, and to have overcome the tragedy of her early widowhood. The narrative is devoted, however, to the dismantling of this initial impression, peeling back the

superficial layers of Marjorie's serene persona to reveal the anger, grief and guilt beneath. As in *Sophie's Bakery for the Broken Hearted,* home and widow become merged to the point where one defines the other—not only is the home a metaphor for the widow's condition, but the widow provides the context in which the home can be understood. When Boyt describes the location of Marjorie's house its symbolic function is immediately evident:

> In the heart of London there are still many nameless pockets of life and love and industry that lie anonymously in the spaces between better recognised territory. These stray regions located half a mile behind a mainline railway station, say, or in the abandoned triangular plots between three landmarks unwilling to share their names (taxi drivers require several reference points to place them) are often quieter than the spaces they border, and stranger and less certain of their weaknesses and strengths. (25)

Liminal, unplottable and difficult to define, this is the geography of contemporary widowhood as well as of place, and the very borderline territory that is the essence of the uncanny; which Sigmund Freud claims emerges at the point at which the boundaries between homeliness (*Heimlich*) and 'unhomeliness' (*das Unheimliche*) merge and dissolve (134).

Bowlby points out that the uncanny is domesticity's precondition, "that unwelcome presence within what is most apparently reassuring in its familiarity and familiality" (77). Marjorie's house is a suitably gothic abode. It originally belonged to her dead husband, who "had shown it to her the day they met" (26), and it remains stuffed with belongings that are not her own. Narrow and tall, it is a tricky and deceptive building, in which space possesses:

> a provisional quality, as though each room was a passage or store leading to larger, more open parts. There was the suggestion of imminent width . . . as you picked your way through the different floors and the abundance of barely furnished small rooms, some oak-panelled, that implied there was something spectacular to come, a vast salon with a sprung floor overlooking beautiful lawns, a galleried area with rare pictures at the very least. . . . (27)

In this setting of uncertain perspective and dimensions, the domestic is defamiliarized and rendered implicitly problematical. It is only gradually that we come to learn the history of Marjorie's occupation of this home, which is certainly haunted, and not only by the memories and possessions of her dead husband. As in *Sophie's Bakery for the Broken Hearted,* the narrative of widowhood is to some degree a cover story, shadowed by another narrative less willing to be spoken: a story of mothers and daughters. It is, however, told from the other side of the generational divide, for in this

scenario the widow is the mother rather than the child. Marjorie's daughter May was only a baby when her father was killed, a close juxtaposition of birth and death which is itself unsettling. In spite of Marjorie's oft-asserted love for May, the memories progressively revealed in the course of the novel demonstrate the extent to which grief has incapacitated Marjorie as a mother. We learn, for example, that Marjorie initially buckles under the pressure of being both widow and mother, at one point deserting her baby for an entire day, following which "[i]t was clear that something [in May] had broken" (213). At seventeen, May is now evidently anorexic, although the word is never enunciated within the novel: instead, Marjorie's observations constantly swerve away from precise identification of the problem. Her daughter might be "eking out her dinner from half a midget jar of baby food" (Boyt 178), but Marjorie persists in convincing herself that "[w]hat May wanted to eat was her own affair" (76).

Boyt's narrative thus moves in precisely the opposite direction to Winston's, in which the domestic sphere in general, and the activity of cooking in particular, become effective methods of reconstructing a renewed sense of emotional security and self-worth. In *Only Human,* by contrast, the home steadily diminishes, because death and its aftermath cannot be so easily banished to beyond its borders. The fading away of May's physical body is redoubled by her decision to move out of her mother's house, leaving only "a sharp vacuum . . . in the places where she ought to be, the places she had formerly inhabited—it was like a murder scene" (195). Boyt's choice of words here again makes use of the discourse of the uncanny. It is, as Marjorie observes, "not good for a place to be characterised by what it lacked" (195), yet that is precisely what distinguishes the domestic in this novel. Widowhood acts as the catalyst in this 'emptying out' process whereby everything that a home should contain, nurture and protect drains away, leaving it as nothing more than the signifier of lack. While the widow does not literally act as the channel through which death is brought into the home, she undoubtedly stands as a reminder that, because it is an inescapable fact of life, death can never be banished from the domestic scenario. Gilbert defines the newly-made widow as "discovering herself in a new *place*—the place of death" (25; emphasis in original), and it is this place that Boyt maps onto the familiar contours of the domestic. What *Only Human* demonstrates, therefore, is that because of her association with death—indeed, because she is *defined* by her association with death—the widow is readily appropriable as a gothic symbol.

Boyt does conclude her novel by offering some hope for the transformation of the domestic; although appropriately enough, it is through recourse to gothic allusion. When Marjorie finds an old stocking hidden under the bed, "packed tightly with faded red-and-green Christmas parcels" (34), a cheery seasonal ritual becomes imbued with uncanny overtones. Marjorie's discovery of the stocking is described as if she has stumbled across a dismembered body-part: it is "heavy and long, like some kind of bulky

stuffed limb" (34), and such associations do not abate when one realizes that it is full of presents from the dead. Marjorie is at first puzzled that she has no memory of these parcels: "Then it hit her. These presents had not been meant for Hugh. They were his presents to her. She sat back on the floor and a strange kind of ache spread out in her throat. It tasted exactly the same as the feeling she'd had in her mouth when he had died" (36). Marjorie's discovery of the parcels telescopes time within the boundaries of the domestic and precipitates her directly back into the trauma of bereavement. But there is a further twist to come, and it is this that offers hope that the home might become something more than a mausoleum. At the end of the novel Marjorie gives the stocking to May with the claim that it contains presents her dead father intended for her. Although Marjorie does this thinking that she is deceiving her daughter, the parcels May unwraps do indeed contain children's presents: "two pairs of woollen doll's tights" (228) and—ironically significant—"a red baby's cutlery set with her name embossed on the handles in gold lettering" (230).

This episode does not offer any definitive conclusions but it does suggest the effectiveness of Marjorie's gesture as a moment of communication between mother and daughter, mediated through the memory of the father. In the end, Marjorie acknowledges, the great love of her life has not been her husband, to whom she was married only briefly, but her daughter: "'I suppose when I look back at my life, it's you that I've really been craziest about,' she did not say. And then something amazing happened. She did say it" (230). It is only after defining herself as 'mother' rather than 'widow' that Marjorie is motivated to think about new beginnings, and even—although the text is determinedly indeterminate on that point—the possibility of new romantic relationships. The novel concludes with a reassertion of its conflation of widowhood and the domestic, binding them together in a metonymic relationship. When Marjorie envisages the possibility that "she could just open out things a little . . . take some of the stacked furniture away from the doors" (243) she is being both literal and metaphorical. The implied act of de-cluttering the house and divesting it of its gothic association with the dead is also a personal avowal to leave the state of widowhood behind, ceasing to define herself solely through reference to what she has lost.

FEMINISM AND THE WIDOW

Feminism has tended to overlook the figure of the widow, I argue, for the reason that she is indeed problematic in the context of feminist debates. Because marriage is the necessary precursor of widowhood, the act of defining oneself as a 'widow' indicates a surviving adherence to the identity of 'wife' despite the loss of the husband and this can seem an archaic claim in an era which has seen a significant weakening in the legal and social definition of women

according to their marital status. Sophie and Marjorie both feel themselves indisputably to *be* widows, but they are deeply unsure how to articulate that state; for in the absence of ritual how, exactly, does one 'do' widowhood? That is the overt question that dominates both novels but it is also shadowed by another one: how, in a supposedly 'postfeminist' era, does one 'do' domesticity? In these novels, the widow becomes a syncretic figure, her struggle to understand ways in which to 'be a widow' overlapping with the dilemma faced by contemporary women who face the necessity of negotiating a balance between their professional and domestic lives. The account of widowhood as Winston and Boyt present it certainly proceeds in the opposite direction to the kind of feminist narrative in which "domestication represents a deprivation of full human potential, and . . . is associated with a false version of femininity" (Bowlby 87). But, as Bowlby has argued, there are other stories of domestication to be told. Despite persistent escape attempts, perhaps all roads really do lead back home in the end, for "[f]eminism cannot just get away from domestication, whether by sweeping it under the carpet as a dusty old error, or by identifying it with an uncomplicated and inevitable process of assimilation" (Bowlby 89). The value of the young contemporary widow for both Winston and Boyt is that she embodies this conundrum. Poised between retrogressive narratives of home and feminist narratives of embarkation, she enables these authors to calculatedly blur the boundaries that demarcate the confines of the domestic.

NOTES

1. The photograph can be seen at http://observer.guardian.co.uk/seedsofchange [last accessed 26 November 2007].
2. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 transferred the divorce process from the direct control of Parliament to the law courts, and allowed women to divorce their husbands on the grounds of desertion and cruelty. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1870 gave married women the right to inherit personal property, and to keep any earnings.
3. For example, consider the amount of media coverage devoted to the so-called 9/11 widows—the widows of the firefighters and policemen who died in the terrorist attack in New York in 2001.
4. That is, however unwillingly, the postfeminist daughter acknowledges that she cannot escape from, and is even indebted to, her mother's influence: but she does not necessarily want to be *like* her.

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6 Domestic Desire

Older Women in *Six Feet Under* and *Brothers & Sisters*

Kristyn Gorton

This chapter focuses on the domestic scene and its effects on the representation of older women within the context of both feminism and popular culture. It is about the ways in which 'home' begins to figure women, particularly in their older age, as carers or mothers, and not as sexually desired or desirable. Using the characters of Ruth (Frances Conroy) in HBO's *Six Feet Under* (2001–2006) and Nora (Sally Field) in ABC's *Brothers & Sisters* (2006–) as examples, the essay explores ways in which the tension between care and desire frames representations of older women's sexuality in popular television. I argue that central to these representations is a dialogue with feminism—in each example there is an implicit struggle, often generational, that can be read as metaphoric of the ways in which contemporary popular culture continues to negotiate, frame and consider how feminism is relevant to women's lives. Part of this negotiation involves the emotional intimacy between the central characters and its resolution or deferral. More specifically, this intimacy is often framed through the relationship between mother and daughter. One of the implicit suggestions is that each generation must learn from the previous how to manage the balance between care and desire in the home and how to avoid letting home become the only way in which a woman is defined. In other words, the domestic takes on different meanings as it is passed through the generations. As Joanne Hollows argues, "[T]he meanings of the domestic, and domestic femininities, are contextual and historical and what operates as a site of subordination for some women may operate as the object of fantasy for others" (114). This essay is concerned with how meanings of the domestic and of domestic femininities are negotiated through the body of the older woman in contemporary television. It is also concerned with how the domestic constructs a tension between care and desire.

REPRESENTATIONS OF OLDER WOMEN'S SEXUALITY IN FILM AND TELEVISION

There are many ways to approach the issue of desire and sexuality in representations of older women in film and television. In *Carnal Thoughts*

(2004), Vivian Sobchack devotes a chapter to what she refers to as "Scary Women", arguing that in "low-budget SF-horror films scared middle-aged women are transformed into rejuvenated but scary women" (41). She also suggests that in both *The Mask* (1994) and *Death Becomes Her* (1992) "cinematic effects and plastic surgery become reversible representational operations—literalizing desire and promising instant and effortless transformation" (47). Sobchack points out that the real labour and time involved in cosmetic surgery are neatly erased and viewers are offered a screen image that magically transforms and perfects the older woman effortlessly (47–48). Within Sobchack's discussion there is an implicit criticism of the ways in which cosmetic surgery alters older women to a point where they are rendered unrecognizable. There is a line drawn between the 'real' woman and her cosmetic alter ego, who often frightens more than attracts. Sobchack's work is important insofar as it problematizes the magical promise of eternal youth and undermines the idea of a simple transformation to a younger self as is referenced, for example, in 'makeover' television programmes such as *Ten Years Younger* (2004–).[1] These sorts of programmes place blame on individuals for not dressing sexier, dieting more effectively and generally for not looking after their ageing bodies well enough to look younger than they really are. In these texts, cosmetic surgery is located on the same register as a new belt or top, and thus figured as a quick fix to anyone who is unsatisfied with their older self. The problem that emerges, of course, is that cosmetic surgery is not an option for everyone, and more importantly, that in the context of the makeover programme 'old' is figured as the unhappy 'before' and 'ten years younger' the desirable 'now'. The trope of the makeover reiterates the idea that a woman's worth is bound to her youth and beauty.

It is also possible to consider the way in which older women who do express sexual desire are positioned as 'sexual predators'. Characters such as Mrs Robinson, for instance, from *The Graduate* (1967) or Joanna Lumley's role as 'Patsy' in *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992–) are positioned as predatory and aggressive in terms of their sexual desire. Often shame and disgust (much like the emotions used in SF-horror films) are used to move desire from the older subject to her younger counterpart. In the case of *The Graduate,* Mrs Robinson's final Munch-like scream at her daughter's escape from a boring marriage positions her as the one with bitter regret, not the one who is preferred and coveted. Again, the text foregrounds youth and young love, while simultaneously punishing the older desiring woman, relegating her to her 'rightly' position as 'mother'. Shame is used here to return the desiring older woman to her place within the home and to foreground choice as a privilege of the next generation. While the ideas cited above are useful ways to approach the representation of older women's sexuality, the central tension I have found is between care and desire; and while this is figured in many different ways, it primarily is encountered through the figure of the mother, her relationship to the concept of 'home'

and through the emotional register of shame and regret. While the struggle between care and desire is not solely a female experience,[2] I argue that it is used more frequently to frame representations of older women's sexuality than older men's sexuality. As Susan Sontag writes in the "Double Standard of Aging": "Growing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination—a moral disease, a social pathology—intrinsic to which is the fact that it afflicts women much more than men. It is particularly women who experience growing older with distaste and even shame" (qtd. in Sobchack 37). As Sontag suggests, growing older, while a concern shared by men and women, is predominantly experienced as shameful by women.

I would like to set up another context for this work, as I think the tension between care and desire can be traced (at the very least) to Douglas Sirk's melodramas. For instance, *All That Heaven Allows* (1957) revolves around Cary's (played by Jane Wyman) struggle to accept her desires for her young gardener (played by Rock Hudson) despite her children's insistence that her role is to care for them. In the end, Cary does accept her desires, but this is mediated by the fact that Ron, her young lover, has just suffered an accident. The final scene has her sitting by his bedside, more in the position of carer, then lover. Laura Mulvey (1987) suggests that the ending, with Ron incapacitated and Cary nursing him, suggests not the happy union of the couple but Cary returning to a more socially acceptable role as 'mother' to Ron. As Mulvey notes: "How can a mother of grown children overcome the taboo against her continued sexual activity in 'civilised society', when the object of her desire is reduced to child-like dependency on her ministrations?" (79). In her analysis of the film, Mulvey refers to Cary's decision to reject Ron as a "flight to illness" (78). As I have discussed elsewhere,[3] the reference Mulvey makes to hysteria reiterates the way in which melodrama deals with inexpressible desires and is about trying to voice repressed feelings, despite the damage that articulation might cause the family structure. Conversely, Griselda Pollock argues that "the contradictions that *All That Heaven Allows* exposes are between social positions and are not simply concerned with irreconcilable desires or the sexuality of women. The closures of these Hollywood melodramas are revealing of this in so far as they end with the relocation of women in their socially determined place as mothers" (110). Despite the differences, both analyses emphasize the way in which desire is returned to care at the end of the film in order to reiterate the older woman's position as 'mother' or 'carer' instead of as 'lover'. This restores the 'order of things' and perhaps deals with the excess that this older woman's sexuality produces.

SIX FEET UNDER AND THE POLITICS OF EXPERIENCE

Each episode of *Six Feet Under* begins with an ending—of someone's life. The short vignette that opens each programme sets up the central themes

of the series: death, loss, family and home. The final theme, home, is ever-present as both domestic home and funeral home are one; most of the characters either live or work within the home. The fact that their home is also a place of work, and then even further, a place where dead people are taken for display is certainly one that challenges some of the theorizations explored above. How do you feel a sense of calm and comfort in a home with a basement full of dead bodies? The series uses this fundamental discomfort to allow 'ghosts' to inhabit the place—on countless occasions the dead cadavers 'come to life' and converse with their caretakers, mostly about the problems the living are having but sometimes to say a final word about their own lives. Another recurring ghost is that of Nathaniel Fisher, Sr., who dies in the first episode of the series. The loss of the patriarch overshadows the home, literally, and also displaces some authority and responsibility onto his widow, Ruth, who steps into the position of matriarch, with much reluctance. Ruth is characterized as the ultimate domestic: hair swept into a bun, often wearing an apron, frequently at the kitchen table, the head of the family and the mother of most of the central characters in the programme. Over the five seasons viewers witnessed various changes in her persona: moments of revelation, honesty and fantasy, but her ability to care take and be domestic is always emphasized. In this way, the figure of the older woman is defined by the entwining of her domestic duties and her emotional as well as physical caretaking, both of the living and of the dead.

In Season Five, Ruth's ability to look after all those she loves is challenged when her husband George has a relapse of depressive psychosis. Ruth joins a knitting circle in order to get out of the house but also to speak to others about her life. She is convinced by the women in the group to leave George. They suggest that she set him up in his own place and then go: that way, she has ensured that he is 'safe' within a domestic space but she no longer needs to be the one domesticating him. In the episode "The Rainbow of Her Reasons" (2005), Ruth is temporarily removed from her responsibilities to George and allowed to enter the sacred circle of her sister's friends to celebrate the life of a deceased friend. The episode features a cameo appearance by Susie Bright, the author of *On Sex, Motherhood, Porn and Cherry Pie* (2004) which offers a nod towards sexual freedom and exploration. What follows is something akin to a 'second wave' women's-only party around the kitchen table. The women celebrate the life of their friend, but, more importantly for Ruth, they envision a world where women are in control and men are only there for pleasure or childcare. Ruth literally lets her hair down and believes in the possibilities of this new female collective. The next day, as the women leave, Ruth asks one of them where they are meeting, fully believing that they are going to set up a commune as they fantasized the night before. When the woman smiles at her, she realises that she has mistaken drunken fantasies for real possibilities and she is faced with returning to the task of losing George. When she

goes to see him, he has realized her plan and tells her that she is 'free'. The programme ends with Ruth in the hallway outside George's closed door. The episode plays with the dilemmas in women's liberation: Ruth is 'free' from her second husband, but what has this freedom cost and what does it offer her? Here the domestic is privileged as a nostalgic space for security and stability. And yet, the series as a whole constantly undermines the domestic, questioning and interrogating its permanence by undermining any sense of security Ruth finds in the home.

Within feminist and cultural studies, there has been a renewed concern with understanding the role of emotions and affect in shaping individual and collective identities and in terms of rethinking the way in which the personal and political are framed.[4] Lauren Berlant, for instance, in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington* (1997), argues that the feminist phrase "the personal is the political" "has now been reversed and redeployed on behalf of a staged crisis in the legitimacy of the most traditional, apolitical, sentimental patriarchal family values" (177–78). She goes on to suggest that the maxim today might be "The political is the personal" (178). What Berlant argues is that instead of trying to validate the intimate and make it relevant in terms of the political, the political has become the personal, which means the individual is now responsible for making sure she is making the right decisions regarding life, love and death. Berlant later went on to make a wider point that the political public sphere is increasingly shifting to an intimate public sphere. What was once considered to be intimate is now splashed across the broadsheet headlines and offered up on reality television every night. She highlights the way in which intimacy has increasingly been moved into the public domain and negotiated within contemporary culture. She argues, for instance, that "in the U.S. therapy saturates the scene of intimacy, from psychoanalysis and twelve-step groups to girl talk, talk shows, and other witnessing genres" (2000, 1). Part of the way this comes through within television drama is through the figuring of the domestic and its relation to wider issues such as found in *Six Feet Under* regarding death, loss and home. Although operating very differently than found within reality television or talk shows genres, there is still a sense that intimacy is at the forefront of the programme. However the intimate is negotiated in a very different way, one that appears to be in more direct dialogue with feminist thinking and with the political. In fact, part of the success of *Six Feet Under* and its characterization of Ruth is that the programme avoids easy sentimentalism and resists legitimating traditional family values.

As discussed previously, "The Rainbow of Her Reasons" begins with the death of Ruth's sister's close friend and focuses on the women who come to Ruth's home and who represent a second wave feminist sisterhood collective. The fact that Ruth fetishises the sense of belonging that this group engenders undermines the idea that simply being a mother and carer gives a woman purpose. One of the suggestions in the family values espoused by traditionalists is

that a woman is not truly a woman until she is mother—that this experience of motherhood is what gives women a sense of connectedness and belonging. Ruth problematizes this sentimental idea in so far as she has a deep sense of regret at being *just* a mother and that her children, who are expected to provide this sense of purpose, are, in actuality, providing a sense of unbalance and frustration. Indeed, whenever Ruth does pursue her own desires, she is reminded that her position is of mother more than of lover. For Ruth, the moment of the women's collective seems to offer a way out of being alone in her position of responsibility within the home. The women talk over dinner and wine about sharing childcare, about a community without men and their incessant needs, and about working together. The dream of second wave feminism, or at least the perception of what that dream involved is invoked, most acutely through Ruth's glassy-eyed gaze around the table. The next day, as Ruth prepares to go into the hills and set up their feminist collective, she is confronted by the reality that it was all longing and nostalgia, not a true possibility. In this way, the episode reflects a kind of disappointment with feminism, and in particular, with second wave feminism. It also hints at a sense of superficiality—a suggestion that feminism is present in discourse and lyrics but not in action.

This episode both reaffirms and problematizes feminism. On the one hand we are reminded of the possibility of sisterhood and mobilization, and on the other, of the activism that seems to have been lost as feminists entered into the academy and spent more time writing and talking about feminism than actively making change. But there is more here, especially when we consider the episode in relation to the programme more broadly. This episode evokes an awakening in Ruth, a change in terms of her position within the world. This is very reflective of feminism and its continuing power. Although many women have disillusionments with feminism, it continues to be a body of knowledge that allows women to reconceptualize and reenvision their position within society. It continues to articulate the ways in which women come to understanding themselves and their place in the world. This is demonstrated beautifully later on in the series when Brenda has given birth to her daughter Willa. Although very different kinds of women, and from different generations, Ruth is able to support Brenda through her experience of single motherhood. Catching her on the stairs, a very domestic space, Ruth tells Brenda that she never really had any help from her husband in raising her children, that she was alone. Having just lost her husband, Brenda is in the same position, and for once, is willing to accept Ruth's help. It is a very simple moment, and yet holds the promise of a much more genuine kind of sisterhood than the idealized images offered in the episode described earlier. In this example, experience is political in so far as it reunites a sense of collective struggle and initiates a deeper understanding between generations.

As discussed previously, the episode deals with Ruth's sexual awakening and at the same time, with the end of her relationship with George. She

is freed from the responsibility of looking after him and yet, finds herself alone again. Her sexual exploration is picked up again in an episode titled "Ecotone" (2005). In this episode Ruth leaves the house, which is very uncharacteristic of her, and goes camping with a love interest called Hiram. She tells him that she wants to feel desire: she wants to leave everything else behind and just think about her own pleasures. However, when they begin to make love she feels suffocated and rejects him. The next day, Hiram tells her that she should have done something to satisfy his desires; that she might regret the way she rejected him. She responds: 'I have so many regrets, what's one more!' The episode fantastically explores Ruth's sexual past and future and constructs her as a sexually desiring and autonomous subject. In a fantastical scene, for example, Ruth is lost in the woods and stumbles across all her former lovers. She confronts each one and shoots them with a rifle à la Annie Oakley. In playfully exploring Ruth's sexual empowerment, it imagines her as someone who can 'let go' of the past and embrace the future without regret. However, this storyline is held in tension with the death of her eldest son Nate. Although Ruth has experienced this moment of self-fulfilment and sexual empowerment, it is short-lived. When she returns home she learns that her son has died of a brain tumour. The text implies that Ruth should not have been pursuing her own desires and should have been there for Nate as his mother; this is emphasized by her other children, who blame her for not being there. In her grief, Ruth returns to her relationship with George, one that has always been framed as a caring relationship, and indeed, despite some suggestion that she moves in with Bettina and leaves George, in the final episode we see her on her deathbed with George by her side. The implication throughout is the tension between the role of carer (more specifically here as mother) and as a woman with desires. Although there is a sense in which Ruth is punished, this is not extended through the series and instead, we see Ruth coming into herself in a different way, but one intimately linked to the domestic and to her position as mother.

BROTHERS & SISTERS AND THE TROPE OF SELF-TRANSFORMATION

The consequences of intimacy are central to the storyline of *Brothers & Sisters*. Similar to *Six Feet Under,* the series begins with the death of the patriarch and the introduction to the ties that bind and suffocate an upper-middle-class family in Los Angeles. Upon the death of William, his wife Nora becomes the central figure in the family. However, her strength is soon undermined by the revelation that William not only embezzelled money from the family business, but also had a twenty-year affair with Holly (Patricia Wettig) (resulting in a daughter). One of the features of the series is the way in which any intimate secret (e.g. infidelity, marriage

proposals or surprise parties) is unable to be kept—the brothers and sisters quickly disseminate any truth across the family and its relations. The series proffers sentimental ideas about the nature of truth and family yet troubles these notions at the same time.

Nora can be read in light of the seventies consciousness-raising novels. She has spent the majority of her life as a home maker—caring for her five children and her husband until his death which initiates a process of self-transformation. In 1970s consciousness-raising novels such as Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973) and Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks* (1976) the narrative moves from the domestic and therefore oppressed to a constructed notion of liberation.[5] Imelda Whelehan notes that "[T]he heroines of the [consciousness raising] novels realize that there is something wrong in their lives and the plot of the novel often follows their quest to fix it. . . . The burden of the narrative turns on their analysis of these wrongs and the action they propose as a result—leaving the marital home. . . . determining to put their own aspirations first, and so on" (175). Although Nora does not leave the home, she begins to pursue her own aspirations. However, they are often mediated by her inexperience and her children's needs (which always take priority over her own). For instance, one of Nora's aspirations is to write and it is in her writing class that she meets Marc, her writing professor, whom she initially feels will liberate her. When he invites her over for a party, her friend convinces her that she should wear something seductive. She arrives dressed inappropriately for what turns out to be a dinner party for board members. One of them asks whether she is going to dance for them. This humiliating experience illustrates Nora's inadequacy outside the domestic scene.

Nora is explicitly contrasted with Holly, the woman with whom her husband had an affair, and to whom he confided his business plans. In the case of *Brothers & Sisters,* the women are divided between those who care and those who desire and Nora's place is firmly rooted in the former. When she attempts to join the family business and therefore compete with Holly she is shown to have little to no business knowledge or talent and eventually leaves to return to her place in the home. At the opening of her son Tommy's and Holly's joint wine venture, Holly seduces Nora's philandering boyfriend which results in a comical confrontation between the two women. Holly accuses Nora of having nothing more than "a box full of recipes" whereas Nora indicts Holly for living off other people's money. They each vie over who William loved/desired more. Holly tells Nora: "You should have seen the smile on his face when he came through the door" while Nora responds: "Why did he always come home to me then? Even your own daughter would rather sleep at my house" ("Grapes of Wrath", 2007). Here 'home' is figured as the prize in the competition between care/desire and Nora/Holly: William's choice to stay at home with Nora even though he pursued his desires elsewhere is offered as a hollow victory for Nora. The verbal fight turns into a food fight and the two collapse into

laughter. Their argument leads to a moment of intimacy between them in which Nora tells Holly she needs to let go of William and Holly warns Nora that she should not let her daughter Rebecca live with her. The scene suggests that the expression of emotion allows people to sort out their differences, however painful and however disparate. However, in *Brothers & Sisters,* this use of emotion comes across in a very sentimentalized way and may leave a viewer wondering how real this proposed solution really is or could be. At yet at the same time, perhaps it is cathartic and hopeful and provides viewers with a 'melodramatic fantasy' of family.[6] As Ien Ang suggests: "Fantasy and fiction then, are the safe spaces of excess in the interstices of ordered social life where one has to keep oneself strategically under control" (1997, 164). In the fantasy world of *Brothers & Sisters,* a food fight can magically resolve betrayal and infidelity and restores Nora's place as the central figure in the family drama.

As in *Six Feet Under,* daughters are represented as possessing different agendas and capabilities in the next generation. Sarah Whedon (Rachel Griffiths), Nora's eldest daughter, is both mother (to two children and a step-son) and the President of her late father's company. Unlike her mother, Sarah is seen as able to be both mother and career woman, although this is often troubled by her relationship with her husband, who has chosen to live at home and look after the childern and who, towards the end of the first season, kisses her newly-found step-sister, Rebecca. We know that Rebecca is not the victim she pretends to be, and indeed it was Joe that stopped any further relations between them. Through Joe's recollections we see Rebecca telling him that he does not need to stop, even though we later see her tell the brothers and sisters a different story. If Nora and Holly are held in contrast with each other then so too are Sarah and Rebecca, particularly over Joe. Nora tells Sarah that she does not want her to make the same mistakes, i.e., stand blindly next to a man that she is cheating on her. And yet, as viewers we know that there is more to the story that meets the eye. The storyline suggests that Sarah will end up making her own mistakes in the process of avoiding her mother's and emphasizes the way in which the knowledge from one generation emotionally and intimately meets with the next. Holly's daughter Rebecca is, in essence, destroying a family in the same way that Holly did, but this time Rebecca is acting from a position of pain, having been denied the truth of her parentage, rather than one of passion.

As in *Six Feet Under,* Nora's desire is conditional on the family's well-being. She only purses her love interests when all other members of the family are happily living their lives. As soon as one of them has a crisis, which happens often, she leaves her romantic pursuits and heads for the kitchen: to make them a sandwich, pour a glass of wine or just listen. Although all her children are fully grown, she is still intimately bound to their happiness and needs. But this relationship is not just a reflection of what popular culture envisions as a 'good mother'—it is also what guarantees her a place in the

programme. She is the central character—like the kitchen to a home, she is the person that draws everyone together and unites them. When Nora confronts Sarah about Joe's affair, she replies that although she realizes now that her parents did not have a perfect marriage, she is grateful they stayed together because it made her feel "whole" and wants to offer the same to her children. Nora tells her that she is a "good mother". Here lies the tension between desire and care: Sarah chooses to put her own desires second to her children's well-being and this, in part, is what makes her a good mother in Nora's estimation. The discussion takes place in the kitchen of the winery which will later be the same setting for Holly and Nora's food fight. Again, the kitchen, the domestic, is the setting for intimate discussions on motherhood, caretaking and desire and the location where generations of women reflect on the joys and struggles of home making. There is an implicit suggestion here that Sarah has not only become a good mother but will also take her mother's place, literally in the kitchen, as the person who will care for the family above her own desires.

CARETAKER, MOTHER, HOME MAKER

In her essays on female body experience, Iris Marion Young speaks about a series of interlinked essays by feminist scholars on the concept of home. Specifically, she refers to Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty's "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do About It?" (1986), which focuses on Minnie Bruce Pratt's experience growing up in the American South as a privileged white woman, and on Teresa de Lauretis's response to Mohanty and Martin, which, as Young points out, further develops the connection between home and identity (146). What Young finds in these essays and others is a profound distrust of the concept of home within feminist politics and a suggestion that we, as feminists, give up on the desire for home altogether (146), particularly in so far as the home is a privilege bound by class and race. Drawing on bell hooks' discussion of 'homeplace', Young argues that the values of home "can have a political meaning as a site of dignity and resistance" and should be "democratised rather than rejected" (146). Although Young agrees that "the attempt to protect the personal from the political through boundaries of home more likely protects privilege from self-consciousness, and that the personal identities embodied in home inevitably have political implications" (149), she argues for a more fluid notion of home—one that "does not impose the personal and the political, but instead describes conditions that make the political possible" (149). Following hooks, Young sees a radical potential in the notion of home in so far as it can offer resistances and, that if home is a privilege, then it should be extended to everyone, rather than rejected. She imagines the home, not as a nostalgic longing for comfort and security, but as a real place for individuals to negotiate both personal and collective identities.

Returning to *All That Heaven Allows,* this film has been explored by critics in terms of the sense of home constructed in the film. In his analysis of the film, for instance, Michael Stern draws on an interview with Sirk in which the latter suggests that homes are like prisons or tombs, places which people build in order to enclose themselves inside. Stern argues that Sirk's settings reinforce this idea, creating the sense that Cary is alive inside her own tomb (117). In one of the most powerful scenes, Cary is alone in her living room, neither of her children having returned home for the holidays. The camera focuses on Cary looking outside through the snow-paned windows: she is trapped inside the house, inside domesticity and the parameters society and her children have set for her desires. She can only gaze outwards onto a life she wants to lead. The TV she insisted she did not want has finally arrived, and she is left in the dark, her empty expression mirrored in the television screen. Stern suggests that "her desire to escape a stultifying bourgeois life, her spiritual and sexual longings, all have been reduced to a pale reflection of the TV screen" (118). This low point encourages the viewer to want Cary's reconciliation with Ron. Viewers who may have questioned her role as a 'good' mother in her initial decision to be with Ron, will now feel Cary's desire is 'allowed' and a happy ending follows. The use of home in Sirk's melodramas can be extended to think about how the home is positioned within contemporary television.

Both *Six Feet Under* and *Brothers & Sisters* are very similar, not only in their storylines, characters and actors, but in their framing of older women's sexuality in popular culture. In each series, the matriarch is firmly rooted in the home until the death of her husband. At this point she is freed from her position and yet all her forays into the outside world are seen as inappropriate or failures, implying that her true place is in the home. Most shots are of either Ruth or Nora in the kitchen—the hub of the family home. The kitchen, one of the most domestic settings, is where intimate discussions on caretaking, motherhood and desire take place. When each woman attempts to find desire with another man she ends up with someone who wants her to take care of him, someone who is more interested in his own desires. Likewise, these moments of sexual freedom are often punished when one of her children calls her to be there for them. In both series daughters emphasize the differences between the generations, the choices that feminism has created and the mistakes that are inherited despite best intentions. The relationship between the mothers and daughters highlight the remaining problems and challenges that face women as they struggle to balance home and career: care and desire. At the end of *Six Feet Under,* viewers witness Ruth returned to the position in which she began—as caretaker and as responsible for the wellbeing of her family. Because *Brothers & Sisters* is still in production it is impossible to make the same pronouncement of Nora, although every indication suggests that her role as caretaker, mother and home maker will continue to frame her sexuality rather than her desires. In the final episode of the first season, appropriately titled 'Matriarchy', Nora jumps into the

pool with her clothes on to prove that the Walker family can be just as much fun as the McCallisters. The series begins with her husband falling into the pool, to his death, and ends with Nora jumping into the pool in celebration. Is she jumping into her role as matriarch or is she transforming herself into someone different? Stay tuned.

NOTES

1. Rachel Moseley persuasively argues that "makeover shows on British television articulate not just changes in the broadcasting climate and the move towards consumer-driven programming, but also shifts in discourses of gender and their television representation" (304).
2. The tension between care and desire is not solely about older women's sexuality; indeed J. M. Coetzee's latest novel, aptly titled *Slow Man* (2006), thoughtfully considers the relationship between care and desire in terms of older men's sexuality.
3. See my *Theorising Desire: From Freud to Feminism to Film* (2008) for more on this.
4. See, for example, my review-essay on the topic (2007).
5. See Whelehan's *The Feminist Bestseller* (2005) for her commentary on *Fear of Flying* and *Kinflicks,* as well as Rosalind Coward (1984).
6. I am here making reference here both to Ien Ang's "melodramatic identification" (158–65) and to Murray Smith's notion of "emotional simulation" (96–8). Both concepts draw on the way in which emotion causes the audience to feel something for the characters or the situations they are in.

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7 Ready-Maid Postfeminism?
The American 'Domestic' in Popular Culture

Suzanne Leonard

The figure of the domestic worker has long existed on the margins of American cinema: the glimpses viewers catch of her are fleeting at best, as she traipses through rooms, carrying trays of food, setting tables and doggedly caring for children outside the central activity of the home and, indeed, the narrative. While this tendency to acknowledge elliptically the labour of the domestic all the while denying her a full subjectivity has surely not abated, American mass culture has recently witnessed an unprecedented rise in popular representations of maids and nannies, figures who remain paradoxically visible and invisible at the same time. Consider: we now regularly see real life domestics helping families on television's *Nanny 911* (2004–) and *Supernanny* (2005–), as main characters in the films *Bread and Roses* (2001), *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), *Uptown Girls* (2003), *Love Actually* (2003), *Spanglish* (2004), *Nanny McPhee* (2005), *Friends with Money* (2006) and *The Nanny Diaries* (2007) and as central literary figures in novels such as Allison Pearson's *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2003), Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus's *The Nanny Diaries* (2002) and Liz Ireland's *How I Stole Her Husband* (2005). This rise is, I argue, a matter of interest not only for film and media scholars, but also a structural problematic in the ideological history of feminism, which has largely failed to grapple with the question of how the preponderance of domestic labourers has ensured economic gains for America's elite, while fixing others, mostly women of colour, in positions which ensure little economic mobility.

The issues surrounding domestic labour have for too long been something of a dirty secret for those who remain concerned about issues of social justice, in part because the solution to the conundrum of female professionalization typically comes in the form of lower-class workers, housewife substitutes who cook, clean and care for children in homes that are not their own. I do not mean that working women are to blame for this scenario, merely that the terms of this debate have not yet been reframed to account for the role that men or governmental subsidies might play in reimagining it.[1] Instead, the discomfort over the domestic worker's position has been worked out in mass culture's tendency to sexualize domestic workers and, conversely, in its endorsement of the idea that the professionalization of domestic and childcare work can avoid grappling with its

status as emotional labour. Taking this complicated moral history into account alongside these shifting media representations, this chapter argues that the domestic's overdetermined appearance in popular culture nominally acknowledges the thorny status of employment issues in the American labour economy; at the same time, such representations paper over the fundamental inequity of this system. In postfeminist terms, such representations also speak more directly to privileged women than they do to the domestics they purport to represent, mainly because such texts caution the overly ambitious. Media portrayals of nannies and maids thereby direct their address at working women who are nondomestics, women it perceives as most seriously in danger of forgetting how to 'make' their own homes.

To explain how this cultural showcasing of the domestic complies with postfeminist logics of rehabilitation and rebuke, this chapter interrogates three widely available tropes, all of which serve as chastisements to nondomestics: the nanny/maid as love object, the nanny/maid as the ideal caretaker and the nanny/maid as a foil for an elite white woman who lacks proper feminine attributes. All three figures should be of interest to feminists because they unmask a culture still made uneasy by the assumed void created by widespread female labour outside the home. This newly intensified focus on the female domestic thus presents itself as a hiccup in a much longer conversation about the perceived need to preserve certain traditional notions of domesticity, even as the women who were once thought solely responsible for such maintenance have largely absented themselves from domestic interiors. The maid or nanny arrives in the void created by such assumed absences, thus her position is inherently overdetermined by the notion that the ethical and moral task of 'home making' is newly in her purview.

At the same time, and in typically postfeminist fashion, the terms of this debate are very much framed from the perspective of the middle- or upper-class home, which is located as the primary site of tension and codified as the stage on which these gendered conflicts play out. While the increased visibility of the domestic worker in the middle- or upper-class home might seem to demonstrate a cognizance of her positionality, most media portrayals nonetheless sidestep the even more complex moral calculations necessitated by domestic labour's status as a global rather than domestic economy. In fact, global labour flows have dramatically shifted the ethnic and racial composition of domestics in recent years. While the first groups of nannies and maids to have a visible presence on the American cultural landscape were Irish and German immigrants, by the mid-twentieth century such positions were largely occupied by African-American women.[2] Since the 1980s, however, the group has largely been comprised of immigrants from Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America, a demographic shift that underscores the necessity of assessing this labour market in terms of ethnic categorizations that are tied to a larger world economy. As Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo writes, "[P]aid domestic work has gone from being *either* an immigrant women's job, *or* a minority women's job to one filled by women who, as Latina and Caribbean

immigrants, embody subordinate status both racially and as immigrants" (14; emphasis in original). Moreover, statistics indicate that many domestics are migrant workers on temporary visas, many of whom have left behind their biological families in order to move to the United States.[3] The situation of contemporary nannies and maids therefore acutely highlights how globalization is changing the face of American domesticity, since the flow of bodies and labour into the home now rivals its reception of material goods. In turn, the shift demands that the domestic sphere be apprehended as an increasingly global space, a microcosm of labour pressures and fluxes necessitated by the fact that the United States exploits other world economies in order to import the care it cannot provide itself.[4]

To suggest, as popular culture does, that the preponderance of domestics are American, white and upwardly mobile largely ignores all the aforementioned demographic realities. In this way, such portrayals out themselves as being primarily concerned with atomizing the impact of fluctuating domestic roles on privileged American families, and are considerably less vexed by the labour conditions and employment expectations confronting the oftentimes non-American domestic worker. Yet because the increased presence of such workers in American homes is difficult to ignore, a solution to this ethical impasse is to code fictionalized nannies and maids as young and desirable, thereby cathexing a larger cultural guilt and assuaging upper-class implications in perpetuating a globally stratified system. Stories about domestics who work in this role temporarily or are 'rescued' from their jobs by affluent employers contravene in actual historical realities, offering themselves instead as comfortable fictions. This plotline, indeed, has remarkable longevity. Speaking in the mid-1990s about the preponderance of people of colour who appeared in popular film as surrogate parents for white families, Sau-ling Wong wrote, "In a society undergoing radical democratic and economic changes, the figure of the person of color patiently mothering white folks serves to allay racial anxieties" (69). Recent images of nannies and maids are doing the same, since the domestic's status as a romantic heroine, or simply an implied site of viewer identification, pretties up the fundamental inequities at the base of this labour economy. The domestic, who has historically been at the margins of cinematic texts and spaces, there to buttress the white women's desirable femininity, now instead registers as the point of cinematic fantasy, and yet, she is no less instrumentalized than she was in previous eras. Though the domestic appears today as a model rather than an afterthought, she is still meant to codify traditional femininities.

WORK, POSTFEMINISM AND THE ROMANTIC COMEDY

The spate of recent films which present the nanny or maid as the central narrative focus and often the primary agent or recipient of romantic interest

identify themselves as romantic comedies or even 'chick flicks'. Historicizing this genre a bit, it is common to find some form of female labour in romantic comedy; typically, the formula necessitates that the protagonist partake in a highly glamorized or otherwise enviable profession and live in an appropriately urban environment. The visual richness of the mise-en-scène (typically, New York, Los Angeles or London) complements the genre's staging of desire, promoting a vision of life that is richly exciting, fast-paced and brimming with expectation. The visual pleasure associated with the protagonist's urban cosmopolitanism refracts in her workplace, which is often a fashion magazine, modelling agency, art gallery, television station or film studio. Trendy urban aesthetics likewise inform the presentation of the hip bars and restaurants the female worker frequents in her postwork hours, where she chats with friends and colleagues. At the same time that the protagonist's upward mobility is emphasized, however, the romantic comedy genre has recently increasingly figured the workplace as a hazardous space that could potentially divert the female protagonist from 'real' ambitions like marriage and motherhood. Taking account of the vast number of heroines who, in the name of empowerment, withdraw from the workforce (and symbolically the public sphere) in order to either acquire or care for husbands and families, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra name "retreatism" as a pervasive postfeminist trope (109). Such representational codes also borrow rhetoric from the oft-discussed Mummy Wars in the United States, debates that exhort women to make a choice between two mutually exclusive identities—that of the domestically-inclined stay-at-home mother, and that of the ambitious working woman. In popular representation, sympathy has trended towards domesticity, which is fashioned as the more 'noble' option. Yet, because the workplace often registers as demanding, amoral and without substantive emotional rewards, one might say that the representations do acknowledge some of the temporal brutalities of the current labour market, an economy that is frequently inhospitable to the achievement of a sustainable work-life balance. This gesture to recognize professional economies as thankless and disappointing usually concludes with retreat rather than reform, however, as female workers extract themselves from masculinized corporate cultures in order to preserve their femininity.

Taking this genre history into account, I propose that we view the subgenre of what I am calling the 'domestic romance' (wherein the domestic becomes the principal point of identification in the film) as reliant on a machination that in effect weds workplace mystification with a romanticization of domesticity. *Maid in Manhattan, Love Actually, Uptown Girls, Spanglish* and *The Nanny Diaries* glamorize the workplace to the extent that it registers as luxurious and posh, yet these texts also participate in a postfeminist ethos that supports the notion that emotionally healthy women are domestically inclined rather than professionally driven. Specifically, because the workplace *is* the home, it bears none of the representational burden of existing as a capitalist, competitive environment, and is

naturalized rather than vilified as a workplace milieu. Films about domestic workers thereby trade on a fantasy image of the workplace, rewarding audiences with the lavish sets and costumes they come to expect from the romantic comedy. At the same time, the heroine's accessing of such luxuries is acceptable rather than punishable because the domestic worker exists in contradistinction to the more 'severe' women who view such surroundings as expected rather than appreciated. The domestic's function is thereby to school such women (and the families who have likewise been violated by her selfish ambitions) on the pleasures of authentic nurturance. Through the domestic heroine's virtuous modelling, the home is inevitably made more 'homey'.

Labouring outside one's own home, but notably in the homes or temporary residences of the rich, affords the presumably working-class protagonist access to the pleasures usually reserved for those who possess a higher class status. Yet, part of the pleasure spectators are offered in these films is to watch truly 'deserving' woman look and feel glamorous too. In *Maid in Manhattan,* Marisa Ventura (Jennifer Lopez) literally 'tries on' the identity of Caroline (Natasha Richardson), the spoiled, insufferable woman whose room she cleans, and whose designer clothes Marisa happens to be wearing when Senate candidate Chris Marshall (Ralph Fiennes) first makes her acquaintance. Chris misrecognizes Marisa as wealthy, and, given this assumed class status, is seduced by what he perceives as her lack of pretension. Crucial to this solicitation of identification with the maid, however, is the fact that the domestic interlopes within *rather than* inhabits the lavish upper-class world, since she has not been inured to the posh surroundings that privileged women take for granted. A routine moment in the domestic romance therefore finds the nanny or maid awed by her surroundings, exhibiting a sweetly nervous countenance that usually results in her making endearing gaffe. In the case of *Love Actually,* the Prime Minister (Hugh Grant), himself jittery about assuming a new position and meeting a cadre of servants who will work for him in his new formal abode, finds his own anxiety echoed in the nervous tick of his new maid, Natalie (Martine McCutcheon) who accidentally keeps saying 'fuck' around him. Natalie not only retains her job in the wake of such an incident but also earns the sympathy and eventually the love of the Prime Minister, leaving no doubt that hers is an (admittedly enticing) fantasy representation of domestic labour.

Idealizing demanding, physical jobs as opportunities for romance, these films likewise frame domestic labour as generative rather than dead-end, employment that allows—and even invites—the domestic to personalize the job she does. Conveniently reimagined as an opportunity for individuation, this version of domestic work showcases the female labourer's special skills, talents that set her apart from the rest of the women in her field. In *Maid in Manhattan,* Marisa's housekeeping duties register as a job that, because of the high status of the hotel's clientele, requires customized

care. Marisa receives praise, for instance, for leaving a lavender sachet on the pillow of an (ultimately ungrateful) client. In this way, the domestic romance ups the ante on the chick flick's typical workplace portrayal since the domestic worker accrues symbolic rewards not merely for the work she does, but more importantly, for the person she is. Audiences therefore understand that the domestic's unique attributes guarantee her eventual happiness, an outcome often ensured through a romantic subplot.

Because typical chick flick heroines do not labour in low-status occupations, the foregrounding of the figure of the domestic signals a departure from genre conventions. Yet, this recent crop of films perhaps also answers a demand for portrayals about the American labour market, interpellating as their target audience the financially strapped young worker who faces a job market currently suffering the effects of outsourcing, where depressed wages and skyrocketing health care are commonplace.[5] In so far as they script jobs that at base have scant potential for real advancement, these films do in fact display at least a superficial acknowledgement of the dire economic calculations required to sustain life in contemporary America. Yet, while these films engage with sites of female anxiety, they also do so through the lens of what continues to be the most popular countenance afforded the postfeminist subject: a white, upwardly mobile middle-class female.[6] Thus, in their most popular iteration, texts about domestics feature young white workers pushed into said labour not because of a lack of training or even privilege but because of some cosmic bad luck, such as having an unscrupulous money manager abscond with a considerable fortune, as in *Uptown Girls,* or as a stopgap measure to stave off a momentarily tumultuous economic reality, as in *The Nanny Diaries*.[7] The films' outcomes also underscore the transience of this position; specifically, they answer the genre's fantasy requirements by catapulting their heroines into more lucrative and rewarding careers following their stints as domestics, new occupations which provide the woman space to be 'true to herself'. In *Maid in Manhattan,* Marisa writes a book on management, the professional field she has aspired to throughout; *Uptown Girls'* Molly (Brittany Murphy) enrolls in a fashion institute in order to turn her pastime of altering clothes into a career; and *The Nanny Diaries* concludes with Annie (Scarlet Johannson) embarking on a Master's degree in Anthropology at Columbia University. Inventing protagonists who will clearly devote the rest of their lives to more prestigious pursuits, such texts fantasize that the moniker of 'domestic' need hardly be a life sentence. [8]

FALLING IN LOVE WITH THE MAID

Postfeminist portrayals tend to value the domestic more for her potential than for her triumphs, and *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd

was one of the first pundits to record distress over a common plotline wherein affluent white men fall in love with women who are neither their intellectual nor economic equals. Dowd cites *Maid in Manhattan, Love Actually* and *Spanglish* as well as *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (2003) in this subgenre, and argues that cultural messages are remiss when they extol the virtues of service rather than accomplishment. Furthering this disparity is the fact that *Spanglish* and *Love Actually* both showcase seductive maids who do not know English; despite (or perhaps because of) this liability, their professionally accomplished male employers have no problem perceiving these women as desirable mates. While it would initially appear that these men hand-pick less successful women as a way to boost their own self-worth, in fact this plotline also routinely features a third figure, the overly talkative woman who that man is simultaneously rejecting. Thus, by inviting implicit comparison between the quiet domestic and another woman whose words register as self-serving, excessive and aggressive, the films reveal that their preference for reticence is as much about rejecting the shrew as it about embracing the maid. Marisa, for instance, is contrasted with Caroline who spews inanities about herself and her always floundering love life. Likewise in *Spanglish,* Deb's (Téa Leoni) shrill rants typically target her beleaguered husband John (Adam Sandler), whereas Flor unfailingly sees his goodness. Flor does on occasion demonstrate that she possesses a feisty and opinionated side, a posture that emerges most obviously when she detects a threat to her parental control. Yet, by suggesting that Flor speaks as a protective mother rather than a self-serving individual, the film uses her verbal restraint as a clear foil for Deb's lack thereof.

In a related iteration, *Spanglish* utilizes the domestic romance to endorse a male fantasy of silent devotion. When Flor *does* speak, in English, she reveals in an eleventh hour confession that she loves John, as does possibly every other woman in the film, including a young female chef who works at his restaurant, his daughter and his mother-in-law, all of whom profess unabashed and excessive adoration. Locating Flor's value primarily in her ability to appreciate the taken-for-granted male, the film ignores the inconvenient fact that she cannot understand him for a majority of the film. The strength of the domestic's faith in her employer and her ability to intuit his goodness also conquers the language barrier in *Love Actually,* since that film scripts a similar subplot wherein Portuguese maid Aurélia (Lúcia Moniz), who also speaks no English, undresses and dashes into presumably tepid waters to save her boss's wayward manuscript, which has drifted into a lake. While the camera lingers on her shapely form, Aurélia's irreverent internal dialogue reveals that she hopes the manuscript warrants the effort. Still, this spectacle tacitly answers the question of why her boss Jamie (Colin Firth) falls in love with a woman with whom he cannot communicate: selflessly, she rescues and values his work, even to the extent of making it *her* work.

As these examples illustrate, the domestic romance predictably trades on the notion that the maid exhibits classically feminine traits, namely, selflessness and devotion. Moreover, while female labour typically figures in romantic comedy either to put the woman in contact with an undesirable moral world view or to cannibalize too much time from her personal life, the domestic romance shifts the terms ever so slightly because the domestic's workplace *is* the home. These alterations in turn reimagine masculinity as domestically inclined, since the domestic's labour puts the women in close proximity not to an unwholesome or competitive co-worker, but rather to a man who values community over achievement, or who is 'home-identified' in some way. John, for instance, owns, runs and cooks for a top restaurant and he repeatedly references the fact that he has organized his schedule so as to spend more time with his family. The men who populate the domestic romance have thus already reached a comfortable level of status in their chosen career, and prefer women who complement their gentler forms of masculinity.

DOMESTICS AS IDEAL CARETAKERS

Primed for domesticity, these men nevertheless rely on the domestics to turn their houses into homes, and to teach their children the virtues of complementarity and cooperation rather than cutthroat competition. Pedagogical in her function, the domestic thereby schools the family or institution for whom she works in symbolic 'home making', a job for which she appears exceptionally well-suited. (Many cinematic domestics, like Flor and Marisa, are also single mothers, thus confirming their maternal inclinations.) Proudly wearing their parental credentials, Flor and John have lengthy conversations in *Spanglish* about how to protect their children from the insidious pressures of an overly competitive school district. Such conversations depart starkly from John's negotiations with his wife Deb, who sets unforgiving standards for their children, and harasses their overweight daughter. In contrast, the domestic appears relaxed, humane and emotionally healthy, earning a symbolic association with populist values which marks her fitness not only as a romantic heroine, but also as a role model for children.

As a populist exemplar, the nanny always knows how to emote, unlike her upper-class charges or their parents. In *Uptown Girls,* for instance, both Molly and Ray (Dakota Fanning) are 'poor little rich girls' who lack stable homes; Molly lost both her parents, including her famous rock star father, in a freak plane accident and Ray's father lingers in an unexplained coma. While the stoic, germophobic Ray does not know how to love her dying father, Molly patiently teaches Ray how to forge a provisional relationship with him and how to grieve appropriately in the wake of his death. In a parallel plot which also highlights Molly's understanding of life's simple

pleasures, Molly insists on bringing Ray, via the subway, to ride the teacups at Coney Island, an event that deliberately echoes and revises the sterile tea parties that Ray likes to host in her pristine East Side bedroom. Favouring mass culture over rarefied, aristocratic pursuits, the film implicitly sets up a hierarchy that attributes Ray's emotional growth, paradoxically, to a regression that relies on a fantasized populist ideal. Indeed, thanks to Molly's guidance Ray learns to value fun and play, a designation confirmed by her goofy dance performance at the end of the film. Instead of the antiseptic classical ballet recital she had planned, Ray brings together a set of personal connections by gyrating to a rock song written by Molly's late father and played by Molly's boyfriend. Ray's proper education, delivered by Molly, thus results in Ray's well-celebrated preference for 'ordinary' rather the 'privileged' pleasures.

The Nanny Diaries also apes this false populism in an effort to counteract the assumed upper-class pretensions of the Manhattan elite. While the apocryphal Mrs. X (Laura Linney) wants her son Grayer to dine on elaborate French meals and learn the French language, his nanny teaches him the 'down home' American pleasures of eating a peanut butter and jelly combination from the jar. Again supposedly siding with the working class rather than the highly privileged, *The Nanny Diaries* also features the apparently now customary shot of the nanny who takes the child on the New York subway against, of course, the strict prohibitions of the upper-class parents. Meant to suggest that the sheltered lives of these children prohibit them from actually 'living', the false populist trope serves as a thinly veiled critique of the fact that the upper-class parents do not allow their children to have fun, so busy are the parents trying to ensure their offspring get ahead in the world by moulding their children in their competitive images. The nanny's role, as ensured by her interloper status, is thus to preserve a highly mythologized version of American childhood, whereby embarking on 'common' pleasures such as eating peanut butter and jelly and riding the subway apparently preserves the child's embattled innocence. The attribution of authenticity that defines domestics thereby sets up an inverse proportionality between the social class of the family for whom she works and that family's ability to adequately care for their children. According to this formula, the nanny serves as a surrogate angel in the house, a credential earned by her unwavering knowledge of what values should be endorsed in the home (community, care) and which should not (aggression, competition).

NANNIES AS FOILS FOR ELITE WOMEN

The films' modus operandi for preserving complementary is to foist an investment in competition onto the professionally-coded woman, a figure who becomes a convenient scapegoat for all social ills. The instrumental

invocation of the upper-class white woman who appears mainly to highlight that she lacks the delicacy exhibited by the nanny or maid finds expression in *Maid in Manhattan, Spanglish, Uptown Girls* and *The Nanny Diaries*. Each film features an elite woman who, thanks to her aggression, anger and narcissism, serves as a convenient antagonist to the domestic, who in turn registers as level-headed, magnanimous and cooperative. The insufferable upper-class white woman thus appears as a stock figure and demonstrates an almost comically predictable set of attributes. As it pertains to the body, she exercises obsessively. In her sexual relationships, she oozes self-absorption: she worries over petty love affairs or stalled romances, she steals other people's lovers and/or she overinvests in her sexual pleasure while forgetting her partner's. She routinely neglects her family, rarely knows her children's whereabouts and fails to support or even much care about their emotional wellbeing. Consumed by her own life, she also treats her help badly, ignoring them, and calling them by the wrong names. Regularly, she forgets they have personal lives or commitments outside their job. Finally, although the upper-class women in this category may or may not work outside the home, they are nevertheless associated with unsavoury professional identities, appearing as needlessly combative and frantically overscheduled. The rhetoric and logic of professionalism thereby indicts women with a certain degree of status, as well as those who overachieve in any way, the implication being that competitive women ruthlessly crush those who are powerless. *Uptown Girls,* for instance, scripts Ray's club owner mother Roma (Heather Locklear) as a cold, rich but nevertheless sexually aggressive woman who callously sleeps with Molly's love interest, a man clearly her junior. Roma lacks any maternal capability, preferring to spend time at her trendy club instead of nurturing her daughter or catering to her comatose husband. This selfishness, of course, opens up the space in the household for a nanny in the first place, a trope is repeated in *The Nanny Diaries* since Mrs. X hires a nanny so that she may spend her days shopping and pampering herself, and *Spanglish* wherein Deborah uses *her* free time to have an extramarital affair. In such examples, the professionally coded woman embodies not only parental laziness but also shocking callousness.

These portrayals are doubtlessly informed by a backlash sensibility that fears any form of female aggression and obsessively imagines the multiply heinous guises female ambition can take. Yet, perhaps even more disturbing is the fact that these texts encourage viewers to direct anger over unjust systems at individual targets. For instance, in the novel version of *The Nanny Diaries,* Nan witnesses Mrs. X fire the family's long-suffering housekeeper on a cruel whim, yet feels powerless to challenge her. The desperation generated by witnessing this injustice is channeled not into a real understanding of the precarious financial situation of the housekeeper, or others like her who work without benefits, but rather into increased frustration at Mrs. X, the only available receptacle for the sense of impotent fury this

situation produces. A similar dynamic occurs in *Maid in Manhattan* since Marisa loses her job thanks to the vindictiveness of Caroline, who finally wises up to the falsified circumstances of Marisa's relationship with Chris. Instead of focusing on the inherent capriciousness of a management system that fires a star employee based mainly on gossip and hearsay, the film invites spectators to want revenge against Caroline, a woman who serves as a bald-faced caricature of the spoiled, insufferable upper class. While these texts do then elliptically acknowledge the precarious financial situation of the domestic, they condense that critique into an attack on one morally bankrupt person, usually another woman. Such a modus operandi reflects postfeminism's tendency to localize social problems as personality conflicts, scaling down what might be a trenchant economic critique into a tale of cruel villains and hapless victims.[9] By the same token, the kneejerk narrative necessity that the female underdog triumph typically occurs in one of two ways. Often, the heartless mother will learn to reform her behaviour, and the final shots of the film version of *The Nanny Diaries,* for example, reveal that Mrs. X has divorced her husband and now enjoys spending time with her son.[10] Other endings more directly celebrate the domestic, as she becomes cognizant that the rich, pampered women are, despite all their money, vacuous, miserable and lonely. In such iterations, the domestic typically decides that to preserve her integrity she can no longer work for or near such people. Yet these revelations should register as no more than cold comfort for those who minister to their whims, since most domestics cannot simply leave their jobs in a moment of brash indignation, as the critical viewer is well aware. The soliciting and cathexing of audience indignation against the rich woman might therefore serve as a convenient denouement, yet we should make no mistake: the films frame individualized solutions as happy endings, yet theirs is in no way a call to social responsibility.

CODA: GLOBALIZATION AND WOMEN WORKERS

I will end by briefly describing the documentary *Maid in America* (2005), a film which focuses on three undocumented Latina domestics working in Los Angeles. Without proselytizing, this portrayal nonetheless registers as a trenchant point of comparison to the films I have been detailing because it is enunciated through the point of view of actual nannies and maids; thus, the representation actually speaks *for* them, rather than, as the domestic romance does, using the words of the domestic as a smokescreen to address the more privileged. *Maid in America*'s different set of ideological investments is made clear by its foregrounding of how logics of distance, loss and necessity most saliently inform the domestic's daily life, and the film unveils globalization's massive impact on the domestic service industry thanks to the fact that the three domestics on which it focuses—Telma, Judith and Eva—emigrated from Mexico, Guatemala

and El Salvador respectively.[11] All three women have suffered losses because of this decision, most poignantly, Judith, whose three children remain in Guatemala while she works in the United States. While the film traces her migration back home, and painfully documents the living conditions customary in this region, it makes no editorialized commentary. Leaving Guatemala, we learn, was a decision of survival, and sustenance is a key logic to this film. Telma, who cares for five-year-old Mickey, the single son of an affluent African-American couple, points out as much when she makes the dual claims that she loves Mickey as if he were her own, and that without him, she would not eat. The thorny issues of responsibility and compensation arise organically in the film as well when despite the lip service Telma's employer gives to how much his family values her, he inadvertently reveals that she is underpaid. Another employer explains how she considers her maid a friend, yet the sight of the domestic simultaneously working in her house renders this claim naïve at best.[12] In addition to showcasing the daily lives and routines of domestics, the documentary also points out that a coalition politics can mobilize change, and the film focuses in particular on the Domestic Workers Project at the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA)[13] which organizes domestics as independent contractors. This documentary project thus proves a counterpoint to the salvation or abandonment narrative common in mainstream films about domestics since it takes a pragmatic view of how the lives of domestics might be improved through financial management.

Maid in America's stark departure from mainstream portrayals points out the many important conversations that are being sidelined as cultural products instead minister to what are comparatively minor growing pains in privileged American lives. The domestic romance is symptomatic of discomfort arising over the question of what our homes will look like in a world where work identities increasingly take women and men away from and outside their domestic locales. However, to foist the responsibility of home making onto the domestic labourer comparatively ignores the impact of that shift on her and her (often absent) family, and sidesteps crucial questions about the toll that globalized labor markets increasingly exact. Should we continue to romanticize the figure of the domestic we therefore risk ignoring more savvy negotiations that offer domestics concrete hope of financial control, and stall the recognition that unexamined participation in traditional logics of domesticity disadvantages everyone.

NOTES

1. Caitlin Flanagan controversially raised this issue in an *Atlantic Monthly* article (2004). I, like many, take umbrage at Flanagan's scapegoating of feminism and her simultaneous refusal to demand more of men or governmental policies.

2. For a detailed historical analysis of how immigrant labour flows codified the position of maids in the early twentieth century, see Phyllis M. Palmer (1989).
3. Arlie Russell Hochschild (2002) has usefully coined the phrase "care drain" to refer to the fact that women who normally nurture the young, the old and the sick in their own poor countries now increasingly administer to the same groups in rich countries, leaving a care deficit in their wake.
4. For an in-depth consideration of these global labour flows, see Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (2002).
5. For book-length treatments of the precarious financial circumstances and economic burdens increasingly endured by America's youth, see Anya Kamenetz (2006) and Tamara Draut (2006). For a consideration of these circumstances on feminist mobilization, see Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (2007).
6. This casting also accords with the target demographic of these films; although they may feature low-status women, such cultural products solicit middle-class audiences.
7. While this is true of both the novel and film version of *The Nanny Diaries,* one of the more striking alterations in the film is to significantly lower the protagonist's socioeconomic status. Scripted as the only child of a struggling single parent who works as a nurse, the film's protagonist takes a nanny job while caught in the midst of a postcollege identity crisis, following her graduation from a state school. In contrast, the novel's heroine nannies to cover the costs of finishing her diploma at a prestigious private university, and comes from a well to-do-family herself.
8. These texts also enact a more complex process of distanciation through casting and appearance. Although *Friends with Money* showcases Jennifer Aniston as a maid, her star image proves too powerful to bear out this attribution. In *Maid in Manhattan,* the powerful star image of Jennifer Lopez likewise serves as a prophylactic against considering her legitimately working class. Finally, though a scene in *Spanglish* scripts Flor (Paz Vega) illegally crossing the border from Mexico, she is nonetheless airbrushed of any real effects of poverty, deprivation or even hard work.
9. For more on how the rhetoric of the individual informs the logic of postfeminism, see Angela McRobbie (2004).
10. The rehabilitation plot is meant to appear believable, yet when this same about-face occurs in *Uptown Girls,* Roma's obsequious behavior as she ministers to Ray's dance costume is so unrealistic as to operate as an unintentional act of Brechtian distanciation.
11. The film version of *The Nanny Diaries* does pay some lip service to this demographic in the form of a nanny who briefly reveals that she has had to separate from her own children to take a job in the United States. However, this thread is not picked up again, and the character never reappears in the narrative.
12. The parodic *A Day Without a Mexican* (2004) obviously intends to make a similarly ironic point, as it envisions the state of California for a day bereft of its fleets of domestic labourers, farm hands and groundskeepers.
13. For more information on CHIRLA, see http://www.chirla.org/.

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Part III

Domestic Femininity in Reality and Lifestyle Television

8 Domestic Dystopias

Big Brother, *Wife Swap* and *How Clean is Your House?*

Anna Hunt

This chapter examines the representation of domesticity in three contemporary televisual texts: the Channel 4 reality shows *Big Brother* (2000–), *Wife Swap* (2003–) and *How Clean is Your House?* (2003–). These programmes share an objective to demystify domesticity—to deconstruct the myth of domestic bliss and to expose an underside of domestic discontent. Popular culture is saturated with images of home, most conspicuously via the inherently domestic medium of television. In turn, reality television, says Germaine Greer, "is popular culture at its most popular" (2001, par. 4) and, as such, it has exploited the contemporary preoccupation with domesticity to excess: property, interior design, cookery and parenting programmes are pushing the traditional family sitcom from its domestic pedestal. Crucially, however, viewers are enticed to the reality television programmes discussed here not by the idealized images of home that define so many popular representations of domesticity but, rather, by an invitation to indulge in overtly negative portrayals of the domestic. Here, reassuringly baked, caked and icing-sugared idylls of home clash with the shamelessly contentious and acrimonious conceptions of Channel 4: if *Big Brother* contrives a deliberately dysfunctional household, *Wife Swap* delights in family discord and conflict, while *How Clean is Your House?* positively relishes offensive displays of domestic sloth. And such perverted depictions of domesticity represent high appeal for viewers; for there appears to exist, as this chapter explores, equal escapism in glimpses of the dystopian as in fantasies of the utopian. Introducing this discussion of domesticity is Henrik Ibsen's own infamous portrayal of home. With its connotations of control, performance and observation, the motif of the doll's house is central to a dialogue between feminism, domesticity and reality television—it is a model of the domestic that is reproduced and renovated in these contemporary texts. In turn, Ibsen's celebrated heroine is the everywoman of this discussion: Nora has become synonymous with feminist domestic discourse and she provides a salient starting point for a reading of these contemporary texts. Feminism itself provides effective fuel for 'home fires': the gender politics of domesticity feeds an enduring and inflammatory debate and, when

combined with popular culture, ignites the fiery confrontations that are sweeping reality television.

THE DOLL IN THE DOLL'S HOUSE

"I want to be something so much worthier than the doll in the doll's house" (Dickens 433). Voiced by Charles Dickens's Bella Rokesmith in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65) and echoed fifteen years later in Ibsen's landmark play, these words resonate through feminist history, founding a mantra that, writes G. M. Young, was to become "the watchword of a revolution" (qtd. in Weintraub 67). "I must stand on my own feet", explains Ibsen's "doll-wife" Nora to her bewildered husband: "I must do it alone. That's why I'm leaving you" (Ibsen 226–27). Nora's legacy to feminism is one of departure: a narrative of "leaving home" that, as Judy Giles documents, is deemed "a necessary condition of liberation" (141–42). Second wave feminism in particular has been explicitly tagged with this desire to depart from the domestic. Within second wave discourse, writes Joanne Hollows, "the identity 'feminist' was predicated on the escape from 'home'" and, as such, was similarly "predicated on a distance from the woman who lived there, 'the housewife'" (100). Indeed, confirm Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd, "[a]mbivalence, if not antagonism, towards the figure of the housewife can be seen to have a crucial role in the history of second wave feminism" (7). For Simone de Beauvoir, "[F]ew tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework" (470), while Betty Friedan, a figure of powerful impetus for second wave feminism, shattered the myth of 'the happy housewife' with her groundbreaking *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). More recently, second wave icon Greer has written that the "only way to escape" the "tyranny" of housework is to, like Nora, "abandon the house" (2000, 172).

But "where," asks Margaret Atwood, "did Nora go when she walked out of the doll's house?" (124) The answer offered by Ednah Dow Cheney in her 'sequel' to Ibsen's play, *Nora's Return* (1890), reflects the uneasy reaction of Ibsen's early audiences to his intrepid heroine. Here, after leaving home and training to become a nurse, Nora rejects her first hospital job offer to return home to her husband, children and a reconciled domestic denouement. On one occasion even Ibsen himself, in reluctant response to protest against his play's controversial conclusion, reconsidered Nora's fate: under pressure he radically altered its closing lines—which hear the door slamming behind Nora's final farewell—to undo the domestic departure. Thus the alternative ending in the German production of the play halts the heroine's escape with a silent stage direction: *"After an inner struggle, she lets her bag fall, and* [. . .] *sinks almost to the ground by the door"* (Ibsen 334). Described by an embittered Ibsen as "barbaric outrage" (334), such domestic resignation is by tradition,

observes Rita Felski, equally scorned by feminism which, while enthusiastically advocating abandonment of the house, has remained decidedly "silent about the return home" (86). And yet, perhaps in response to the "anti-home" narrative of second wave feminism (Felski 86), there is now emerging a renewed interest in the possibility of going home. Postfeminism is arguably producing a 'post-Nora' perspective: a compulsion to reconsider the domestic that harks back to Cheney's happy-ever-after. The question now, it seems, is not where Nora should go when she walks out of the doll's house but, rather, how Nora should behave once she has decided that she would quite like to stay in it. Those women who choose to stay are advised—via the modern-day conduct books of self-improvement television programmes—how to keep it shipshape (*Anthea Turner: Perfect Housewife,* 2006–), what food to cook in it (*Nigella Express,* 2007–), how to raise children in it (*Supernanny,* 2004–) and even which doll's house to buy (*Location, Location, Location,* 2001–). In the first, "hopeless housewives" are treated to "the Turner School of Domesticity", a disciplined education accompanied by the ultimate in twenty-first-century conduct books: *How to Be the Perfect Housewife: Lessons in the Art of Modern Household Management* (2007).

Importantly, however, 'Nora's return' is more complex than this evidence suggests. As Hollows has made clear, the contemporary preoccupation with the domestic is invested with a significant narrative of romance: the fascination with idyllic representations of the home is not necessarily a lived desire for the reality of domesticity but, rather, an idealization that relies on its status as fantasy. The oozingly feminine, carefree domestic captured by Nigella Lawson, for example, does not "prescrib[e] a return home", says Hollows but, instead, "offers the opportunity to experience at the level of fantasy what being a domestic goddess would *feel* like" (106; emphasis in original). Such self-improvement television programmes as listed above are, then, transient indulgences: brief episodes of existence in the doll's house before an escape back *out* of it. In this way, Hollows concludes, "domesticity operates as a site of fantasy and a means of exploring feminine identities that may not be realizable, or indeed desirable, outside of fantasy" (113). The aura of domestic fantasy that surrounds such figures as Nigella and Anthea is reinforced by an equally romanticized idea of domestic relationships: what Heidi I. Hartmann calls an "erroneous" perception of the family that "downplay[s] conflicts or differences of interest among family members" and instead fosters an ideology of harmonious togetherness, in which the family exists as a protected "unit" (172). In fact, Hartmann proposes, the family exists as "a locus of *struggle*" (172; emphasis in original); a hub of tension and effort that reveals an altogether less idealized definition of domestic life. Offsetting, then, its capacity as a "site of fantasy", domesticity can similarly operate as a site of grim reality—a means of exploring decidedly undesirable identities. It is this dystopian view of domesticity that unites *Big Brother, Wife Swap*

and *How Clean is Your House?*: all three are built on a domestic of discontent from which Nora is always relieved to escape.

DOMESTIC REALITIES: *BIG BROTHER*

Channel 4's *Big Brother* is arguably the most significant social experiment in domesticity of recent times. While the first phase of reality television, writes Jonathan Bignell, featured camera footage of heroic "policemen, ambulance drivers or firefighters, more recent programmes have shifted their focus from the observation of action in public space [. . .] towards an interior and private dramatic world" (28). Indeed, "[w]hen all public space is overlooked, the only realm left to explore is private space, bedrooms, bathrooms and toilets", says Greer (2001, par. 25). The private space created by *Big Brother* is, then, made public by design. In a reproduction of a doll's house—with its removable roof or hinged front to reveal the rooms inside—the *Big Brother* house is conceived with uninterrupted surveillance in mind. With box-like rooms and glass walls, the house is a stage set on which dramas of domesticity are played out. Deliberately a house, rather than a home, however, its furnishing contradicts the comforting tweeness of doll house decor. Instead its interior is, Bignell observes, "aggressively modern" (123): tough plastic seating, bright lighting, windowless bedrooms and poky bathrooms reduce comfort to a minimum, while outside space is dominated by high fencing and a glaring lack of vegetation—it is not intended to be a pleasant place to be. In the early days of *Big Brother,* then Channel 4 boss, Michael Jackson, gave it a utopian gloss: "The house represents a melting pot for a broader, more understanding and inclusive society. [. . .] programmes like *Big Brother* provide an optimistic glimpse at the ease of presence between a group of people with different ethnicity, sexuality, religion, class and education" (*The Observer,* July 2001, par. 16). Promoted as an exercise in social awareness and community relations, *Big Brother* has, in reality, revealed itself to be the locus of struggle of Hartmann's analysis: Jackson's optimistic utopia has deteriorated rather rapidly into a domestic dystopia.

In 2003, as Bignell documents, criticism of the tedium of *Big Brother* footage prompted the decision by the production team "to introduce greater stress on the contestants, paraphrased as 'Big Brother gets evil'" (52). Accordingly, in subsequent series of the show, emphasis has increasingly been on further reducing the residence to its doll house shell: smaller rooms, fewer beds, less food. Coupled with a nomination and eviction system devised to encourage tension and dispute, *Big Brother* seems intent on replicating, and magnifying, the "domestic storm" of Ibsen's drama with its own spectacle of upset and controversy (Ibsen 199). "As reality television series multiply across the networks", predicts Greer, "they will become increasingly sadistic and prurient. [. . .] *Big Brother* is bullying in

all its forms writ large. It is the politics of the playground projected back to people as entertainment" (2005, par. 62). Restructuring the traditional nuclear family beyond all recognition, it is a pantomime troupe of strangers that enter the *Big Brother* house. Stripped of privacy and isolated from the outside world, the contestants become strangely unreal; devoid of any pre-*Big Brother* identity their profiles are pieced together in the editing suite and presented to viewers as a suitable cast for the televisual stage set. And it is hoped that within this exposed environment, amidst the anonymous architecture, the contestants' discomfort will produce some disagreeable behaviour—while Ibsen's audiences were shocked into disapproval at the disrupted domestic of his play, it is precisely the fracturing of domestic relations that satisfies the avid viewers of *Big Brother*. Relishing displays of pedantry over washing up, playground spats over the dinner table and full-blown rivalry over cooking duties, the "optimistic glimpse" at communal living exposes itself as greedy voyeurism of fraught domesticity. Moreover, united by this curiosity for conflict, viewers "are happy to observe, evaluate and judge their fellow humans on capricious and partial evidence and condemn them to ostracism, one of the most powerful weapons in the human social armoury, just because they don't like them" (Greer, 2001, par. 9). Any sense of security or belonging, instinctively associated with the concept of home, is, then, stripped away by the mechanics of *Big Brother*. The protected unit of family life becomes, instead, segregated and vulnerable; a transitory construction made subject to the whims of the television audience.

Consciences were pricked for the first time when audiences of *Celebrity Big Brother* (2007) witnessed a domestic storm of previously unseen furore. Complaints were made and Channel 4 disciplined, in response to the tragicomic portrayal of a broken home: a bitter confrontation sparked by disagreement over a vegetable stock cube. The accusations of bullying and racism which followed eclipsed any claim to entertainment value. Captured concisely in this one memorable episode between eventual winner Shilpa Shetty and *Big Brother* veteran Jade Goody, is the real, unglossed result of *Big Brother*'s domestic experiment: programmes like *Big Brother* provide, in fact, a depressing glimpse at the *un*ease "between a group of people with different ethnicity, sexuality, religion, class and education" (Jackson par. 16)—and, significantly in this case, the unease between a group of women with different ethnicity, sexuality, religion, class and education, when they find themselves sharing the same kitchen. Shetty's (moral and financial) victory of *Celebrity Big Brother* (2007) was significant not only because of the international racism debate that erupted around her. Interestingly, women do not win *Big Brother* (UK) very often: Shetty is only the fourth female of fourteen winners since the programme began in 2000. This seems to be one domestic, then, from which women are actively pushed; fellow housemates and viewers repeatedly nominate and evict female contestants, encouraging rather than resisting their departure

from the house. Into this unreceptive environment walked, in the 2005 series of *Celebrity Big Brother,* feminist icon Greer. Despite previously declining to participate in an ITV reality show—the displaced domesticity of *I'm a Celebrity: Get Me Out of Here!* (2002–)—and despite her earlier derision of *Big Brother* itself, Greer responded to her own call to women to "abandon the house" by walking *into* the most infamous house of all. Only five days later, however, Greer became the first celebrity contestant in *Big Brother* history to voluntarily leave. Seemingly reconsidering her earlier advice and upholding the second wave narrative of "leaving home", she followed in Nora's footsteps and left the *Big Brother* house. "I walked out", she said later, "because I didn't want to be a part of their [her fellow contestants'] undoing [. . .]" (Greer, 2005, par. 61). In truth, perhaps Greer, like Bella Rokesmith, "want[ed] to be something so much worthier" than the celebrity doll of Channel 4's own notorious doll's house.

DOMESTIC DISCONTENT: *WIFE SWAP*

If pushed to the fringes of *Big Brother,* the lady of the house takes centre-stage in Channel 4's BAFTA award-winning *Wife Swap*. First aired in 2003, this reality programme provides an interesting response to the question of Nora's whereabouts following her departure from home. Here, she simply gets swapped: when Nora walks out of her own doll's house she walks straight into another—replacing the resident wife who, in turn, relocates to Nora's home. Such a simple formula has resulted in Channel 4 viewing figures exceeded only by *Big Brother* (Webb 16). The domestic departure is—like Cheney's version of Ibsen's tale—a temporary one: two weeks during which the new wife must first step directly into the original wife's shoes, adopting her role in the family and experiencing her daily life, before then implementing her chosen rule changes. The new wife presents her surrogate family with typically controversial amendments to their accustomed routine, to which they must agree to adhere for the remainder of the swap. Each swap begins with the new wife entering her new home, alone, to explore its interior. "[M]uch emphasis," Bignell writes, "is placed on the details of the mise-en-scène in each house" (30). Empty of its occupants, the home, like the *Big Brother* residence and Ibsen's own doll's house, is a stage set—each prop a significant clue to the drama about to unfold. Domestic trivia are "revealing evidence of the class and cultural expectations of the participants. The kinds of furnishing, level of cleanliness and tidiness, and the repertoire of items kept in the fridge and in kitchen cupboards become key signs of definition for the two households" (Bignell 30). Family photographs are scrutinized, the quantity of fresh food or ready-meals scorned, the number of children's beds anxiously counted—all in an attempt to build a profile of the woman the new wife must 'become'. To aid her in this task, she is given a household manual.

Written by the 'real' wife, this is a conduct book of sorts, comprising detailed instructions for the correct running of her household: washing, cleaning and cooking routines.

Despite the intimacy suggested by the programme's punning title, any affection between the new wife and her substitute husband is rare. Orchestrated to produce maximum tension between participants, *Wife Swap* searches out stereotypes to pair the wealthy with the financially struggling, the fastidiously organized with the determinedly messy, the church-goer with the atheist, the dogmatic with the liberal, the career-minded with the unemployed, the materialist with the environmentalist and so on. Deliberately selected, like the motley *Big Brother* ensemble, to create a cast of memorable characters, the *Wife Swap* families perform a domestic pantomime in which the wife plays the leading role. Such contrived cultural mixing works not to "downplay" but, rather, to actively foreground the "conflicts or differences of interest among family members" (Hartmann 172): the myth of the happy family is publicly deconstructed as squabbles and heated disputes dominate the edited footage. The idea behind *Wife Swap* is, says Paul Webb, "a very simple one that appeals to an ancient and very powerful emotion—that the grass is always greener on the other side" (9–10): there is the impetus to explore, to step out of the allocated role of housewife and to experience an alternative identity. For some of the wives who participate in *Wife Swap* this seems an accurate description. Temporary departure from their own homes is a small escape, a trial separation from husband and family and the opportunity to experience what proves to be an improved existence living someone else's domestic: the chance to upgrade from one doll's house to another. Accompanying this escape is the hope that their own families will, enlightened, welcome their return home with renewed and humble appreciation. For others, however, the motivation appears to be very different. It seems that for a significant number of the *Wife Swap* wives, the programme is an opportunity to showcase, rather than to bemoan, their own domestic. Theirs is a mission of perceived goodwill: they will allow another woman—and the television cameras—a taste of clean, shiny, successful domesticity, whilst going forth to educate the surrogate husband and family.

Under the glaring eye of the *Wife Swap* camera lens is not the anonymous domestic of *Big Brother* but, rather, the very fabric of personal lives—of which participants can be fiercely protective. Feminism works to intensify the emotive potential of domesticity by investing the personal with the political: relative to circumstances there is an implied social pressure on women to justify decisions to prioritize family life or paid employment. As such, *Wife Swap*—where women's relationships with the domestic are made subject to direct scrutiny—is characterized by vehement defence of domestic choices. Working mothers are chided as selfish and controlling; dedicated housewives are denigrated as ambitionless and submissive. Indeed, disparagement and defensiveness dominate

the *Wife Swap* experience. The second week of each swap, during which the new wife can implement her rule changes, generally features a dramatic and earnest overhaul of the household. In a methodical dismantling and redesigning of domesticity, the fridge is emptied and restocked with different food; the house is scrubbed spotless or, alternatively, left to fester; children are shocked into discipline or let loose from their usual restraint; the husband is directed firmly towards the kitchen or pushed from the house towards the pub; furniture is rearranged and rooms reaccessorized; televisions and computers confiscated or bestowed; and gardens dug up and replanted. Motivated by the conviction that her way is the best way, each wife fashions her own idea of perfect domesticity, one with which the surrogate families inevitably struggle, or refuse, to comply. Pride permeates the programme, fostering an attitude of superiority that results in an often acrimonious meeting of the wives at the end of their swap. The experience of *Wife Swap,* summarizes Hilary Bell, commissioning editor for Channel 4, lets participants "reflect, lets them look at their lives and make changes, which is a very positive thing." Crucially, however, "[t]he one thing that isn't positive is that there's no sense of sisterhood, and I find it very depressing how judgmental of each other the women are" (qtd. in Webb 20). Such hostility between the wives overwhelms any appreciation for what Bell calls "the richness of attitudes and approaches to living that we have in this country" (qtd. in Webb 21)—a comment reminiscent of Jackson's sanguine statement about *Big Brother.* Instead, the divisive performance between the wives arguably dramatizes the more universal struggle to reconcile personal and political stances towards domesticity—and produces another theatre of domestic discontent that captivates audiences.

DOMESTIC NEGLECT: *HOW CLEAN IS YOUR HOUSE?*

From the impersonal domestic of *Big Brother* to the increased personal probing of private space in *Wife Swap,* the voyeurism of reality television reaches an extreme in the absolute exposure of *How Clean is Your House?* Here, the realm of "bedrooms, bathrooms and toilets" of Greer's statement is explored to the level of scientific scrutiny: swabs, Petri dishes and white coats are props in a reality television programme that seeks to showcase—and then to sanitize—the sheer grubbiness of other people's homes. It is, however, the showcasing rather than the sanitizing that fascinates the programme's viewers. Undoubtedly, the efforts of hosts Kim and Aggie—the Queens of Clean—to instil a sense of domestic pride in their weekly subjects is engaging, as is their preference for traditional cleaning solutions involving vinegar, lemon juice and soda crystals. Accessorized with fake-fur-fringed marigold gloves and lipsticked smiles, this mordant dyad offer a pantomime parody of the perfect housewife. Theirs is

a mission of disinfected domesticity: each week they tackle a household that has deteriorated beyond the politics of housework to a state of filth and even squalor, chastising the inhabitants and restoring their home to a clean, shiny example of domestic perfection. The task that has defeated the home owners themselves now defies the domestic labour of a single housewife: Kim and Aggie are accompanied by a workforce of cleaners who embark upon a military operation of sanitation that shuns the soft soap fantasy of Anthea Turner's domestic serenity for the hard science of microscopes and allergy tests. The process of hygienic redemption is secondary, however, to the displays of domestic sloth that define *How Clean is Your House?* Viewers are shocked by close-up images of lice-ridden carpets and mould-covered kitchens, and delightedly disgusted by footage of stained sheets and filthy toilets. Blood, sweat, rotting food and animal excrement are sniffed, prodded and poked. Such unabashed exposure of the tabooed is compelling to audiences: the spotlight on detritus and waste so contradictory to the sterilized standards set by typical television. The grotesque is made more palatable with a considered injection of spoof—akin to the blood and gore shots of a bad horror film, the magnified images of domestic dirt are accompanied by a dramatic soundtrack of screeching violins.

Beyond the burlesque humour, though, is a sobering backdrop of domestic despair. The pride and defensiveness displayed by the participants of *Wife Swap* is absent or short-lived in *How Clean is Your House?,* where home owners typically express mere indifference to the chaos that surrounds them. A "house-proud woman", scorns Greer, "equates her spotless home with her virtuous self and derives her sense of self-worth from the orderliness of her cupboards rather than the qualities of her mind or soul" (2000, 171). Perhaps, then, dismissal of domestic responsibility should be admired; the refusal to invest time and energy in laborious tasks respected as a method to fulfilling other, more lofty, aspirations. Indeed, Greer rallies, "[b]y the millennium housework should have been abolished"; freeing the "labouring sex" from the shackles of the home (2000, 164; 152). Far from esteemed, however, the home owners of *How Clean is Your House?* are exposed to the derision and disgust of viewers—an indignity exacerbated by their uninhibited willingness to exhibit their dirt and disorder to the cameras. The audience's disbelief and revulsion, tinged, of course, with smugness for their own comparatively pristine homes, is tinged also with a note of pity. For, significantly, the neglected domestic presented here is not the liberated autonomy of Greer's commentary. Rather, the subjects of the show are presented as victims of their own failed domesticity. Indeed, contrary to an escape from the confinement of home, complete abstinence from housework has resulted in a form of incarceration: the claustrophobia of the doll's house made manifest in the literal and physical overwhelming of the inhabitants by their own home. Space is cluttered and identity stifled as inanimate mess encroaches and impedes even the smallest attempts at

action. The devaluing of domesticity has, it seems, led not to emancipation but to immobilization.

DOMESTICITY AND POPULAR CULTURE

Domesticity is a powerful trigger of emotion. It exists, largely, as the humdrum backdrop to our lives: established routines and necessary tasks that demand time but little critical attention or emotional engagement. And yet the domestic is so intrinsically linked with the personal and the private, with individual likes and dislikes and the small choices and comfortable habits that define daily life, that it exists, also, as a revealing expression of identity. This explains perhaps the extent to which, as Amanda Craig notes, "[a]ll of us [. . .] are fascinated by the details of other people's lives" (par. 7), which, in turn, accounts for the lofty viewing figures for these televisual representations of domesticity. It is not, however, a yearning for depictions of domestic bliss that draws the millions of viewers to *Big Brother, Wife Swap* and *How Clean is Your House?* Rather, it is the potential for witnessing volatile exchanges and domestic disasters that engages audiences. Viewers are intrigued by the overtly negative portrayals of home and family life that characterize these programmes; portrayals seemingly so at odds with the intentions of the earliest radio and television broadcasters to "create an atmosphere conducive to the sustenance of home" (Silverstone 30). While *Big Brother* presents a survival-of-the-fittest game show of domesticity, *Wife Swap* and *How Clean is Your House* arguably offer a far more 'real' version of reality television—lifting the lid on authentic, rather than constructed, doll's houses. And intriguingly, feud-ridden *Wife Swap* and filth-ridden *How Clean is Your House?* can be seen to function equally effectively as vehicles of escapism as the likes of Nigella or Anthea. For if picture perfect representations of domesticity allow indulgence in romanticized ideas of the ultimately desirable, then these Channel 4 reality shows similarly captivate by granting temporary immersion in the ultimately undesirable. In the same way that fantasies of chintz curtains and bread baking are consciously whimsical flights of fancy from which we willingly return, so the spectacles of *Wife Swap* and *How Clean is Your House?* are fascinating yet reassuringly distant glimpses of how it could, but we hope will not, be. Both extremes function to situate, and to even make more manageable, the reality of daily domesticity.

Craig has identified this appeal of the negative: "Are you tense, irritable and ashamed of your domestic life? Do you wonder whether your children are hideous, your partner lazy and your house a mess? Fear not: like five million people every week you can find real people whose lives, tastes and behaviour can console you by being far, far worse" (par. 1). Indeed, how far television has actually travelled from its early emphasis on "an atmosphere conducive to the sustenance of home" is questionable. The original

responsibility of television to project suitable models of domesticity and to impart, as Mary Beth Haralovich documents, "an ideology of domesticity which would encourage women to accept a gender identity appropriate to their required role in society" (qtd. in Silverstone 32), is arguably still evident in, if not fundamental to, the reality television programmes discussed here. By inverting the perfect to the imperfect, these shows present their target audience of (middle-class) females, with persuasive examples of *un*suitable models of domesticity—examples which work to consciously interrogate the relationship between feminism and the domestic, and which utilize the powerful medium of popular culture to do so. The contemporary phenomenon of reality television, which now dominates programming schedules, works directly to publicly critique the personal: to deconstruct the gender politics of domesticity and to demonstrate to women, often with crude but commanding case studies, the consequences of their domestic choices. Finally, then, perhaps these reality shows can be viewed as cautionary tales; in particular the domestic dystopia of *How Clean is Your House?* The complete deterioration of the doll's house into a state of abject domesticity nods to a post-Nora challenge to the anti-home narrative of second wave feminism: an extreme consequence of heeding the second wave feminist call to 'abandon the house'.

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9 "It's Just Sad"

Affect, Judgement and Emotional Labour in 'Reality' Television Viewing

Helen Wood, Beverley Skeggs and Nancy Thumim

In this chapter we open up a debate about how the extension and opening out of intimacy on 'reality' television is contributing to refiguring the value of women's emotional and domestic responsibilities within the neo-liberal economy. The extensive coverage of women's domestic and emotional labour on 'reality' television can be seen to be a positive valorization of all the work and responsibility women perform. Yet it can also be seen as a new way by which capital extends into regions it previously considered negligible to profit accumulation. In the 1980s, substantive debates, within the rubric of the 'domestic labour debates', took place about the actual value of women's labour to the general economy: Did domestic labour have the same monetary value as paid labour? Should housework be paid for in the same way as waged work? Did women's servicing of the family enable capitalism to survive without capitalists paying for the sustenance of the workforce? If women stopped cooking, cleaning and having children would capitalism grind to a halt?[1] These debates forced women's 'invisible' labour to be recognized within male social theory, and eventually, through women's lobbying, by governments: the EU, UK, France and Scandinavian countries have all attempted to quantify domestic labour in relation to their GDP.[2] And domestic labour is becoming the fastest-growing sector of the European economy (see www.global-labour.org). The expansion of the domestic labour market exists alongside increased use of domestic and emotional labour as sources of entertainment, with 'reality' television companies such as Endemol and RDF, generating massive profits. In response to these changes, we are interested in how 'reality' television visualizes the contemporary conditions of women's domestic and emotional labour and reshapes evaluations of moral worth, of what it means to be a 'good woman'.

Eva Illouz (1997) maintains that the transformation of intimacy and its increased use as a site for entertainment and exploitation calls for an extension of notions such as domination and capital to domains hitherto considered private. Likewise, Patricia Clough (2003) proposes that the promise of normalization is no longer simply trusted to the family, kin groups and other

institutions of civil society; rather it is now a matter of investment in and regulation of market-driven circulation of affect, whereby capitalist accumulation enters the domain of affect and attention. 'Reality' television, by sensationalizing women's domestic labour and emotional management of relationships, displays the new ways in which capital extends into the 'private', in which capital is engaged in the socialization of affective capacities and in which governance and capital become intricately entwined. Eeva Jokinen (2008), developing the domestic labour debate into the present refers to this process as the 'fourth shift', a temporal moment in labour relations in which the borderline between work and home becomes obscure and dissolved. In the fourth shift, the core of creating and accumulating wealth shifts from material goods to immaterial ones, in which knowledge, education, communication, caring and taking care of the chain of services—all kinds of domestic management—are central, and the paradigmatic form of new work is *domestic work*. It is the visualization of this fourth shift, to affective, domestic, emotional and affective labour on 'television' and the process of subsumption by which value is extracted from intimacy, that we address by utilizing some of the data from our empirical research project on 'reality' television and women audiences. In particular we examine how the sustained focus on women's domestic and emotional labour induces different affects from women audiences in our research project, *Making Class and Self Through Televised Ethnical Scenarios*.[3]

By exploring one small word from our research transcripts—sad—we show how sympathies and pleasures are invoked simultaneously alongside derisions and judgements, in relation to the performance of labour by 'reality' television participants. Such responses, we argue, also disclose research participant's own relationship to domestic and emotional labour, revealing how investments are made in the production of gendered self-worth. Whilst many critics, like John Corner (2002) and Richard Kilborn (2003), refer to 'reality' television's challenges to documentary forms as part of a wider crisis in public culture, we think it is equally important to locate 'reality' television within traditions associated with 'women's genres' and melodrama. Rachel Moseley (2000) first pointed to how the television makeover capitalizes on devices from soap opera, and Helen Piper (2004) provides the useful phrase 'improvised drama' to describe 'reality' forms such as *Wife Swap* (2003–). 'Reality' television's main pursuit of dramatic tension leads to the representation of crisis, conflict and ultimate transformation (often with the aid of 'expert' advice), placing attention on the identifiable *failure* of women's domestic, emotional and feminine practices which have to be seen to be in need of transformation. In her work on 1950s sitcoms, Mary Beth Harolovich (1992) identifies how the pleasures of domesticity as a site of psychic and social success for women became something posited as an ideal to be laboured towards, placing emphasis on the detailing of female (often maternal) failure, thereby repositioning domesticity into a set of practices and performances through which one constantly needs to try harder, get advice and potentially transform for the future, as a form of necessary labour.

This is not to say that television has always represented the heterosexual family as an ideal that can be achieved. Tania Modleski (1982) outlines how in late 1970s soap operas the family is presented in a constant state of turmoil requiring the viewer to be tolerant and understanding. She argues that the display of the family as a complex and contradictory site offers the audience a "larger picture" in which sympathy can be attached to all characters, where the viewer is "in a position to forgive all" (93), yet still judge. We can see 'reality' television's playing out of moral dramas within these traditions. Lynne Joyrich (1992) argues that soap operas of the 1980s and 1990s involve emotional intensification and moral polarization through the focus on 'personality'. We might see this as paralleling more recent shifts in morality whereby self-performance comes to be a source of legitimation and value rather than morality authorized by external institutions such as the state or religion. As Mimi White (1992) demonstrates, the psychotherapeutic experience has become central to a wide range of television broadcasting, deployed to enable an individual to find their proper place, a place overdetermined by family/gender relations and models of consumption. By visualizing familiarity, the melodramatic techniques used on 'reality' television amplify the 'ordinary' domestic generating extreme versions of moral simplification: good and bad writ large through innocence and evil, situated in a safe 'home'. 'Reality' television thus continues the traditions associated with 'women's media'—soap operas, magazines, talk shows and melodramas—and their intense moralizing of domesticity and women's social worth.

'Reality' television regularly reflects back domestic space and emotional labour in different ways. For instance, one of the earliest 'reality' programmes in the US, *The Real World* (1992–), brought together a number of different young adults to live in a house in the city in order to monitor their domestic relationships, whilst *Big Brother* (2000–) focuses on the interactions of the participants within the everyday of the Big Brother house, however surreal the set. *The Osbournes* (2002–2005) follows the life of a celebrity family, resurrecting many of the medium's obsessions with the domestic family sitcom. Even when participants are sent as far away from 'home' as possible as in *Survivor* (2000–), *Castaway* (2000) or *Shipwrecked* (2000–) the action is concerned with how participants rebuild, manage and maintain a new domestic environment in unfamiliar terrain. In recent hybrids of 'reality' television and lifestyle programming, the household of the 'ordinary' participant becomes the site for capturing the action, as in *Wife Swap* (2003–), *Supernanny* (2004–), *You Are What You Eat* (2004–), and *Honey, We're Killing the Kids* (2005–). And even in the event-type programmes which focus on the public world of corporate business, such as *The Apprentice* (2004–), the participants are always filmed living together framing the public tasks of the day by getting up and getting motivated and then returning and deconstructing the day from within the comparative comfort of a shared domestic space. Liesbet van Zoonen (2001) discusses how original critiques

of the *Big Brother* phenomenon reproduced the distinction between the private and public sphere, attacking *Big Brother* in favour of keeping the distinction intact, whilst the huge audiences that it attracted suggested a widespread rejection of such a divide. The humdrum experiences of emotionally managing domesticity are therefore the key to the show's success: it springs from the contemporary bourgeois division between a private realm and public realm that has isolated private life, marginalized it and made it invisible. Feminism and *Big Brother* share their resistance against that division. It is consequentially not surprising that both do well with women, in the Dutch situation at least (Van Zoonen 673). We want to assess what the blurring of the public/private distinction through an intense publicising of intimacy offers to audiences, locating some of our findings from the forty women we interviewed about their own lives and the place of 'reality' television within their broader life experiences. What is it about the private realm that becomes appealing in the replay of 'real' lives and homes (rather than fictional ones) on television? Since the private sphere has traditionally housed and constrained women's forms of domestic and emotional labour, securing their relative absence from the public sphere, what kind of social processes does this verisimilitude, mediation and 'doubling' of domestic relations in the space of the home produce?

In our interviews we talked to the women about their lives, their interests, tastes, work, friendships and families. As we might expect many of the women expressed tensions about the home: working outside of the home; wanting to work from home; concerns about children in the home; the boredom and loneliness of being at home. These covered the range of dilemmas in which women's lives are bound up with domestic expectations. They all eloquently articulated the range of frustrations that feminists have identified in the broader politics of domesticity. The women were recruited from different social locations so these replies depended upon their related class and geographic locations, their position within the labour market and how their particular households were arranged. The issues from their own lives constantly reverberate around what they say about 'reality' television and those frustrations were sometimes complicated by the idea that the home should be an uncomplicated site of authenticity, a space where one should be able to 'be oneself'. As Nicola from the Addington group suggests,

> I suppose I am an easy-going person but at work I can be an uptight person. *At home I am just me* but at work I am different and as well you have to be different at work, and with my best friend at work we have a professional relationship as well as a social relationship. But at work you see a different side to me from home.

In this sense the merits of 'reality' television's association with the home helps support its broader claim to some kind of authenticity. The home represents an inevitableness and comfortableness in which the artifices of

work and/or public life *should* melt away. Previous research on sexuality demonstrated how the ontological security of a 'home' was a strong desire for those whose traditional family space represented violence, difficulty and anxiety; in response they generated 'mobile homes', spaces of ontological security in different sites where they were free from surveillance and could be 'themselves'.[4]

For instance, 'reality' television uses relationships to illicit raw and spontaneous outbursts of emotion, what Laura Grindstaff (2002) refers to in relation to the talk show as the money shot: those moments when there is an eruption of anger, a breakdown of tears or a poignant moment of self-revelation. The currency placed on this unscripted emotion in 'reality' television can be related to the trend towards the commercialization of feeling. Hochschild suggests "as a culture we have begun to place an unprecedented value on spontaneous 'natural' feeling. The more our activities as individual emotion managers are managed by organisations, the more we tend to celebrate the life of unmanaged feeling" (1983, 190). Other studies of 'reality' television audiences support this idea by suggesting that the main viewing pleasure lies in detecting the moments of ontological integrity when people are not 'acting for the cameras' but are apparently 'being true to themselves'.[5] Our research substantiates these findings further: 'staying real' and 'being real' were significant criteria for assessing the value of 'reality' television participants. We develop this analysis by exploring what is at stake in the relationship between 'reality' television's creation of 'authentic' feeling and changes in and extension of emotional management. This general myth of inevitability and ontological security lends itself well to 'reality' television and to the construction of seeing real life unfold. For example, one participant's appreciation of the programme *Sex Inspectors* (2004–) relates to how detailing the domestic experiences of couples holds the key to the ultimate improvement of their emotional relationships because it gives access to a sense of people "as they really are". She discusses a couple who had become distant from one another and how the psychology experts: "[j]ust went to their home and just okay watch how they behave, how they sit [. . . .] I think so just when they are home and just recording each other and everything and at the end of the programme they are close." This sense of 'just' recording what happens at home suggests a kind of stripping of the processes of production to a raw minimum.

Yet 'reality' television is highly edited and preplanned to stage or format a 'reality' and our research participants are very conscious of these processes. But the repetition of the domestic and the everyday helps to obscure, or at least marginalize, some of these televisual devices. In relation to *Big Brother,* 'Sabeen' is confused by the representation of the everyday, live on television, but then reveals how gripping and compelling that representation becomes:

> When I first got the television, that's the first programme which is coming, so I was just asking my husband like what's this, like people are

> just you know, sleeping, eating, going to washroom and you know, just taking baths and everything and it's coming live. He said it's a programme, it's like the plot is something like that—you know drama or something, challenging. So they just stuck like in the one home [. . . .] and we just watched the behaviour of the people and the housemates, *how they're going to behave, if they good, if they bad*. . . . Just like click in my mind, good programme.

For 'Sabeen' the reflections of the mundane actions of domestic life reveal insights into good and bad behaviour, like the moral polarity rooted in melodrama. We have suggested that British 'reality' television's incitement to judge participants on these grounds ultimately re-routes and re-embeds classed and gendered distinctions through a conservative ethics of individualization and self-improvement.[6] The 'right' behaviour of the home is organized around emotional as well as physical labour. The home is not just a 'natural' site of comfort, but one created through sustained domestic and emotional labour of women. The common adage of turning a house into a home, involves the unseen but intimate 'labours of love' to which women are supposed be naturally predisposed. Potentially, the good or bad behaviour, as 'Sabeen' sees it, relates to deploying appropriate emotional work that is unequivocally tied to the maintenance of 'home', domesticity and thus to traditional forms of femininity.

'REALITY' TELEVISION AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR

The significance of emotional labour to contemporary gender relations in paid work was initially demonstrated by Arlie Hochschild in her now classic study of the training of flight attendants in *The Managed Heart* (1983), and in her more recent work on how feminism and intimacy have been recruited to develop the commercial space of individualism in *The Commercial Spirit of Intimate Life* (2003). In the former she describes the way in which female flight attendants are required to harness the skills of emotional work from the home to manage the customers on board an aircraft, by asking them to think about irate passengers as if children, to defuse difficult situations and to deploy care and empathy towards *all* passengers: "It is the flight attendants' task to convey a sense of relaxed, homey cosiness whilst at the same time at take off and landing mentally rehearsing the emergency announcement" (106). Hochschild's concern that the transformation of emotional work into paid labour and commercial consumption will generate damage through the disjuncture between 'true' feelings and the commercialized feelings that one is called to invoke, is a demarcation that itself reproduces the public/private dichotomy and operates with an essentialized interior self. However, what Hochschild usefully points to is the commercialization of feeling and how its transformation into capital produces new forms of governance, arguing that:

> The transmutation of emotional life—the move from the private realm to the public realm, the trend towards standardisation and commercialisation of emotive offerings are being recycled back into individual private lives; emotional life now appears under new management [. . . . as it] opens the family home to a larger world of feeling rules (Hochschild 1983, 160).

It is possible to see 'reality' television through this lens, one that provokes new rules for emotional management, what Eva Illouz (2003), in her discussion of the cultural phenomenon of Oprah Winfrey, calls moral entrepreneurship: making money through sensationalizing and exploiting emotional expression. As Illouz notes, the emphasis upon extracting emotional display and the future promise of emotional management, generates a form of economic value, offering new ways to exploit people (especially women). Exploitation becomes a mechanism not just of surplus-value extraction from paid labour, but also cultural affect stripping.[7]

The government and commercial rhetoric on enterprise selves and self-responsibility proposes that self-work has a transformative potential: a 'work on yourself, work for the global economy' happy alliance in which individualization reigns.[8] Mark Andrejevic (2004) suggests that the modes of surveillance routinized and naturalized on 'reality' television deliver up individuals as knowable entities in the increased push for niche markets by advanced capitalism. All of this supports the notion that 'reality' television represents the successful marshalling of the intimate sphere into the broader public realm for commercialization. This however barely tells of the gender implications of this phenomenon. The increasingly close relationship *between* governance and capital visualized through the incitement to try harder on 'reality' television positions women in particular as the objects for scrutiny.

The ability/capacity to sell one's labour (of whatever variety), however, is not an equal opportunity process: processes of socialization and individualization are also processes of distinction. Diane Reay (2004), for instance, shows how emotional capital is not a resource that can be put to use for equal benefit: her study of how emotional capital underwrites children's education is a study of vast class divides. Hochschild too has made it clear that gender and class distinctions are reproduced in the hierarchies of emotional management. What happens on 'reality' television is not necessarily an entirely new set of neo-liberal techniques, but a spectacular and unequivocal visualization of the extension of domestic and emotional labour, which makes explicit the divisions within gender relations. So, like Hochschild's flight attendants' study, we ask how the capturing of intimacy into the public sphere of television, which is then refracted back into the space of domestic relations, is mixed up with the politics of emotional management by those already negatively positioned by symbolic classifications of gender, race and class.

The conditions that 'reality' television creates for its audiences suggest a more immanent set of relations to the televised participants than to paid actors. Whilst this can be said to develop out of melodramatic imperatives—the overpresence of the image for women viewers and the 'nowness' of the endless soap opera narrative—it is also intensified by the use of 'ordinary' people, and sometimes their own homes, to stage the spectacular drama.[9] In this sense, Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2005) argue that the use of micro-communities, either fake or proscribed, with the framing of competition and individual aspirations represent a "mediated social/public realm" which develops the communicative relations of the talk show, eroding divisions between audiences and 'performers' and offering an extended social realm which theories of representation cannot capture.[10] We see the many responses the women in our study made in relation to feeling empathy with those on television in this way. For instance, 'Sabeen' talks about the moment of revelation in *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (2003–):

> So *in front of your eyes* you're going to see it because before the house it was like this, and they're doing it, just you know building it and doing it. And afterwards they're going to show how the family reacts, *you start crying as well sometimes . . . they were so real like you start crying oh my god*. She sacrificed all through her life and now she gains a home like that with her children.

In melodrama Peter Brooks ([1975]1995) argues that closeness is achieved through its appeal to a prelinguistic system of gesture and tableau that aims beyond language to immediate understanding. What is intensified here, for 'Sabeen', is the way in which empathy is induced through the recognition of the shared demands of emotional labour for others, who are posited more literally as 'real' or 'actual'—"in front of your eyes". As Hochschild notes, in the social hierarchy of "feeling rules", women are called upon to constantly deploy empathy for others (even in the workplace) as part of the labour of being feminine, or rather we'd argue, doing femininity.

Another participant, Ruby, whilst discussing *Wife Swap,* relates how those spectacular moments of emotional turmoil replay 'real life' in such a way that she becomes part of the emotional journey, not just with other women but with *all* of the characters:

> Yes, 'cos I think sometimes you've got to go through all that anger and fighting and shouting and screaming at each other to, unfortunately you know you've got to go through it to find out the answer to solve the problem, its part of the process. And yes we'd all love to be able to sit around a table and make notes and say well I disagree with this, and I just think OK I'm going to change *but life ain't like that*. You do have to scream and shout sometimes to be heard you know it's an invasion in

> your life, you know it's their home and someone's coming in, you know and saying right I'm going to change it. Well of course they scream and shout and there are tears and you know swearing and kids slamming doors and wives slamming doors and people saying they're going to walk out on it. But I think there's only one programme that I watched that there wasn't a proper conclusion, they had to stop filming or something, but they always come to the end, you know they sit round a table and its been a really emotional experience and *I really feel that, I feel that anger sometimes, and I feel that sadness . . . So I think I personally go through that journey with most people on the* Wife Swap, *not just the wives, but the husbands and the children, I go through—the family yeah.*

In this sense, 'reality' television might simply operate on one level as an extension of women's emotional and domestic labour in which they have traditionally been constituted as moral guardians of the nation. In the current neo-liberal political climate in which those responsibilities have become increasingly subject to governmental scrutiny, we might say that women are less entrusted with these responsibilities, evidenced for example by the establishment in the UK of the National Parenting Academy. What would it mean therefore to think of these more immanent relations with 'reality' television as a recognition and legitimation of current governmental discourses and interventions in emotional labour?

As Lisa Adkins and Celia Lury (1999) note, in the new service economies women are continually, and through a series of ongoing processes, positioned as members of a social group with an essentialized fixed identity rather than as individuals who perform an identity. Adkins and Lury show how the agency and autonomy of women workers is always limited by the category of gender, and thus the labour of doing gender is always hidden and frequently fetishised. Whilst femininity is both performative and performed, the act of performance is often politically denied *and* incited through the lack of alternatives. Therefore, what we see on 'reality' television is a visualization of different performatives and demands to 'do' femininity, domesticity and emotional management in particular ways: the performance element of the 'unconscious' performative is visualized. The distance between the practice of the viewer and the performer is minimized because both are subject to the requirements of feminine performances, particularly at the level of caring. Many programmes—in particular *Wife Swap, Supernanny* and *Honey, We're Killing Kids*—strictly fix the subject positions of mother and wife, which limit the possible performances that can be made. Yet the limits are often breached. We watch the spectacle of performativity undone; the labour required—both physical and emotional—to 'be' a woman is detailed explicitly as both success and failure and thus the 'doing' of femininity is revealed *as* labour and as an impossible demand that cannot be 'properly' achieved.[11] So whilst 'reality' television offers a visualization of capital's investment in and regulation of market-driven circulation of affect and attention, thereby

providing a recognition of the demands imposed upon women, it simultaneously offers a visualization of the difficulty and impossibility of those demands. Through gendered domestic and emotional labour performances, women are positioned more immanently to the immediate concerns of 'reality' television. However, we do not want to argue that women are damaged as such by the appeal of 'reality' television in some regressive step towards negative 'effect' that harms their essential gender. Instead we want to open out some critical questions about women's relationship to the immanence of emotional labour and the ambiguities generated through the affects of this particular form.

IT'S JUST SAD . . .

Semantically, the word 'sad' has two meanings: the first refers to an act of sorrow, to be mournful or causing sorrow; the second is a derogatory slight, meaning shocking, deplorably bad or incorrigible. The first meaning refers to an emotion whilst the second refers to a judgement. 'Sad' was a word used regularly by our participants to talk about 'reality' television and their use of the term oscillates between these meanings. The most obvious way it was used refers to an emotional and empathetic positioning with the participants on the shows. For example, when Kathy talks about the programme *Little Angels* (2004–), in which a child psychologist helps parents to cope with their difficult children, she sees how much easier it is to parent as a couple, making her empathize with the single parents: "Looking how hard it is as parents looking after children and you a see a lot of single parents who have to do both of these roles which is really *sad* you know". There are many examples from watching programmes with the women in the study where they defined moments which made them feel sad. When Vicky and Mel watch *Wife Swap* they empathize with the woman who swaps her domestic situation with one child for one with six unruly children. During a scene where the mother is getting distraught at trying to control the children, they say:

> *Vicky:* Not used to it is she.
> *Mel:* No, she's not.
> *Vicky:* *Sad*, and *sad* that she's not seen her little girl.
> *Mel:* Yeah.
> *Vicky:* Especially as she's been seeing her [the other wife's] kids all day.

Often, however, the use of the term 'sad' refers to the second meaning, a judgement made about those on 'reality' television. As is also apparent above, the distinction between empathy and a moral judgement is not so clear, which reveals a key dilemma and social contradiction at the heart of 'reality' television viewing. Lucy goes on to suggest when she talks about

the makeover programmes *What Not to Wear* (2002–) and *Ten Years Younger* (2004–):

> It's taking people who are *sad* with their lives, *sad* with how they look and I know they have to diet and they have to exercise and stuff, but surgically making them look better so that their friends and family suddenly love them. It's like how *sad* is that? it's just like it's quite *sad*, I find it quite cringey.

This extract reveals how immanent empathy is intricately bound up with moral judgements of value. The empathy that Lucy articulates about those who are "sad with their lives" is inextricably tied to the impossibility of a makeover to suddenly make people love them, and thus the 'sad' depthlessness of the television genre.

Similarly, when, 'Sabeen' and friends were watching *What Not to Wear* their conversation suggests a similar ambiguity in the meaning of sad. At the point in the programme where Trinny and Susannah have thrown away all of the clothes in the participant's (Michalena's) wardrobe, they become shocked by the way she isn't taking it seriously enough:

> All the clothes gone!
> How can she be laughing?
> How *sad* is that?
> Her problem is that she has no self-esteem.

The women, not surprisingly given the way the protagonist Michalena is pathologized by the programme, make a judgement about her lack of awareness about her tasteless wardrobe, followed by a more empathetic position, where they suggest that her denial might be due to a lack of self-esteem. The phrase 'how sad is that?' occupies both positions of judgement and empathy simultaneously. This discursive movement is common and returns in the focus groups, for example: Sarah: "I don't know it depends if you—you can see some programmes and you feel for the person and you think, 'ah you know you need help, sort yourself out' but in other ones you just think 'you're *sad*—get a life'". Similarly when Liselle is watching *Wife Swap,* she moves swiftly from suggesting that a particularly emotional moment "is very sad" to feeling uncomfortable with the invasion of privacy on the programme: "I think it is very sad . . . I think the whole thing is voyeuristic". Empathy, judgement of others and a critique of the intrusion into intimacy generated through the mediation between their lives and the programme are interwoven in the women's discussions. The ambiguity over the meaning of sad draws the female viewers into an immanent emotional labour relationship, whilst simultaneously offering a space to critique a recognizable set of feminine responsibilities of care, attention and correction in the home *and about* themselves. The experience of 'reality' television

viewing is one that is constantly conceived through a gauge of proximate judgements. Immanence produces comparison and judgement as well as recognition and sympathy.

The critical response of "it's just sad" is vitally connected to the values associated with the genre itself. As Su Holmes points out, the broader debates about cultural value that surround these programmes are often shaped by notions of 'quality' which are themselves couched in discourses of social hierarchy and class. Our middle-class participants were very conscious of providing a more reflexively critically distanced position on 'reality' television, related to their considerable understanding of the techniques and production processes and replaying some of the academic debates over the staging of 'reality'.[12] The discursive movement between empathy and judgement operates within the broader framework of cultural value in which the genre is a devalued and denigrated form of popular culture, resonant of women's culture more generally. Therefore when women are called to the emotional labour involved in the pleasures of watching 'reality' television, they are also positioned as flawed. "Putting the 'me' into seeing 'you'", as Hochschild (1983) describes emotional labour, is therefore an uncomfortable process: the women also recognize themselves as 'sad'. For example, when Sally talks about the programme *Ladette to Lady* (2005–), it is couched in the broader recognition that "ain't I sad cause I've watched every one of them". Of course this might be an effect produced by the presence of an academic researcher asking questions about popular culture, but these personal appropriations of the discourses of cultural value resounded around most of our interviews. Reading the reception of the televising of intimacy through Hochschild's discussion of emotional management reveals that there is a curious disjuncture for women. Usually emotional management involves adjusting our feelings, or at least acknowledging how we 'should feel' as dictated by the 'feeling rules' of the culture one inhabits. Here the women must negotiate their traditional labours of empathy and care against dominating cultural discourses of value. As Rachel Moseley notes in relation to makeover programmes: "Makeover shows collapse public and private space, and can destabilize the discrete entities of viewer and participant. There is potential dis-ease in the excess of the ordinary they produce, and sometimes the safest response may be a retreat into a position of class- and taste-based superiority" (314). That unease registered in the findings suggests that to engage in the emotional labour of 'reality' television viewing as a woman is also to submit oneself to a cultural pathology of moral approbation (and lack of cultural value) associated with gender and class.

INTIMACY AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR

In this chapter, we have argued that 'reality' television visualizes new capital relations of exploitation and governance as it is performed through the

extension of affect and attention, setting up a particular set of relations in which intimacy is extended and mediated through the replay of emotional labour, domesticity and home. With dramatic attention placed on crisis and failure, women's domestic and emotional labour is made visible, responsibility is allocated and the performance demands of performativity are exposed, their limits made clear: difficulty, inequality, impossibility are unresolvable. We have identified at least one 'dilemmatic' process: the simultaneous offering of empathy and making judgement, whilst also locating oneself in a hierarchy of cultural value. Illouz (2003) suggests that in contemporary culture we are called into a type of "ethical criticism" whereby the marshalling and recognition of emotional labour must also sit alongside moral evaluation. As she posits in relation to the phenomenon of *Oprah* (1986–): "The viewer is drawn into a particular biographical story by the activation of particular kinds of emotions, which we may call 'moral emotions', that bind the listener to the storyteller through a set of assumptions about worthy or reprehensible behaviour" (91). Feelings, therefore, can never be evoked as value-free; they must also be tamed by the controlling discourses of worth and cultural value, which are made spectacularly visible through the melodramatic techniques of 'reality' television. If the small word 'sad' does so much to expose the contradictions in women's relationships with their own emotional and domestic labour, there are undoubtedly many more examples of how women's relationships to their own performances of femininity and domesticity are articulated. By bringing women's domestic and emotional labour to prime-time lucrative television, its composition and distribution is exposed. Women across the board can now see a great deal of *their* labour made visible and public.

Yet the format of 'reality' television—where transformation is one of the main dramatic mechanisms—means that just like in the 1950s their labour is usually found wanting, in need of expert advice, guidance and improvement. The recognition of labour that feminists once fought for now comes highly packaged in a moral order which attributes person-value: the good, bad, mad and sad categories are allocated and judged depending on performance and/or sometimes the promise to improve in the future. [13] A whole new sphere of visualized moralizing discourse develops which (not uncoincidentally) mirrors government, health and educational rhetoric on good and bad citizens. As domestic and emotional labour develops through the new affective economy, or into the fourth shift, it also becomes further subject to governance and scrutiny, attached to the wellbeing of the nation and new forms of exploitation. To become a worthy national citizen one has to labour on and invest in one's self; to not do so is seen as a public failure, a lack of self-care and a lack of self-control. The labour of femininity, domesticity and emotions becomes a form of metonymic morality, with each small practice standing in for the whole worth of the person. Yet our audience research suggests this is not a straightforward process: the evaluation of other women is often difficult and ambivalent as viewers

realize they too are subject to the same judgments. They, too, may be sad, bad or mad. This leads us to suggest that as feminists if we just analyse television as a series of representations we close down the possibilities for understanding how women are located in a circuit of domestic—and ultimately person—value, alongside the participants on 'reality' television; the judgments evoked, immanently through affect are judgments that locate all women through their labour. If we are now in the 'fourth shift' of capitalism and affective and emotional labour are shaping new possibilities for generalized exploitation, we need to be able to understand how the relations for exploitation are being developed, but also how they are being reshaped through the relations into which they enter.

NOTES

1. See summary in Heidi Hartmann *et al.* (eds.), *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* (1981).
2. Yet the recognition of labour performed has only led to minimal decreases in women's actual labour and divisions between women who can afford to pay for domestic labour and those who cannot.
3. This is part of a larger project investigating the moral economy presently made through 'reality' television. *Making Class Through Televised Ethnical Scenarios*is is funded as part of the ESRC Identities and Social Action Programme (reference no: 148–25–0040, 2005–2007). The project uses a multi-method approach, including a textual and sociological thematic analysis of ten series of programmes selected from forty-two over a twelve month time frame; interviews with forty women, of different generations, middle- and working-class, white, Black and Asian, settled and new migrants from four areas in South London; 'text-in-action' sessions (watching and recording responses whilst viewing); and focus group discussions. For more on this, see Beverley Skeggs, Helen Wood and Nancy Thumin (2008).
4. For more on the fantasy of an 'authentic ontology', see Leslie Moran *et al.* (2004).
5. For more on this displacement specifically in *Big Brother*, see Janet Jones (2003); for a broader study of this in 'reality' television, see Annette Hill (2005).
6. For more on this, see Helen Wood and Beverley Skeggs (2004).
7. See Beverley Skeggs (2004) for how the processes of turning culture into a form of property operate.
8. For more on the 'governing of the soul', see Nikolas Rose (1989); for the notion of compulsory intimacy, see Lauren Berlant (1997); and for compulsory individuality, see Marilyn Strathern (1992).
9. Categories of 'ordinary' obviously raise issues related to questions of authenticity and often class, which registers a large debate beyond the scope of this essay. For more on this, see the essays in David Bell and Joanne Hollows' *Ordinary Lifestyles* (2005).
10. See Helen Wood (2008) on how women talk *with* television.
11. See Mariam Fraser (1999) on the class-based limits to performativity.
12. See Beverley Skeggs, Helen Wood and Nancy Thumim (2008) for how this played out through discourses of reflexivity and cultural value.
13. We examined the visualizing of moral subject formation in the making of the 'bad' abject person in Beverley Skeggs (2005). See also Chris Haylett (2001) on the making of the national abject subject.

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10 Consuming Nigella

Lise Shapiro Sanders

> The trouble with much modern cooking is not that the food it produces isn't good, but that the mood it induces in the cook is one of skin-of-the-teeth efficiency, all briskness and little pleasure. Sometimes that's the best we can manage, but at other times we don't want to feel like a postmodern, postfeminist, overstretched woman but, rather, a domestic goddess, trailing nutmeggy fumes of baking pie in our languorous wake.
>
> —Nigella Lawson, *How to Be a Domestic Goddess*

This chapter explores the relationship between domesticity, femininity and feminism in contemporary popular food culture through an analysis of the influential figure of Nigella Lawson, celebrity food writer and media personality.[1] Lawson's books—especially her early publications *How to Eat: The Pleasures and Principles of Good Food* (1998) and *How to Be a Domestic Goddess: Baking and the Art of Comfort Cooking* (2001)—and her several television series emphasize cooking and eating as sites of pleasure for women. This pleasure is both authentic—a reclaiming of the domestic sphere from which, according to the preface of *How to Be a Domestic Goddess,* "many of us have become alienated" (2001, vii)—but also ironic, self-consciously reworking a mid-twentieth-century ideology of domestic femininity. For Lawson, cooking and especially baking facilitate access to a fantasy of femininity that, instead of dooming women to lives of "domestic drudgery", enables the performance of a "weekend alter ego winning adoring glances and endless approbation from anyone who has the good fortune to eat in her kitchen"—"a cross between Sophia Loren and Debbie Reynolds in pink cashmere cardigan and fetching gingham apron" (2001 vii).[2] Read without irony, this statement might suggest an image of prefeminist subservience, but as this chapter argues, Lawson's popularity stems not (or not only) from nostalgia, but from a self-possessed and intentional form of ironic distance. Using the subtextual operation of irony—where what is said differs from what is meant, and meanings are multiple and ambiguous—Lawson both claims and reworks her position as an object of desire, or, in Walter Benjamin's terms, "saleswoman and wares in one" (157). One might look to her chocolate effigy, displayed in the windows of Selfridges in the 2003 Christmas season, as a nearly perfect metaphor for Benjamin's expression.[3] It also raises the question of why anyone would

want to consume such a thing—and indeed, what it might mean to agree to such a mode of self-representation. However, as I will suggest, since all of Lawson's actions are inflected with both sincerity and irony, the gesture provokes humour, not revulsion. By contrast, what would one make of a chocolate effigy of Martha Stewart in the Macy's holiday windows?

I want to suggest that Lawson's self-positioning raises several questions that are central to debates over the status of domesticity in contemporary feminism. Does the production of this fantasy of a new domestic femininity based on sensual pleasure come with a cost? Does being a domestic goddess, or even (as Lawson revises her title) "feeling like" one, imply an acceptance of the conditions of sexualized gender performance and the feminization of the kitchen? Is the domestic goddess a symbol of a postfeminist return to the sexual division of labour that exploits women as domestic workers—or an appropriation of domesticity for strategic, even feminist, ends? This chapter will explore some answers to these questions, contextualizing the media phenomenon of 'Nigella' in light of recent scholarship in feminist theory, media studies and consumer culture. In what follows, I argue that the narrative that Nigella presents, combined with her methodology of offering an ironic, humorous approach to the menial aspects of domestic life, is designed to appeal to readers in its ability to allay the anxieties of being a working mother and caring for oneself and one's family. In rescuing the mundane and workmanlike processes of cooking by infusing them with a sense of playfulness, sexiness and pleasure, Nigella negotiates the kitchen's symbolic status as site of domestic labour, instead imbuing it with a glamour that is nonetheless fallible. Contrary to the "It's a good thing" perfectionism of Martha Stewart, Nigella's approach offers permission to her audience not to be the domestic ideal; indeed, her frequent emphasis on her own flaws suggests a corollary in her readers and viewers, who are thereby given permission to be themselves. Nigella proffers a tactical and contingent approach to domesticity, which in turn reflects a larger trend in contemporary writing on women's struggles and frustrations with the domestic realm, one which is characterized by the ambivalence inherent in ironic discourse.

DOMESTICITY, FEMINISM, AND CHOICE

An ambivalence towards the place of the domestic within feminism is, of course, nothing new. In her essay "Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella" (2005), Charlotte Brundson cites the work of Martha Rosler, whose 1975 video *The Semiotics of the Kitchen* uses kitchen tools as weapons to express second wave feminist anger against the constraints of domesticity, to analyse what she terms, following Angela McRobbie, the "disidentity . . . constitutive of feminism in all its generations" (112). Nigella herself performs this disidentification when she claims that her breakfast-time

preparation of oranges for bitter-orange ice cream is not intended to be taken as the act of a "deranged superwoman" (2002, 70). Brundson reads this scene as "the refusal to be the 1970s answer to feminism, the superwoman" (114), and views Nigella's disavowal as undermined or complicated by the fact that her work continues beyond the frame of the breakfast setting (and beyond the mise-en-scène of early morning childcare and domestic labour): "Even the prop of a mug of tea cannot disguise the fact that although Nigella might not be a superwoman, there is still a lot she has to do that can certainly not all be filmed at breakfast time" (114). I would argue, however, that Nigella's comment plays on an ambiguity in the term "superwoman", which I read not as "the 1970s answer to feminism" but rather as a result of the backlash against feminism's gains and principles. In other words, the superwoman as a characterization (or, more likely, a stereotype) emerged in response to the failures of society to make the structural changes that would support a transformation of traditional gender roles: the superwoman was never the ideal of second wave feminism. Nigella's disavowal suggests a more complicated negotiation of feminism's history, since her critique turns on a rejection not of feminism but of the backlash against it. Yet, of course, disavowal is fundamentally constituted through both acknowledgement and denial: as Brundson astutely observes, "Nigella could not be ironic in the kitchen if Martha Stewart and Delia Smith had not already been super-competent there, [and] Martha and, Delia could not have become wealthy in the kitchen if Martha Rosler had not been cross there first" (114). In short, there are numerous strategies for disavowing one's connection with other women, indeed other generations of feminism, and the discourse effected by Nigella's ambivalent relationship to the figure of "the superwoman"—or, in the formulation above, the "postmodern, postfeminist, overstretched woman"—gestures towards the uncertain status of feminism and postfeminism in contemporary culture.

At issue is the question of whether Nigella should be read as making, or offering, a choice between domesticity and feminism, and the extent to which this choice is predicated on a deeper, class-bound presumption of choice: after all, 'choosing' to leave the workplace (largely for unpaid labour in the domestic sphere) is not necessarily an option for women who do not have Nigella's degree of cultural and social privilege. As Elspyth Probyn notes, "[F]eminism itself is bound up in the discourse of choice" (284), and indeed the rhetoric of choice is central to a certain kind of postfeminism circulating in popular culture, in which on the one hand women are represented as choosing between domesticity and work outside the home, while on the other hand still given the message that it is indeed possible to 'have it all'.[4] Reading the coverage of *How to Be a Domestic Goddess* in the mainstream press, Joanne Hollows comments that "the 'no rules, only choices' mentality that is supposed to be characteristic of the new middle classes is rather more fraught for women when 'having it all' is constituted within the popular as yet a further, compromised and problematic choice" (197). The question of choice becomes therefore complicated by

what McRobbie terms "the regulative dimensions of the popular discourses of personal choice and self improvement," in which choice becomes yet another "modality of constraint" (261). For McRobbie, the implications are significant: in the postfeminist landscape, feminism is invoked only to be summarily dismissed as outdated, insufficient to the complexities of the present; and this is particularly striking when young women, "educated in irony and visually literate", are the ones choosing to repudiate feminism and its politics (259).

But perhaps the contradictory and ambivalent nature of irony can provide us with an unexpected alternative to the entangled discourses of feminism and choice. As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra remind us, "[T]he irony and self-reflexivity that characterize so much of postfeminist and postmodern culture in no way invalidate feminist critique" (171). Irony's double edge enables us to understand its critical function and potential relevance to contemporary debates over postfeminism and domesticity in general, and Nigella's work in particular.[5] In its postmodern form, irony is fundamentally characterized by polysemy, which opens up the question of choice to multiple possibilities, modes of interpretation and positions along the scale of pleasure and resistance.[6] An ironic relationship to domesticity therefore has the potential to operate as an antidote to a strict feminist ideology that decries the kitchen as the site of subjugation. Yet irony is inherently unstable, and polysemy cuts both ways: hence Nigella can position herself in one way and be interpreted quite differently by her viewers and still differently by critics. Although the ironic utterance is always at risk of being misread, I contend there is a political—indeed, feminist—imperative to take the question of irony seriously in reading Nigella's work. The final section of this chapter explores answers to this question through an analysis of conversations posted on the forum on Nigella's website, which provides an unusual perspective on the "discursive community" (Hutcheon 89) centered on Nigella's ironic stance towards domesticity.

THE PLEASURES OF IRONY

Nigella's biography is by now well known to many. The daughter of Nigel Lawson, Margaret Thatcher's Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Vanessa Salmon, whose family founded the Lyons Corner House restaurant chain, Nigella was educated at Oxford with a degree in Medieval and Modern Languages, and began her career as a journalist and restaurant critic before writing her first book, *How To Eat: The Pleasures and Principles of Good Food* (1998). Four books and accompanying television programmes later—in addition to a short-lived talk show on ITV1—Nigella has become one of Britain's most well-known celebrities, famous for her embrace of the sensual pleasures of food and life (all the more so in light of the deaths of her

mother, sister and first husband, journalist John Diamond, of cancer). Her 2003 marriage to advertising mogul Charles Saatchi placed her even more in the public eye, and subsequent media and tabloid coverage has drawn on and fed the public interest in the details of her private life, something she herself contributed to in bringing the television cameras into her home for her first series, *Nigella Bites* (2001). Her books draw substantially on her personal relationship to food—typically written in the first person and frequently recounting familial contexts for particular recipes—and her television programmes have largely focused on meals made for her children and friends, underscoring the place of domesticity in everyday life.[7]

Nigella's own relationship to domesticity and feminism is a complex one that draws on concepts of authenticity and performance as well as on the self-conscious, ironic positioning that is a hallmark of her work. She views feminism as having shaped her perceptions of women's social roles and especially their relationship to their bodies, yet she simultaneously acknowledges her own anxieties about weight and her tendency to diet: "For all my long-held beliefs that fat was a feminist issue, that the modern tyranny of the scales was both ideologically and physically damaging, and that intolerance of the unthin was dangerous, I have to admit that I felt awful when I put on weight after the birth of my first child and better when I lost it" (1998, 367).[8] This simultaneity, this ambivalence, may indeed be one of the major aspects of Nigella's appeal for so many of her fans: her weight fluctuates from one year to the next (and from one glossy, photograph-illustrated magazine article to another); she describes herself as having "an old-fashioned figure, all bosom and bottom" (Cochran 43); and yet (or perhaps, consequently) she celebrates and glories in the pleasures of food. *How to Eat* opens with the following disclaimer: "Although it's possible to love eating without being able to cook, I don't believe you can ever really cook unless you love eating. . . . In writing this book, I wanted to make food and my slavering passion for it the starting point; indeed, for me it was the starting point. I have nothing to declare but my greed" (xv). This celebration of pleasure in food—accomplished with a certain degree of humanizing self-deprecation through phrases such as "slavering passion"—provides Nigella's readers and viewers with an opportunity to see food in the same way, to begin to oppose decades of tutelage in image-conscious dieting and reclaim the joys of cooking with cream, butter, sugar and all the other luxuries of the palate. Numerous magazine and newspaper articles quote Nigella extolling the virtues of fat, and one need only count the number of variations on sweets—cupcakes, cookies, not to mention deep-fried candy bars—in her repertoire to understand the sincerity of her commitment to culinary and gustatory pleasure. In a 2002 interview, Nigella commented: "In a way, to be afraid of fat is to be afraid of food. And to be afraid of food is to be afraid of life. I think good butter, good milk, and good eggs are things we should be grateful for in life. I sort of feel: Everything in moderation and occasional excess" (Peterson par. 6).[9] In this sense, she reminds consumers of the joys of giving in to temptation and she likewise

rewards the production of desire—another form of hunger—with yet more recipes for satisfaction of that desire.

It is exactly this sense of food as pleasure that has brought Nigella forward into the media's glare: she has been both celebrated and derided for the performance of her pleasure in not simply cooking but also eating her creations. In contrast to the British cooking-show host Delia Smith, whose 'no-tasting rule' reveals her position on the verbal expression of pleasure in consumption, Nigella displays her pleasure for viewers in a fashion that is both authentic and self-consciously, even ironically, performative. Reviewing the 2001 series *Nigella Bites II* in the *Spectator,* Simon Hoggart observed, "*Nigella Bites II* (Channel 4) isn't a cookery programme; it's a hymn of love to Nigella Lawson disguised as a cookery programme [. . . .] The food is incidental. We're not looking at comestibles; we're being invited to ogle Nigella. She's the only dish that counts round here" (51). Hoggart takes a certain amount of pleasure himself in describing Nigella's appearance:

> Throughout the show there is practically not a frame that doesn't include some part of her. Nigella's big soft brown eyes. That wide, Julia Roberts-style mouth, so perfectly suited for ingesting her delectable confections. When the camera closes in to catch her chopping or stirring, her magnificent embonpoint fills the top half of the screen. Could they do this with Delia? Or, for goodness sake, Fanny Craddock? This is the only cookery show I've seen where you end up wanting to eat the presenter. (51)

Hoggart's breathless description of Nigella's physical attributes suggests the ways in which she becomes an object of desire, ready-made for the consumption of the heterosexual male audience. He rightly notes the double entendres and sexually suggestive language that have become trademarks of her style, yet he cannot help but digress into a fantasy of his own:

> Her running commentary manages to be both lubricious and innocent at the same time. 'I like a bit of hands-on work,' she says eagerly as she oils her hands and starts stroking the pork bellies. 'I'm going to strip off the rinds to eat alone, later'. . . . she adds, and you half expect her to murmur, 'unless of course you're free to come round.' The scene where she eats a fried-mozzarella sandwich and the strings of molten, waxy cheese are drawn oozing and wiggling from her lips is sexier than any porn video. . . . Having prepared one dish she heads upstairs: 'Mmm, bed, television, food!' Still, my beating heart! (51)

Hoggart's focus on the unrequited lust Nigella (allegedly) inspires in her male audience suggests one way in which she participates in the discourse of consumption: straightforwardly, as a sex object.

Indeed, in a review of the book that accompanied the *Nigella Bites* series, Suzanne Moore evinced a degree of impatience with Nigella's capitalization

on the cultural associations of sensual and sexual pleasure: "Increasingly, it has to be said, Nigella is complicit in marketing herself in a certain way. Does she have to come over all Flake advert every time a camera is pointed in her direction—so that what we are being sold is pure oral fantasy?" (par. 3). When *How to Be a Domestic Goddess* was published in Britain, many critics likewise read (or, rather, misread) the book's association of baking with the pleasures of femininity as an example of, in Hollows's words, "false consciousness" or "domestic enslavement": Hollows notes that Nigella was "variously positioned as the prefeminist housewife, as an antifeminist Stepford wife, as the saviour of downshifting middle-class career women and as both the negative and positive product of postfeminism" (180). To my mind, Hollows is quite right instead in reading the figure of the domestic goddess as a negotiation of "the opposition between the feminist and the housewife", and in seeing this negotiation as offering as a mode of identification that incorporates the productive aspects of fantasy: readers can have the freedom to imagine themselves as domestic goddesses without having to become them (188). For Hollows, in gesturing towards baking as a symbol for an *imagined* vision of past plenitude, "Nigella refuses the fantasies of the past upon which feminism depends, creating in their place an alternative fantastic space that acknowledges that it *is* a fantasy" (190; emphasis in original). And in so doing, Nigella presents us with a complex reinterpretation of contemporary feminism that turns on the significance of ironic ambivalence.

Let me unpack this claim through recourse to some of Nigella's own comments on the place of irony in her work, and through an analysis of her performative and writerly style, which I would suggest capitalizes on the instability of irony to make its point. On the controversy around the publication of *How to Be a Domestic Goddess,* Nigella refuted her critics' claims about her espousal of a return to domestic servitude: "It's not about getting the woman out of the workplace and into the kitchen [. . . .] I would never advocate reinventing yourself as a kitchen-bound vision of womanhood" (Dolce 160). And in response to an interviewer's query about the endpapers of the book, which reproduce 1950s images of smiling, apron-clad women, Nigella returned, "How can those photos *not* be considered ironic? Wasn't it Mencken who said there should be a typeface slanting left for irony?" (Dolce 160, emphasis in original). This reference to the need to signal ironic discourse through stylistic difference is instructive, and illuminates Nigella's own sensitivity to the ways in which she has been understood (or, in her view, "willfully misunderstood") by the media (Lane, par. 6). Her characterization of her intentions suggests her awareness of having been misread, yet misreading is exactly the province of irony. In interviews following the publication of *Domestic Goddess,* Nigella attempted to clarify that the phrase began as a joke between herself and Diamond: "'That used to make John laugh uproariously [. . . .] I am not a goddess. I'm not even domestic. People should see my underwear drawer. I

just like to cook" (Fallon 122). But despite her intent (stated or unstated), her words may always be mistaken to mean exactly the opposite—in this case, suggesting the ways in which the instability of ironic discourse results in a loss of interpretive control. One could, after all, easily read *Domestic Goddess* as a manual in the mode of nineteenth- and twentieth-century conduct guides extolling the virtues of proper domestic management—and on one level, one might not be far off the mark.[10]

Like her writing, Nigella's performative style is deeply ironic; she is fully aware of the suggestiveness of her commentary, and indeed plays on the presence of double entendres and multiplicity of interpretation throughout her various television series. In an essay comparing Nigella with fellow cooking-show host Jamie Oliver, Maggie Andrews has described Nigella's style as a "tongue-in-cheek performance" of the relationship between domesticity and sexuality (200). In an episode of *Nigella Feasts,* for example, she collapses the sensual with the sexual in a manner that is knowing and just a bit naughty: cutting lettuce for Petits Pois à la Française, she comments archly, "I love the way the lettuce squeaks as it yields to my knife"; and in a recipe for Garlic Roast Potatoes, she is careful to describe the perfect ratio of crisp exterior to "hot, soft, fleshy interior" ("Weekend Wonders", 2006). Her wit is not circumscribed to the domain of the sexual-sensual nature of food, however—in the same episode, she takes a semi-ironic, playful tone towards her children: describing their sweet, angelic natures, she gazes meaningfully towards the camera for just a moment too long, her look providing a counterpoint to her words, as if she were saying to viewers, "They may seem angelic—but you and I know better, don't we?" And if we interpret the scene Hoggart describes not as a straightforward scene but rather as a self-conscious performance of sensual pleasure and sexual availability, Nigella seems to be distancing herself from sexual objectification even as she embraces it.

READING NIGELLA'S AUDIENCE

I have argued that Nigella offers herself up as a self-conscious, self-aware icon of domestic femininity, while simultaneously trading on her status as both subject and object of consumer desire. Nigella's reach into her consumer market extends into cyberspace, through the open forum on her website Nigella.com, to which any registered site member may post recipes, comments and questions. Among discussions of particular recipes and favorite chefs, topics for conversation have also included child-rearing practices and the challenges of sharing household chores with a partner (usually, though not always, male) who does not hold up his end of the bargain.[11] Although none of the posts I look at here explicitly address the question of irony in Nigella's work—and I am unwilling to

make assumptions about whether her fans take the concept of the domestic goddess seriously—one exchange is especially illuminating in terms of a community of women grappling with the frustrations of domestic labour. The thread, entitled "My husband's logic", began with the following post by "Meg" on 7 February 2006:

> Even though I work part-time and also do some voluntary work I'm the one who does all the housework, laundry and cooking so I was having a moan about this to my husband last night. He got all indignant and hurt and said "I do help—in fact, I'll help you right now" and proceeded to pick his coffee cup from off the floor and moved it to the windowsill!!! How does that help me? And he actually expected praise from me for his help!

Meg's post, written in a voice combining the resigned with the incredulous, inspired a series of replies, with many voices commiserating Meg's experience. "Mara2" replied with a comment that captures the sense of ambivalence I have described above: "I don't know if I should LOL [laugh out loud] or be sorry for you. I mean I don't know if you're being ironic or really hurt. Because sometimes I'm so angry over things like this that I laugh. My hubby sometimes says proudly: I'm gonna do the washing up—and pushes the button of the dishwasher LOL What more can you expect from a man?" In response, Meg wrote, "I actually found it funny but he got mad with me for laughing! I can't win!" "Saskia" concluded this portion of the exchange with the following: "Oh Meg—you were right to laugh, even if, apparently, he WASN'T being self-ironic. . . . (I often suspect men to be, but maybe they are not as complex as all that and I merely attribute them with irony to make myself feel better . . . :-) [. . .] Thank goodness for girlfriends to which you can regale this and have a laugh. Makes life with men more bearable!"

The conversation subsequently developed into a shared discourse on male and female roles in the household, with some women advocating for treating housework as 'teamwork' and others arguing for a belief in the importance of 'traditional' roles. Paola commented, "There's nothing [I] despise more than 'traditional' roles. [I]t's time for women to start standing up for themselves. [T]his isn't the 50's anymore and we are not required to welcome our husbands after a day of work with a spotless house, a cold beer and dinner on the table!" To this (a point several other writers made), Mara2 replied with a somewhat equivocal perspective, arguing for a belief in traditional roles even if in practice such beliefs are difficult to maintain:

> I don't like men to do too much homework. But it's because those men I know are too henpecked. I like men to be men. And strong.
>
> So please don't take offence, I don't know your husbands :)))

> But I do believe in traditional roles, Paola. But it would mean I didn't have to work, which is not true. So it's hard. But it also means I don't change bulbs or tyres or anything. I'm not willing to do such jobs :))

Several other posts followed this exchange, with one person claiming "smug singleton" status—"the only mess I clean up is my own"—and another noting, "As a feminist I . . . have opinions (and air them!) on sharing housework." From this thread, which had a lively number of posts over the course of one day, we can see women who, by virtue of joining Nigella's forum, identify themselves as fans of her work, and who are themselves grappling with the very domain that has historically been one of feminism's major battle grounds.[12] I read the tone of these posts—with the sharing of humorous stories and commiserating comments such as "[A]ll I can say is Men!"—as an intertextual reflection on a more general and shared ambivalence towards the gendered prescriptions of domestic life. In this way Nigella's fans express a perspective similar to that shared by the authors of a spate of recent books on housekeeping and child-rearing that use irony and humour to negotiate the perils of domesticity. Titles such as Christie Mellor's *The Three-Martini Playdate* (2004) and Muffy Mead-Farro's *Confessions of a Slacker Mom* (2005) are designed to appeal to readers who find parenting and other pursuits less than a domestic idyll—and to underscore the fact that, like the domestic goddess, such an idyll is more fantasy than reality.[13] In their conversations, Nigella.com's forum members seem to come to a similar conclusion, using the space of the forum to work through their positions on gender roles and domestic practises. Moreover, these women approach a debate familiar to feminism—though it rarely goes under that name—with a sense of humour that enables them to laugh at their experience, but also perhaps to begin to effect change.

What Nigella offers, then, is an ironic take on the domestic goddess that, when taken seriously by her fans, results in an unexpected reversal. Having offered up the domestic goddess as an ironic performance, Nigella is absolved of her collusion with the specter of 1950s femininity (or, in Paola's terms, "'traditional' roles" for women); at the same time, her fans are able to produce a feminist critique of gendered domestic labour while cooking and sharing in a community based on her recipes. Nigella's appeal—not to media pundits but to her self-identified audience—depends on this operation of ironic humour, and particularly in the fallibility that this entails. It is an axiom that characters are loved for their flaws; similarly, Nigella's own narrative of self-deprecating imperfection is the basis for her success. The attraction is not what she does right with all the proper ingredients in easy reach, but rather what she does with what she has on hand. In this way she imbues the drudgery and tensions of the kitchen with the glamour that is part and parcel of consumer fantasy, and enables her fans both to identify with the figure of the domestic goddess as a performance, and to resist being domesticated by domesticity.

NOTES

1. My thanks to Stacy Gillis and Joanne Hollows, and also to Viveca Greene and Eric Henry Sanders, for their comments on an earlier version of this chapter.
2. For an analysis of the workings of fantasy in Nigella's oeuvre, see Joanne Hollows (2003); and for a broader discussion of fantasy in food television programming, see Cheri Ketchum (2005).
3. *Retail Week*, 7 November 2003. Benjamin uses the phrase to describe the nineteenth-century prostitute, but I would argue that this formulation underscores women's sexual objectification on a broader level, particularly with regard to consumer culture. For an elaboration of this idea in a different historical context, see my *Consuming Fantasies* (2006).
4. As Probyn notes, ideology is significant in what she terms "choiceoisie": "choiceoisie fulfills its mandate as ideological by precisely offering women a position in an imaginary relation to their material lives" (282).
5. For an elaboration of the theory and politics of irony, and its critical or 'cutting' edge, see Linda Hutcheon (1994). For a philosophical analysis of irony's relationship to femininity and feminism, see Lydia Rainford (2005).
6. And of course, the interpretation of ironic discourse depends on its audience: as Hélène A. Shugart observes, "[P]ostmodern irony whose complex subversive function is not apparent to an audience may serve inevitably to reify the very constructs it seeks to resist" (451).
7. This style, pioneered by Jamie Oliver in *The Naked Chef* (1999–), incorporates daily life into the show's diegesis, and contributes to the sense of the television chef as someone 'just like you and me', who does the grocery shopping as well as the food preparation. This is, of course, in contrast with the established tradition of the home chef with every ingredient at her fingertips such as Julia Child or Martha Stewart. Nigella takes this style one step further, transporting her children to and from various activities and gatherings and making childcare evident as another element of women's everyday lives.
8. Although some might find it hypocritical that Nigella has become an advocate of low-carbohydrate diets after a career built on extolling the virtues of carbohydrate-rich food, I take it to be a 'feminist issue' to urge the purposeful disregard of Nigella's own weight as a significant factor in her relationship to food and food culture.
9. Hollows reads Nigella's emphasis on the pleasures of cooking and eating, combined with her flights into the occasional asceticism of low-fat cooking (see, for example, the "Low Fat" chapter of *How to Eat*), as an example of the "calculated hedonism" of the new middle classes: "What Lawson offers [. . .] is a sense of feeling *as if* we were in control, *as if* the body was a temple" (185; emphasis in original).
10. In this sense Nigella's work follows in the footsteps of a long history of domestic advice for women, beginning in (at least) the eighteenth century and extending into the recent present and encompassing manuals from Isabella Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (1861) and Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *The American Woman's Home* (1869) to Cheryl Mendelson's *Home Comforts: The Art and Science of Keeping House* (1999). For a survey of relevant texts in this genre, see Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English (1978), and Sarah Leavitt (2002).
11. The forum also includes contributions from men, but the majority of posts are from members who identify themselves as female. Nigella does have a substantial male fan base (Hollows 198) but a full analysis of the differences

posed by gender to the ways she and her work are interpreted is beyond my scope here.

12. Another thread (from January 2007) entitled "Who wears the pants?" began, "So we all know who does the cooking around here, but who actually determines what is cooked[?]" The majority of contributors had the final decision, although many discussed menus with family members.
13. Some texts, by contrast, appear to capitalize on the cultural value of irony while shoring up the notion of a return to traditional domestic roles: Caitlin Flanagan's appealingly titled *To Hell with All That: Loving and Loathing Our Inner Housewife* (2006) spends as much time blaming feminism for its failures as it does arguing that in middle- and upper-middle-class families, someone needs to minister to the needs of young children and manage the peaceful comfort of the home—and invariably that someone is female.

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