THE REAL HOUSEWIVES OF POSTFEMINISM: FALSE AGENCY AND THE INTERNALIZATION OF PATRIARCHY ON REALITY TELEVISION

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ABSTRACT

The figure of the wife has been present in popular culture for many years, and interpreting her portrayal often informs the reader of the contemporary position of women in society. This study addresses the recent representation of the wife on the reality television series, *The Real Housewives*. Using previous scholarship on the trends in postfeminism, I investigate how the show promotes a postfeminist discourse. Specifically, I adapt Angela McRobbie’s work in order to understand the shifts both in the representation of women in popular culture and in the women’s movement. How has the women’s movement evolved from *The Feminine Mystic* to *The Real Housewives*? And how does reality television shape women’s place in society? Ultimately I argue that the current representation of women in popular culture presents an internalized sexism. In other words, I argue *The Real Housewives* portrays and promotes a discourse in which women have become their own oppressors.
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Many thanks,

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Introduction

Bree: Perception is reality.  
*Desperate Housewives*

On the 15th of August 2011, Russell Armstrong’s body was found hanging in the northwest corner of his Beverly Hills apartment. On the floor lay an orange extension cord. One end of the cord extended up behind a cabinet and was double wrapped three times around a beam that lay below the ceiling. The other end of the cord was double wrapped twice around Armstrong’s neck and tied with a slipknot at the back of his head. Armstrong was dressed in a black t-shirt, black briefs, and black socks. His legs rested against a bench in the corner of the room. At 2109 hours the Los Angeles Police Department reported the suicidal death to the Los Angeles County Coroner’s Office.

Russell was recently divorced from Taylor Armstrong, one of the stars of Bravo’s hit reality television series, *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. Whether Taylor or the show had anything to do with his suicide is, of course, debatable and ultimately Russell’s death does not concern me. Yet, I find the tableau of the hanging ex-husband a grimly appropriate start to an investigation into the discourse of postfeminism.

This thesis is concerned with how *The Real Housewives* represents women and how this portrayal fits into cultural trends in both reality television and the women’s movement. *The Real Housewives* phenomenon began in 2006, when Bravo released a new reality television show, *The Real Housewives of Orange County*. The show followed the lives of five affluent and extravagant Southern Californian women over the course of several months as they went about their daily routines. Over the next five years, six spin-off series were created, all following the same format but in a
different city; first New York, then Atlanta, New Jersey, D.C., Beverly Hills, and
Miami. Each series changed the location name but otherwise kept the peculiarly
paradoxical title, *The Real Housewives of*. I call the title paradoxical not because
labelling any representation (even one of reality) “real” proves inherently
problematic, but because the “housewives” on the show are not necessarily
housewives. While some of the women on the show are married and remain in the
domestic sphere, others have jobs—careers even—and a significant number are not,
nor have ever been married. I want to know what cultural phenomenon has led the
housewife to become estranged from both home and husband? Why would women
who are not housewives claim to be so? What does this mean for the representation of
wives—and of single women—in popular culture? And what impact does this
portrayal have on the consumer’s perception of women and marriage?

The recent media storm surrounding the Republican “war on women”,
particularly comments made about Sandra Fluke have sparked important and
controversial debates inside and outside of the Georgetown University classroom.
When a colleague asked me if I thought sexism was still prominent in society, I
answered, “yes, but not in the same way as it was pre-1960’s.” As it happens, this
would also be my answer if I were asked whether I thought feminism was still
prominent in society.

I have used this thesis to flesh out my answer to both of these questions. Using
*The Real Housewives* as a case study, I investigate how sexism operates in a
postfeminist context. I examine how the show portrays wives, arguing that through
this type of close textual analysis the changes in social and cultural attitudes towards
sexism and feminism become clear. If sexism in the 21st century is different from
previous centuries, how and why is it different? I wish to apply the same question to
feminism, given that these two concepts are closely related. Thus, through examining The Real Housewives phenomenon, I investigate trends in postfeminist discourse in order to further understand the ever-evolving ties between women and popular culture.

First and foremost, however, why write a thesis on wives? My answer to this is threefold. First, there exists a dearth of scholarship addressing the contemporary portrayal of the wife. While feminist critics have shrewdly tackled the emergence of postfeminism in contemporary culture, the current scholarship on the presence and effects of postfeminism focuses almost exclusively on texts designed for or about young, single women. This is important work. I argue, however, that by relegating postfeminism to the domain of the single girl, the current literature obscures the full scale of this cultural crisis. Thus, in order to develop a more conducive picture of how postfeminism manifests in popular culture, I have chosen to study the representation of older, married women.

Second, I argue that in recent years society has developed a peculiar fascination with the figure of the wife. Consider, for example, the plethora of reality television shows alone that foreground “wives” in their title such as Mob Wives, Sister Wives, Baseball Wives, Basketball Wives, or Wife Swap. The trend continues in fictional programming, with shows such as Desperate Housewives, The Good Wife, and Army Wives. Even shows with male protagonists, such as How I Met Your Mother or My Wife and Kids, place the domesticated female figure on a paternalistic pedestal. Has popular culture returned to the happy housewife heroine? And, if so, what has caused this return? Furthermore, what does this mean for modern women? The answers to these questions are certainly complex, but by examining The Real...
Housewives I am able to gain an insight into the multifarious cultural politics at work in the contemporary portrayal of the housewife heroine.

My final reason for choosing to investigate the representation of wives is that I argue the figure of the wife provides an interesting point of cultural comparison between representations of women pre and post feminism. Whereas the traditional postfeminist heroine (Ally McBeal or Bridget Jones, say) is viewed as a departure from the 1950’s housewife and understood as having her own unique problems symptomatic of her time, the contemporary housewife cannot be so easily distinguished from the women of previous generations. In fact, both the similarities and the differences between Betty Friedan’s housewife heroine and the protagonists of Bravo’s The Real Housewives reveal a great deal about the state of women and the effects of postfeminism. For example, Friedan explains that, “In the second half of the twentieth century in America, woman’s world was confined to her own body and beauty, the charming of man, the bearing of babies, and the physical care and serving of husband, children, and home.” How, if at all, does The Real Housewives alter this perception of housewives in the first half of the twenty-first century? For these reasons, I have chosen to discuss and deconstruct the representation of the wife in contemporary popular culture.

I analysed three series of The Real Housewives. I decided on The Real Housewives for a number of reasons. In part, while all the wives are exceedingly wealthy, the series showcases single, married, and divorced women of different ages and races, allowing me to analyze a diverse sample of women within the same context. Furthermore, the series is highly successful. On the 20th of January 2011, 4.2 million viewers tuned in for the season finale of The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills. Ten days later, 4.4 million tuned in for the season finale of The Real
Housewives of Atlanta.iii With remarkably high ratings for a cable television show and seven distinct series in North America, the series has made a place for itself in popular culture. Despite this presence in popular culture, however, remarkably little scholarship exists on the phenomenon. Whereas an academic conference has been held to discuss The Jersey Shore, critical discussions on The Real Housewives are curiously absent inside the ivory tower. This thesis attempts to remedy this, arguing that The Real Housewives is, in fact, an important cultural text that without efficient analysis continues to subtly manipulate the role of women in a postfeminist society.

In the following pages I analyze the presence of postfeminist discourse in The Real Housewives in an attempt to locate and destroy the dominant patriarchal structure. To achieve this, I investigate how postfeminism manifests in the show, and the effects this discourse has for the female protagonists. Before I address the show, however, I provide an overview of previous literature on both postfeminism and the representation of women on reality television. I use the term “postfeminism” to describe the current cultural condition in which women are misleadingly viewed as having achieved equality. The term, however, can be defined using a number of methods, and different scholars have adopted a range of approaches to defining the term. Angela McRobbie, for example, whose work proves vital in this study, defines postfeminism using a set of conceptual frameworks that focus on the contemporary portrayal of both women and feminism in society.

In addition to McRobbie’s method, I find it useful to compare postfeminism with second-wave feminism, since it is this feminism that is supposedly complete. By comparing the two feminisms, it is possible to identify the historical differences between feminism in the 1970s and today. Today, for example, capitalism has succeeded in commercializing feminism. I argue this causes the depoliticization of
feminism, resulting in the phenomenon of false agency. This false agency lurks in the rhetoric of reality television, informing women they have the freedom to do anything—as long as it involves consumerism.

While previous literature on women in reality television is sparser than that addressing postfeminism, in her book *Enlightened Sexism*, Susan Douglas provides an extensive summary of the key issues concerned with the representation of women on reality television. In her work, Douglas discusses the dangers of stereotyping, a phenomenon synonymous with both reality television’s representation of women and postfeminist culture.

In order to discern the presence of postfeminism in *The Real Housewives*, I adapt McRobbie’s paradigm for identifying the cultural phenomenon. Using McRobbie’s conceptual frames, I investigate trends in the show relating to the representation of women’s bodies and the rhetoric of success. I also examine the tone of the show, addressing the dialectic of irony and sexism. My analysis is based on three series of *The Real Housewives*; *The Real Housewives of Atlanta, The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, and *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. Of these three series, I focus on the opening episodes across seven seasons. I found that each opening episode contains a segment in which each wife is introduced and framed in the context of the show. Given that these segments are short and formulaic, sexist stereotypes are often used to represent the wives. In this study, these introductory segments provide the foundation on which McRobbie’s framework builds.

I present my findings in six sections. The first five address McRobbie’s concepts, drawing also on the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault in order to investigate how the female body functions in postfeminist discourse. The sixth section addresses how age, race, and marital status are represented in the show. This
allows comparisons to be drawn between previous investigations of postfeminism (often focused on issues of age, race, or marital status) and this investigation of postfeminism in *The Real Housewives*. My analysis suggests that postfeminist discourse disciplines the female body to internalize patriarchy. While capitalism constructs an illusion of liberation (the freedom to shop), postfeminism ensures the continuation of oppression. Under the guise that feminism has been completed, then, sexism reasserts itself in society. Thus, if society wishes to achieve gender equality, postfeminism must be dismantled and feminism re-politicised. This is what the following research aims to accomplish.
Review of Previous Literature

Lisa’s husband: Why are they arguing?
Kyle’s husband: Because women love to argue.
The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills

The following chapter outlines the two threads of scholarship this thesis derives from, the critique of postfeminism and the representation of women on reality television. Therefore, the purpose of reviewing previous literature is twofold. First, it is necessary to reach a working definition of postfeminism, in order to do this, I outline the structural framework of postfeminism. I then investigate postfeminism’s relationship to second wave feminism and give an historical account of how postfeminist culture emerged in the late twentieth century. Finally, I provide a series of examples from previous scholarship that examine the prevalence of postfeminism in popular culture.

The second half of this literature review focuses on the representation of women—specifically wives—on reality television. This provides the generic context for a close reading of The Real Housewives. I begin by explaining the stereotypes of women on reality television and address the complications that arise when these stereotypes are presented as satirical. I then examine the problematic portrayal of agency for women on reality television and, consequently, the correlations between reality television and neoliberalism. In conclusion, I turn to the representation of the real housewife as a site of reappropriation and compare the portrayal of the real housewives to other manifestations of the wife on reality television. Although my analysis of postfeminism is separated from my discussion of women in reality television, these two phenomena are closely connected and, as I later explain, complexly intertwined.
The Critique of Postfeminism

In the introduction to *Interrogating Postfeminism*, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker posit that, “Postfeminism broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated with popular media forms, having to do with the “pastness” of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated.”\(^\text{vii}\) That is, postfeminist discourse assumes that in contemporary society, feminism no longer proves necessary. What is of interest here are the methods postfeminist ideology employs in order to successfully manufacture a world in which (regardless of completion) the feminist project has been abandoned.

The term dons a number of different names, although sometimes referred to as third-wave feminism or power feminism, Susan Douglas labels the phenomenon “enlightened sexism” and Elizabeth Kaufer Busch refers to postfeminism as “the feminist mystique.”\(^\text{viii}\) Terms such as these reveal the disdain modern feminist scholars have for postfeminism. Indeed, the term is rarely used in a positive light. Despite this, the concept appears to embody feminist ideals of female liberation, agency, and empowerment. A closer examination of the term, however, reveals how these feminist achievements are subtly undermined. Thus in the following section, I investigate how previous literature has exposed the anti-feminist postfeminist agenda.

Angela McRobbie provides a set of conceptual frames that explain and examine the phenomenon of postfeminism.\(^\text{ix}\) This formula, of identifying key causal elements of postfeminism, allows for a more rigid and structured analysis than other studies, which merely comment on tropes or trends arising in popular culture. McRobbie’s framework identifies five concepts for engaging with postfeminism. The first, “feminism dismantling itself,” focuses on feminism within the academy and “the
moment of definitive self-critique” when scholars such as Gayatri Spivak combined
the goals of second-wave feminism with postcolonial feminism, and scholars such as
Judith Butler and Donna Haraway “inaugurated the radical denaturalizing of the
postfeminist body.”xix The second, “female success,” addresses the successes of the
feminist movement and the consequent “displacement of feminism as a political
movement.”x The third, McRobbie defines as “unpopular feminism.” This describes
the media’s adverse reaction to feminism and the consequent generational division
between second-wave feminists and younger women.xii This unpopularity leads to
McRobbie’s forth concept, “feminism undone,” in which she posits that the
“hyperculture of commercial sexuality” creates sexism that young women must
accept (if not endorse) “in order to count as a modern, sophisticated girl.”xiii Last,
McRobbie turns to “female individualization.” She explains,

[A]s the old structures of social class fade away and lose their grip in the
costext of “late” or second modernity, individuals are increasingly called upon
to invent their own structures… Individuals must now choose the life they
want to live. Girls must have a life plan.xiv

Thus the desire for “personal choice and self improvement” undermines the collective
nature of feminism.xv

For McRobbie, then, and the other scholars cited in this chapter, second-wave
feminism functions as the feminism to which postfeminism is post. Consequently, the
correlation between second-wave feminism and postfeminism proves vital in
understanding the current cultural condition. Indeed, the prefix of post must be
understood as altering to an already complex term, and the ‘pastness’ the ‘post’
implies should not negate the role second-wave feminism plays in constituting postfeminism. As Bonnie J. Dow explains, “shifting attitudes toward feminism do not always represent a rejection of women’s liberation as much as an adjustment to it.” Postfeminism does not necessarily signal the undoing of feminism, as McRobbie suggests, or a return to pre-feminist values. Rather, I argue, postfeminism is the commoditization of certain facets of second-wave feminism, which in turn causes many of the movement’s gains to be undone.

As Helene A. Shugart, Catherine Egley Waggoner, and D. Lynn O’Brien Hallstein suggest, “certain tenets of third-wave feminism are appropriated, commodified, and “sold back” to audiences.” Essentially, if explicit sexism no longer sells, producers adapt their products to ensure both customer satisfaction and return. Mass culture, however, will never sell liberation from the capitalist system. Thus in order to cater to a new generation of women who, like myself, have “grown up taking for granted the feminist victories won by their mothers and thus for whom feminism exists at the level of popular common sense,” popular culture texts begin to circulate the “comforting message that patriarchy is over and women have achieved equality.” In McRobbie’s words, “feminism is only invoked in order to be relegated to the past.” This processes of commoditization essentially depoliticizes contemporary (or post) feminism by suggesting that there is effectively nothing left for feminism to do.

Since, I argue, liberation can never be sold, in order to sell feminism as commodity, feminism must be depoliticized. Thus, in addition to the relegation of feminism to the past, postfeminism utilizes a number of other methods in order to reach a point where feminism is acknowledged but disengaged. Specifically, I have found postfeminism promotes two slightly contradictory ideologies. The first of
which is blame, or, more specifically, the notion that postfeminism holds second-wave feminism responsible for women’s current discontent. This is what Busch labels “the feminist mystique,” she explains that the “new liberated woman finds herself stifled by the very feminism that enabled her entry into the public sphere.” Busch continues, “These heroines do not credit feminism for their so-called advances; rather, they blame the movement for creating a new mystique that limits them, rather than liberates them.” Here, the underlying logic is that feminism made modern woman lonely instead of happy. Popular culture heroines, such as Bridget Jones, Carrie Bradshaw, Meredith Grey, and, perhaps most notably, Ally McBeal champion this ideology, often positioning themselves as victims of the ‘triumphs’ of second-wave feminism.

The counter, then, to the victimization these characters embody, is the branch of postfeminism invested in depoliticizing female empowerment through narratives of “personal transformation” and the “celebration of the [feminine] body.” Dow expresses her concern for this type of postfeminism, positing that,

It would be nice if the majority of women in this country felt comfortable saying, “Yes, I am a feminist”; but if the way to make that happen is to empty the term of all political implications so that all it really means is “I like myself,” then feminism has not gained much.

Postfeminism, in this case, brands feminism as strictly personal (with the assumption that the personal is not the political). Under this regime, “identity characteristics such as strength and independence function as effective marketing strategies.” This is the process of appropriating and reselling feminism so that it becomes void of any
socio-economic political implications and instead, as Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer argue, “is committed to a kind of newly entrenched liberal politics dedicated more to ‘lifestyle politics’ than to traditional assertions of citizen rights and liberties.” This ‘lifestyle postfeminism’ manifests most prominently in reality television, for example, in cosmetic surgery makeover shows that promote the ideology that “appearance is one’s character and capacity for achievement in all aspects of life.”

Thus, while fictional fantasies provide narratives of female discontent as a result of second-wave feminism, reality programs champion a new feminism focused on the individual as a ‘liberated’ consumer. Given that this study focuses on reality television, I am primarily concerned with lifestyle postfeminism, which I will address in greater depth in the following section on women and reality television.

Prior to addressing how postfeminism operates through reality television texts, however, an understanding of how feminism became so ineffectual proves necessary. What happened between the 1970s and the present day that caused such significant shifts in the feminist movement? How, in other words, did feminism become post? For Dow, “the posting of feminism” begins in the eighties, specifically with the failure to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982. As Dow explains, this caused feminist organizations to become “even more professionalized and fragmented.”

Throughout the 1980s, feminism suffered what Susan Faludi retrospectively labelled the “backlash.” For Dow, this backlash functions as the first articulation of postfeminism. She suggests that, as opposed to an outright rejection of feminist values, the postfeminist backlash recognised “that some discourse which questions certain feminist issues and/or goals assumes the validity of other feminist issues and/or goals.”
To a certain extent, then, gender equality became common sense and was thus viewed as a non-issue. In the early nineties, however, the backlash mutated from resisting the endorsement of second-wave feminism into an outright attack on the movement. Authors such as Christina Hoff Sommers, Katie Roiphe, and Camille Paglia argued that feminism forced women to identify as victims of sexual and economic mistreatment. These are the authors who proclaimed the death of patriarchy and championed postfeminism as ‘power feminism.’ In 1995, following the rise of ‘power feminism’, the release of texts such as Rebecca Walker’s *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* and Barbara Findlen’s *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Generation of Feminists* introduced the notion of third-wave feminism. Although not as anti-second wave as ‘power feminists,’ third wave scholars still aimed to distinguish themselves from second wave feminism. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford explain this dichotomy by invoking the “mother-daughter metaphor.” Third wave feminism embraces the politics of difference, and, like a rebellious teenage daughter, it defied the “anti-sex sensibilities of second wave feminism,” and detested the notions of normalcy and collective conscious. For these “young” feminists, empowerment was derived from “reclaiming their sexuality” (presumably from their hairy, bra-burning mothers). However, in their discussion of third wave feminism, Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein note,

Empowerment takes on a different meaning in this new feminism in other ways, as well—not in collective terms, as with the second wave, but in very individualistic terms. Being empowered in the third wave sense is about
feeling good about oneself and having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are.³³xiv

Therefore, by the mid-nineties, popular and academic literature had positioned lifestyle postfeminism as the current (and popular) form of “feminism.” Thus feminism could be incorporated as a depoliticised ideology into popular culture texts.

As a recent phenomenon, postfeminism frequently engages with other prominent cultural shifts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, specifically postmodernism and neoliberalism (the latter of which I will address in the following section). Postfeminism, then, occurs at a time when the distinctions between high vs. low and commercial vs. non-commercial art have disintegrated, and popular culture has emerged as a space in which personal pleasure and social politics (conspicuously) collide. In other words, the rhetoric of the aesthetic has claimed its place in postmodern discourse. Thus, I argue the scholars who address postfeminism through popular culture texts do so not because these texts provide clear examples of postfeminism (which, of course, they do) but because they understand the texts themselves contribute to the postfeminist canon. Hence, I contend The Real Housewives is not just an example of postfeminism; it is also responsible for repositioning postfeminism within the domestic sphere. In fact, since prior discussions of the postfeminist (anti)-heroine (such as that in Busch or McRobbie) code her as single and girly, positioning the real housewife as both a postfeminist woman and a housewife marks a shift in postfeminist discourse.

How, then, does The Real Housewives negotiate the married and motherly housewife into the existing postfeminist paradigm? While McRobbie provides the overarching framework for understanding postfeminism within popular culture, other
critics—often writing expressly about television—provide examples of specific traits or characteristics that embody the essence of postfeminism. An understanding of these codes reveals how *The Real Housewives* successfully renegotiates postfeminist themes to fit both the narrative of the single career woman and that of the married housewife.

Busch, for example, tracks the postfeminist heroine from *Ally McBeal* to Carrie Bradshaw to the characters on *Desperate Housewives*. In her article, Busch concludes that *Ally McBeal* and *Sex in the City* demonize feminism, portraying “the feminine mystique as more desirable than the feminist mystique because the former is rooted in human nature, or the natural differences between the sexes.” Finding little to enjoy in the unhappy-single-career-woman shows, Busch turns to the married women shows, in particular *Desperate Housewives*. Despite “having” what television’s single protagonists yearn for (specifically, a man), Busch finds the housewives seem just as discontent as their single counterparts (admittedly the show is more upfront about this discontent, articulating it quite clearly in the title). To account for this, Busch posits that,

Following the dictates of the feminist mystique, women had mimicked traditionally male nature (the “masculine mystique”) or ignored female nature altogether, a strategy that led women back to the only other understanding of female nature available—the 1950s happy housewife heroine, a role that no longer seems to fit.

In her analysis, Busch provides the necessary context for understanding *The Real Housewives* phenomenon. With the understanding that neither the masculine career
woman nor the feminine 1950s housewife brought happiness, *The Real Housewives* attempts to construct a new housewife, one that acknowledges her role as a return to the domestic sphere *post* feminism.

This return to the domestic sphere and the role of women as wives and mothers, however, does not eradicate a fascination with youth from postfeminist discourse. Despite the recent surge in shows—particularly reality television shows—focused on wives and/or mothers (such as *Dance Moms, Toddlers in Tiaras*, or *Bethenny Ever After*), postfeminist ideology still positions aging “as a series of losses rather than achievements, gains or successes for women.”xxxvii Thus shows, such as *The Real Housewives*, appropriate youthful or girlish traits in order to ensure the new housewife is not confused with either the outdated housewife of the 1950s or the aging feminist of the 1970s.

Sadie Wearing uses this cultural obsession with youth as a lens through which to examine postfeminist discourse in popular culture, specifically in the film *Something’s Gotta Give* (2003) and the television series *10 Years Younger*. Wearing finds the girlish exterior of women in popular culture unnerving. When discussing *10 Years Younger*, she argues,

> On one hand, we find a vibrant, even utopian, celebratory insistence that age need not mean loss—of femininity, of fun, of “girlhood,” perhaps, finally, of “self.” At the same time, however, a more cautionary note is sounded, which suggests less that age “need not” and more that it “must not” be allowed to relax the hold of “youth” on the body and that responsibility for maintaining a youthful appearance lies in making the right consumer choices, including undertaking surgical procedures.xxxviii

xxxvii

xxxviii
This rhetoric is by no means limited to *10 Years Younger*. In fact, the dichotomy between the blessing and maintenance of youth plays a significant role in constructing episodic narratives across *The Real Housewives* series.

While Wearing uses the cultural constructs of youth as a method of framing postfeminism, Kimberly Springer examines “African American women’s presence and absence in postfeminist manifestations of popular culture.”xxxix Notably, in addition to single and youthful, the majority of postfeminist icons are also white. As with its portrayal of youth and singleness, *The Real Housewives* complicates the characterization of race through its Atlanta based series, which features predominately African American housewives. By investigating popular culture texts, Springer identifies a number of stereotypes used to portray African American women in this postfeminist, post-civil-rights era, there is the diva, the modern mammie, the black lady, the evil black bitch, the sistah with attitude, and the bitter black woman—most of which are represented on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*.xl In terms of postfeminist canon and racial representation, Springer writes,

Superwoman/strongblackwoman discourse assumes that a black woman has *too many obligations* but she is expected to *handle her business*. Thus, while postfeminism proposes that white women cannot have it all, radicalized postfeminism, at least for black women, means continuing to be everything for everyone else and maintaining a sense of self. Postfeminism, though, has begun to assimilate black women into the rhetoric of having it all.xli
Nowhere is this more apparent than in *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. Despite racial differences, the real housewives on this series offer another articulation of depoliticized lifestyle postfeminism already established by the white and wealthy women (or ‘girls’) of Orange County. As predominantly African American, however, the wives of Atlanta embody not only a depoliticized gender, but also a depoliticized race.

This depoliticizing of gender and/or race results in what I label “false agency.” This, I argue, is an essential characteristic of lifestyle postfeminism, and consequently of reality television. False agency is the illusion that women have been liberated from patriarchal and capitalist regimes, thus are now free to act and make choices on their own accord, driven only by their own desires. In other words, according to popular culture, women have reached a point where they can say “I like myself.” A closer examination of postfeminist culture, however, reveals how this agency in fact operates within the boundaries of patriarchal and capitalist systems. Thus, what women are actually saying is, “If I am considered sexy and I have enough money to maintain my sexiness, then I like myself.” From here, an investigation into the representation of women on reality television allows a deeper understanding of how false agency operates in postfeminist culture.

**The Representation of Women on Reality Television**

As Susan Douglas notes, “there’s been precious little comment about how women have been portrayed in reality television.” From what has been written, however, it is clear the genre has a complex relationship with women. In part, this is due to the postfeminist canon of female success that underlies the reality television
genre. Women are seen on an even footing with men; they too can be the Survivor or the Apprentice. Indeed, the rhetoric of The Real Housewives positions the wives as successful, independent, and powerful women—with or without a husband. On reality television, women now compete on an even playing field with men to be the next top chef, baker, fashion designer, artist, restaurateur, singer or talented person. When men are expected to groom and polish themselves (as is the case in Queer Eye for the Straight Guy) in order to compete not just with each other but also with women in professional and romantic spheres, feminism must surely be understood as complete. However, while it may seem that the patriarchal system of previous eras has dwindled, in its place neoliberal and postfeminist regimes continue to promote a sexist discourse throughout the genre of reality television. In the following pages I address the representation of women on reality television. I explore the role of irony and stereotyping, and investigate questions of agency and reappropriation. By examining the “precious little” literature that addresses the genre’s portrayal of women, I question how The Real Housewives both confirms and challenges the sexist practices showcased on reality television.

Douglas herself offers a valid attempt to amend the lack of literature on women in reality television, listing ten aspects of postfeminism or “enlightened sexism” that appear repeatedly throughout the reality television genre,

1) Women Are to Be Judged First and Foremost by Their Appearance.
2) Women Need to Compete Over Men.
3) Women Can’t Get Along with One Another and Will Stab Each Other in the Back.
4) Women Are Overly Emotional and Obsessed with Relationships.
5) Women Should Be Sexy, but Not Overly Sexual.


7) African American Women Are Lazy, Threatening, Have a Chip on Their Shoulder, Are Not Marriage Material, or All of the Above (Except for Tyra Banks).

8) Women (Especially Blondes) Are Shallow, Materialistic, and Live to Shop.

9) Housework and Child Rearing Are a Woman’s Domain.

10) Lesbians? What Lesbians?xliii

What should be understood from Douglas’ list in relation to *The Real Housewives* is that the series follows the rule; thus fits into a larger trend of shows that simultaneously support sexist stereotypes while claiming feminism has achieved its goals.

The list demonstrates the somewhat dire state of women on reality television—but this comes as no surprise. It is common knowledge that reality television hosts the most despicable, most outrageous, most shocking, and most dramatic people the human race has to offer. Of course the real housewives stab each other in the back, of course they plot each other’s downfall, of course they get outrageously drunk and threaten to kill each other—that is what makes them so entertaining. The viewer can watch, judge, and enjoy safe in the knowledge that these women (as real as they may be) are unrepresentative of the norm. As Douglas explains, however, this ironic eye (which excuses the consumption of reality television) complicates this portrayal of women.xliv She writes, “We aren’t supposed to take these [reality television] shows completely seriously.”xlv Again, *The Real
Housewives follows this trend, with Producer Scott Dunlop intending to create a “satirical look” at the lives of Orange County women. In an interview he explains, “I think it's more of a "soap opera" than a reality show. Is Coto de Caza damaged because of the show? No, I don't think so. People should take it as entertainment, not about everyone's real lives in Coto de Caza.” Herein lies the danger. Ironic or not, these shows present sexist stereotypes of women, and when these women are portrayed as freak fragments (or extreme exaggerations) of the greater female population, the viewer is encouraged to judge them. As Douglas states, “Reality TV doesn’t only resurrect various sexist stereotypes, it also resurrects approval of them.” In other words, the audience judges the woman, not her portrayal. Thus the viewer of such shows is positioned with a gaze that not only excuses sexism, but also encourages it.

Since Survivor brought about the reality television revolution, there have been a wide variety of shows, including The Real Housewives, dedicated to producing exclusively female or feminized narratives. The sexist stereotyping these shows encourage cannot be understated. The format of female-centric reality programming proves diverse; there are the cosmetic surgery makeover shows (The Swan, Extreme Makeover), the lives of wives shows (Wife Swap, Sister Wives), the competitive husband hunting shows (The Bachelor, Joe Millionaire), the dream wedding shows (Say Yes to the Dress, Four Weddings), the sex as female empowerment shows (The Girls Next Door, Kourtney and Kim Take New York), the pageant shows (Toddlers in Tiaras, Miss America Pageant), and the young mom shows (Sixteen and Pregnant, Teen Mom). Of course a number of hybrid shows have also been produced, such as A Shot for Love, in which men and women compete for dates with the overtly sexualized Tila Tequila or Bridaplasty, in which women compete against each other
in order to win plastic surgery for their weddings. Needless to say, these shows follow
different narratives and depict a ‘diverse’ sample of women. Despite the varied
content, however, these shows share similar ideals of success, empowerment, and
beauty for modern women. Thus the sexist stereotypes of previous eras, dictated by
patriarchy and capitalism, remain in place—excused by the postfeminist notion that
women have chosen to act in such a manner.

This question of choice or (false) agency proves prominent in both reality
television and postfeminist discourse. This is more than a mere coincidence. To a
significant extent, reality television provides a platform for postfeminism to manifest
and infiltrate social thought. This form of indoctrination can be seen with
neoliberalism and the broader genre of reality television. In the US neoliberalism
emerged from the Chicago School as a counter economic strategy to Keynesian
theory.¹ Media scholar, David Grazin defines neoliberal principles as “global free
trade and the deregulation of industry, the weakening of union labour, a decline in
welfare assistance and social service provision, and the privatization of publicly-
owned resources.”¹² While these elements define neoliberalism as a conservative
economic policy, there are other social and behavioural facets that manifest under a
neoliberal regime, technologies of the self and constant surveillance, for example.
Nick Couldry suggests that the genre operates as a theatre of cruelty for
neoliberalism.¹³ He argues,

The truths of neoliberalism would be unacceptable if stated openly, even if
their consequences unfold before our eyes every day. Those truths must
therefore be translated into ritual that enacts as “play” an acceptable version of
the values and compulsions on which that cruelty depends.¹³
Thus, according to Couldry, neoliberalism depends on reality television in order to continue its operation. Arguably, the same logic applies to the sub-genres of female focused reality programming and postfeminism. Postfeminism is not only present in these shows, but it also relies on these shows to exercise control. Thus, across the female focused reality television genres, both neoliberal politics and postfeminism subtly foster false consciousness. By reaffirming the rhetoric of female empowerment—primarily through sex, beauty, and consumption—reality television constantly conceals the troubling depoliticization of feminism. Furthermore, the satirical, self-aware tone of certain shows encourages the viewer to see these shows as playful, humourous nonsense. Under this innocent guise, postfeminism, like neoliberalism, seeps unnoticed into social discourse. In fact, as Banet-Wiser and Portwood-Stacer suggest, the two systems—postfeminism and neoliberalism—collaborate to promote a similar ideology within the cosmetic surgery makeover show. They explain that “The Swan and Extreme Makeover construct their transformation narrative using very specific strategies and themes that resonate within a postfeminist context of neo-liberalism, individual agency and the celebration of technology.”

The concept of postfeminism existing as an element of or backdrop to neoliberalism proves relevant when discussing the rhetoric of The Real Housewives, since the series embodies both postfeminist and neoliberal ‘politics,’ depicting individual agency as attainable through consumption, and success as based on appearance and wealth. The attention given to the individual within the neoliberal regime and the manifestation of this phenomenon in postfeminist canon creates a problematic portrayal of women on reality television. In other words, feminism’s
thematic shift from addressing the societal tensions collectively facing women, to issues of individual agency is in keeping with the discourse implemented by late modernity’s economic shift towards a neoliberal regime. Previous studies of women on reality television have addressed this alleged empowerment or ‘choice’ now available to women. In particular, Banet-Wiser and Portwood-Stacer explain, “consumer post-feminism is often individualized and constructed as personal choice or individual equality, and thus is figured quite differently from a historical feminist emphasis on social change and liberation.”\textsuperscript{lvii} Thus empowerment exists but only within the system of patriarchy. As Mackenzie Cato and Francesca Renee Dillman Carpentier write, “Today, dominant messages in popular culture often suggest that a woman’s power comes primarily from her sexuality.”\textsuperscript{lviii} The makeover, therefore, positions itself as empowering, and women, such as the real housewives, who have husbands and can spend copious amounts of time and money maintaining and improving their image, present the ideal of success.

Furthermore the liberation these reality shows champion is constantly linked to consumer culture, Banet-Wiser and Portwood-Stacer continue, “[P]ost-feminism boldly claims that women possess active political agency and subjectivity, yet the primary place in which this agency is recognized and legitimated is within individual consumption habits as well as within general consumer culture.”\textsuperscript{lviii} The Real Housewives constantly promotes this form of agency. The wives are ‘free’ to spend their (husbands’) money on whatever they want for themselves, for their children, and for their home. For example, in the second season of Beverly Hills Dana (a friend of the Beverley Hills’ housewives) announces she spent $25,000 on a single pair of sunglasses, in the first season of Atlanta Kim Zolciak spent $18,000 on her daughter’s birthday party, and in the first season of New Jersey one of Theresa Guidice’s
narrative arcs follows the construction of her “dream home,” thus, success—as a result of empowerment via sex—is constantly correlated with economic wealth.

Of course, where agency—even false agency—presents itself, the opportunity for reappropriation or slight resistance occurs. While the false agency of postfeminist choice aims to conceal the continuation of inequality, in the case of *The Real Housewives*, it must also position the role of housewife as a choice. Here, *The Real Housewives* differs from other representations of women on reality television. Whereas in other shows false agency succeeds in quenching any opportunity for resistance by disguising stereotypes as the way women choose to present themselves, *The Real Housewives* openly alludes to a stereotype in its title. Furthermore, to a certain extent, the title begins to dismantle this stereotype. By positioning the housewives on the series as explicitly “real,” the show implies that the current connotations of housewife—often associated with the feminist mystic—are false. Thus the stereotype of the housewife becomes detached from its original meaning and placed in the context of the show.

Giovanna Derenzo labels this process the “reappropriation of housewife.” Reappropriation, as it is understood here, occurs when a minority demographic successfully commandeers an offensive term used by the dominant power. The meaning of the term is reversed and the label becomes one of pride, such as when ‘nigger’ was adopted by hip hop artists or ‘queer’ was incorporated into the LGBT community. Speaking specifically about *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, Derenzo explains, “On the show the women openly and often refer to themselves as housewives as a label for their groups of friends. They associate themselves with the term without acknowledging the true meaning or responsibilities of a housewife.” In this sense, *The Real Housewives* takes it upon itself to redefine the housewife for a
postfeminist era. Whereas once society pigeonholed women into the role of wife, which, according to Friedan, was a source of an ineffable discontent, the real housewives are proud of their identity. The real housewives do not experience “a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning.” Quite the opposite in fact, given that during the show’s title sequence each wife summarizes her happiness in one sentence, such as Phaedra Parks (Atlanta), who proclaims, “I’m the ultimate southern bell, I always get what I want,” or Gretchen Rossi (Orange County), who insists, “Don’t call me a princess, call me the boss.” Thus the woman’s role as wife is never positioned as a source of dissatisfaction, and although the women on The Real Housewives are not always content they tend to view their own lifestyle choices as universally desirable.

In contrast to The Real Housewives’ narrative that celebrates the success of the housewife, shows such as Wife Swap or Trading Spouses depict the chaos of modern families. These shows differ from The Real Housewives in their choice to film only nuclear families (no single mothers or unmarried women) and their portrayal of wives as failures who “cannot manage on their own to resolve the everyday demands made on them by work, children, and marriage.” However, there also exist key parallels between the differing representations of wives. As Kirsty Fairclough notes in response to the British Wife Swap, “It appears that according to television producers, the division of household chores, personal habits, taste, and parenting are the new battlefields in which women are contesting their homes, marriages, and self-esteem.” While the real housewives very rarely attend to household chores, the rest of Fairclough’s analysis applies to the real housewives. Despite their portrayal as empowered women who identify themselves as wives, their ‘choice’ still confines them to the domestic sphere. Therefore, just as the agency of the postfeminist woman
can only be exercised through consumption, the agency of the postfeminist wife can only be exercised through consumption applicable to the domestic sphere. The real housewives are simultaneously empowered and restrained, thus the dialectic of false agency exists at the heart of both the representation of women on reality television and postfeminist ideology.

**Summary**

The rhetoric of postfeminism manifests itself prominently in the discourse of reality television. The reduction of feminism to a movement based on improving one’s lifestyle collides with the neoliberal politics of reality television in order to produce the satisfying and believable message that gender equality has been achieved. In this chapter, the close examination of how postfeminism operates as a commoditized and depoliticized form of second wave feminism reveals the dangers of constantly reproducing narratives of false agency for women on reality television. This chapter also positions *The Real Housewives* as part of a larger trend—both in the postfeminist canon and in the narratives of women on reality television. The remainder of this thesis is my contribution to the growing discourse on postfeminism in popular culture, and attempts to reposition the “young” feminist voice as one that is socially and politically engaged.
Methodology

NeNe: Ten years of love, honey, nothing but love and hard work. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*

This research uses *The Real Housewives* as a case study to investigate the prevalence of postfeminism in the representation of the wife on reality television. The method of analysis I use is based on McRobbie’s conceptual frameworks for interpreting postfeminism in popular culture.\textsuperscript{lxvi} I have adapted McRobbie’s structure in order to gain a more in depth reading of how postfeminism manifests in *The Real Housewives*. The following chapter is divided into three sections. The first addresses the content of my analysis, explaining what I chose to analyze and why I made these decisions. The second section focuses on my analysis of the show. Here I justify why McRobbie’s method proves beneficial for my research. Finally, in the third section, I explain how McRobbie’s frameworks apply to *The Real Housewives*.

The Content

In the previous chapter I identified recurrent themes of what constitutes postfeminism. The remainder of this project explores how these themes manifest in *The Real Housewives* series. In North America, there are seven series of *The Real Housewives; Orange County* (2006-present), *New York City* (2008-present), *Atlanta* (2008-present), *New Jersey* (2009-present), *D.C.* (2010), *Beverly Hills* (2010-present), and *Miami* (2011-present). To date, across the seven series, there are 21 seasons, starring 59 housewives. These numbers will continue to rise as new seasons of *New York City, New Jersey,* and *Miami* are all currently in production. Of all the series, only *The Real Housewives of D.C.* has been officially cancelled. Within this study,
there is neither the time nor space to address all series, episodes, and housewives. What I therefore propose is to study a select sample of shows and wives to provide a base of research that can later be expanded.

I have chosen to study the introductory segments to the housewives of Atlanta, New Jersey, and Beverly Hills as my sample texts. At the start of each season *The Real Housewives* provides each ‘character’ with an introduction (or recap if the wife has appeared in a previous series). These introductory segments are short, ranging between approximately two minutes thirty seconds and five minutes, with an average length of approximately three minutes. While brief, these clips are highly informative; they are designed to give the audience an overview of the housewife, both from the housewife’s own perspective (through on screen interviews) and from the show’s observational perspective (through carefully selected footage and calculated edits). In some cases, the self evaluation and the observational evaluation prove complementary, in other cases they are at odds with each other—establishing from the outset which wives should be read as genuine and which should be read as untrustworthy, manipulative, oblivious, or just plain stupid.

The value of decoding the introductory segments is twofold. First, these segments neatly establish the dichotomy between the voice of the wife and the voice of the producer, allowing a reading of both how the wife represents herself and how this representation is appropriated for the narrative of the show. Thus, when investigating whether the show situates itself within postfeminist ideology, the introductory segments prove significant as they provide an insight into how the show—through the wives—constructs its own discourse and positions itself in the context of the postfeminist canon. Second, the segments follow a formulaic pattern
that remains the same across the series. This allows comparisons to be made between
different series and seasons. The Atlanta housewives, for example, can be read in
contrast to the Beverly Hills housewives. By addressing both reoccurring themes and
anomalies— intra-series and inter-series— a more nuanced reading of how The Real
Housewives endorses postfeminist values can be reached. If, for example,
postfeminism, as Springer suggests, promotes whiteness, how do the housewives of
Atlanta fit into the discourse established by the housewives of Orange County?\textsuperscript{lxvii}

The series selected for analysis (Atlanta, New Jersey, and Beverly Hills)
provide a diverse sample of wives not only geographically, but also ethnically and
culturally. While Beverly Hills represents what might be considered a more
recognizable form of the postfeminist heroine in popular culture, both Atlanta and
New Jersey complicate this representation by dealing with cultural stereotypes (such
as ‘the sassy black woman’ and ‘the Italian mother’) that must be placed within an
already established discourse. Although Orange County, as the original text, provides
the formula for the following series, previous scholars, such as Derenzo, have already
addressed many of the feminist issues raised by the series, thus I wish to address
series that have not yet been discussed in order to provide a more diverse reading of
The Real Housewives phenomenon.\textsuperscript{lxviii}

In order to carry out my research, I analyzed a total of 19 different housewives
across the three series. I watched three seasons of Atlanta, consisting of 43 episodes,
two seasons of New Jersey, consisting of 28 episodes, and two seasons of Beverly
Hills, consisting of 41 episodes. With the exception of the second season of Beverly
Hills, which I watched as it aired on Bravo and then on Amazon Instant video, I
watched all the episodes on DVD over a period of two months. The episodes
originally aired on Bravo between October 7\textsuperscript{th} 2008 and February 13\textsuperscript{th} 2012. All the
episodes are approximately 44 minutes long. I re-watched the first episode of each season, in which the introductory segments are placed. In total, I watched 38 introductions, three times. As I watched these segments I applied McRobbie’s conceptual frames to the content. The process by which I did this is outlined in the following section.

The Analysis

As noted in the previous chapter, in “Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime,” McRobbie outlines “conceptual frames for engaging with what has come to be known as postfeminism.” McRobbie applies these frames to Bridget Jones in order to demonstrate how postfeminism embeds itself in popular culture texts. This study adapts this method, applying McRobbie’s frames to the introductory segments of the three selected series of The Real Housewives. Since McRobbie applies her frameworks through a textual analysis of Bridget Jones, I completed a close textual reading of The Real Housewives.

The following section outlines, in greater depth than the previous chapter, what the five conceptual frames are and how I apply these frames to the text. As outlined in the Review of Previous Literature, McRobbie’s concepts are, “feminism dismantling itself,” “female success,” “unpopular feminism,” “feminism undone,” and “female individualization.” I then explain why I chose to work from McRobbie’s model of analysis, and finally, how I conducted my analysis. Having discussed the tropes and trends of postfeminism, this method is designed to decipher how (if at all) a text as a whole promotes a postfeminist ideology. While McRobbie’s work focuses on Bridget Jones—a single thirty-year-old—I argue her frameworks can also be used
to investigate the real housewives as alternative postfeminist protagonists. These concepts convey the core elements of postfeminist discourse in popular culture as discussed in the previous chapter. To understand the role of each concept, however, they must be unpacked in greater detail.

In relation to The Real Housewives and “feminism dismantling itself,” then, I adapt Butler’s work in order to examine how the housewives discuss their bodies. “Feminism dismantling itself” is the only concept concerned with feminism in academia as opposed to in popular culture; the effects of this dismantlement, however, are still present in popular culture texts. According to McRobbie, the self-reflexive critique that occurred within feminist cultural studies shifted the focus of scholarship from exploring one ideal of femininity to exploring “the subject” or “the body” in increasingly abstract terms. Gender feminism, as opposed to equity feminism, became the primary concern of cultural critiques, creating a tension and distance from the professional woman’s movement. McRobbie identifies Butler as the key catalyst for this development, and indeed Butler’s work provides a strong foundation for the contemporary study of gender.

Inspiring Butler, Simone De Beauvoir established that, “One is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one.” This observation creates a distinction between biological ‘sex’ and constructed ‘gender.’ While de Beauvoir’s statement acknowledges gender to be a cultured phenomenon, it assumes sex exists as a strict binary. In contrast to this assumption that sex is a facet of nature, then, Butler argues sex itself is also a cultural term, arising from the constructed binaries of gender. Advancing de Beauvoir’s work, Butler argues, “One is not born a woman, one becomes one; but further, one is not born female one becomes female; but even more radically, one can if one chooses, become, neither female nor male, woman nor
man. This is what McRobbie refers to as the “denaturalizing of the postfeminist body.” In the discourse of postfeminism, however, I argue this denaturalizing of the body has expanded from gender fluctuation to embody the spectrum of age. That is, in addition to the decentering of “female” as a cultural category, the category of “girl” has also become unfixed. Therefore, one can not only choose to be woman or man, one can also choose whether to be girl or woman, boy or man. Thus in the same manner as Butler argues drag queens perform gender, I argue “cougars” (older women who date younger men), such as Lisa Wu (Atlanta), perform youth. In the introductory segments of the series, then, I identify moments when youth is performed through manipulation of the body as a site of postfeminism correlating to “feminism dismantling itself.”

In terms of “female success,” or the “displacement of feminism as a political movement,” I examine whether the housewives see themselves as successful and, if so, whether they attribute feminism as the reason for this success. The concept of “female success” creates the notion in both popular and political spheres that feminism no longer proves necessary for women to succeed and thus they “must do without more autonomous feminist politics.” Hence investigating the reasoning behind the housewives’ success proves an appropriate test for this concept.

Next, “unpopular feminism,” synonymous with Douglas’ “enlightened sexism,” speaks to the cultural assumption that irony excuses modern day sexism. Thus, I investigate to what extent the “satirical” tone of The Real Housewives dismisses any sexist content in the show and therefore promotes a postfeminist ideology. Elaborating on this concept, McRobbie analyzes two advertising campaigns (Eva Herzigova for Wonderbra and Claudia Schiffer for Citroen) both of which ironically invoke the objectification of the female body. McRobbie refers to these
commercials as “self-consciously “sexist-ads,”” thus by identifying moments where sexism is invoked ironically, I question whether The Real Housewives can be read as a self-consciously “sexist show”.

McRobbie’s fourth concept, “feminism undone,” also integral to Douglas’ theory of enlightened sexism, is concerned with younger women’s relationship to feminism and their acceptance of sexism in society. It is worth noting here that the vast majority of work on postfeminism consists of “older women” critiquing representations of young, single women in popular culture. As a “young” feminist critiquing the portrayal of the wife in popular culture, this study proves somewhat of an anomaly. Hence, unlike McRobbie, I do not anchor the undoing of feminism to “young women.” Rather, I see the commoditization of sex appeal, which exists at the heart of “feminism undone,” as a universal concept in the postfeminist age. Therefore, I investigate how the undoing of feminism manifests in The Real Housewives by examining whether, and if so, how the show positions the wife as sexy.

Moving away from the unpopularity of feminism, McRobbie’s fifth concept, “female individualization,” returns to the idea of female success sans feminism and the disciplines of the female bodies. This concept speaks to the postfeminist phenomenon of holding the individual (woman) accountable for her own successes or failures. In relation to the show, I want to return to the rhetoric of success, investigating whether the wife as an individual (an ironically paradoxical term) is held accountable for her actions. I wish to discern whether success (or failure) is depicted as social or personal on the show. The final facet of “female individualization” is the collapse of static gender roles and class structures. Thus the concept of “female individualization” also accounts for the process of reappropriation and false agency,
meaning the actions and lifestyle “choices” the wives make on the show contribute to postfeminist discourse as well.

**The Application**

After describing her conceptual framework McRobbie begins her analysis of *Bridget Jones*. Examining postfeminist frames in the character of Bridget Jones, McRobbie writes,

> Aged thirty living and working in London, Bridget (played by Renee Zellweger) is a free agent, single and childless and able to enjoy herself in pubs, bars, and restaurants. She is the product of modernity in that she has benefited from those institutions (education) that have loosened the ties of tradition and community for women, making it possible for them to be “disembodied” and to relocate to the city to earn an independent living without shame or danger. However, this also gives rise to new anxieties. There is the fear of loneliness for example, the stigma of remaining single, and the risks and uncertainties of not finding the right partner to be a father to children as well as a husband.\textsuperscript{xxix}

In her analysis, McRobbie uses her conceptual frames to reveal how the film constructs a postfeminist discourse. For example, Bridget is depicted as both independent and successful without ever acknowledging the gains of feminism. Furthermore, her problems are lifestyle based (such as whether she will ever get married) therefore they are personal and not concerned with the political inequalities
collectively faced by women. While Bridget differs from the real housewives in many ways (she is single, British, employed, middle class, and fictional), it is possible for the method of analysis McRobbie uses to transcend *Bridget Jones* and be applied to a slew of popular culture texts. This is because, while very detailed, McRobbie’s frames are broad and abstract, making them easily adaptable for a case study such as this. In their abstract nature, McRobbie’s concepts address the systemic discourse of postfeminism, allowing a more thorough analysis of the cultural phenomenon than studies which only identify thematic trends such as ‘singleness’ or ‘girliness.’ Applying McRobbie’s framework to *The Real Housewives* thus proves the most efficient method for identifying whether the show promotes a postfeminist ideology.

To apply McRobbie’s conceptual frames I watched and re-watched the introductory segments to the housewives of the previously mentioned series. As I watched the introductory segments I took hand written notes on the signifiers (outlined above) for each conceptual frame. On my third viewing of the introductory segments, I compared the portrayal of the wives across the different series. I took notes both on trends in the introductory segments that didn’t fit into McRobbie’s framework and on differences in the representation of the wives, particularly differences related to race, age, and marital status (given that these are all central concerns in the postfeminist canon). I organised my work first by housewife, noting how the conceptual frames applied in each introduction. I then wrote notes comparing and contrasting the different wives under the headings of “Race,” “Age,” and “Marital Status.” After I had finished watching I rewrote and reorganised my notes by conceptual frame in order to form a clearer idea of how the show embodies the concepts. This also allowed me to see trends among the segments and connections among the wives, which I then compared to my own notes on race, age, and marital
status. With an understanding of McRobbie’s concepts and a broader knowledge of what constitutes postfeminism, I was able to discern from my analysis the extent to which *The Real Housewives* (specifically of Atlanta, New Jersey, and Beverly Hills) constructs a postfeminist discourse.

**Summary**

The process of analysis I undertook allowed a focused and detailed reading of *The Real Housewives*. By watching the entire series, but only using the introductory segments as my key texts, I was able to perform an in-depth critique of central themes and narrative arcs relating to the wives as well as gain a clear understanding of how the show represents them. By watching multiple series, which aired across four years, I gained a broad view of how the different housewives were represented, with the portrayals often differing depending on the wife’s race or age. Using McRobbie’s framework provided me with a structured yet flexible model for my research, thus I could efficiently investigate complex notions of postfeminism in *The Real Housewives* series.
Discussion of Findings

Camille: Girlfriend of mine told me, expect the worst and you won’t be disappointed. Well, let me tell you, I have not been disappointed. 

_The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills_

The following section contains my findings and analysis of the postfeminist discourse apparent across three separate series of *The Real Housewives*. This chapter opens with an overview of each series, providing the necessary information to interpret the rest of the discussion. My analysis is then presented in six segments, five addressing McRobbie’s terms as outlined in the previous chapter and a final segment investigating the complex portrayal of race, age, and marital status in the show. I examine trends across the series in order to analyse how the show as a whole presents a postfeminist discourse. While I present the concepts as separates, within the show they often work together, occurring simultaneously. For instance, Danielle Staub’s *(New Jersey)* introduction portrays both the dismantling of feminism and unpopular feminism. Therefore, despite the distinct analysis in this discussion the concepts collaborate in order to create postfeminist discourse.

Overview

Premiering in the fall of 2008, *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is the longest running series of the three I discuss. The series has four seasons, of which I watched three, and a total of eight housewives, all of which I analyzed. In the first season, the housewives are NeNe Leaks, DeShawn Snow, Sheree Whitfield, Lisa Wu, and Kim Zolciak. Kim is Caucasian and Lisa is half Chinese and half African American. The rest of the housewives are African American. Kim has a boyfriend known as ‘Big Poppa’ and Sheree is going through a divorce. Otherwise, the housewives are all
married. The season revolves around tensions between NeNe and Kim, that arise when Kim attempts to become a country singer and is mocked by NeNe. Sheree starts a fashion line, DeShawn hosts an unsuccessful charity benefit, and NeNe discovers her biological father is not who she thought he was.

In season two, the drama continues as Grammy award winner Kandi Burruss is introduced into the group and DeShawn leaves the series. NeNe attempts to rekindle her friendship with Sheree. Sheree and Lisa both work on their respective clothing lines, Kandi and Kim both work on their respective music careers, Sheree celebrates her new single life, and Lisa tries to get pregnant. The season ends with an emotional NeNe fighting both with her husband and with Kim. In season three, model Cynthia Bailey and entertainment attorney Phaedra Parks join the series. Lisa does not participate as a leading wife in this series, though she makes a number of guest appearances. Tensions in NeNe’s marriage reach a breaking point, Phaedra’s pregnancy sparks questions around her due date, Cynthia accepts a proposal from her boyfriend Peter and begins planning her dream wedding, Kim and Kandi disagree over a new song for Kim, Sheree pursues her lifelong dream of becoming an actress, and NeNe begins a career as an entertainment reporter for a local news station.

*The Real Housewives of New Jersey* is also four seasons long, currently, however, only three have aired. I watched the first two seasons starring five of the seven total housewives. The housewives in the first two seasons are Teresa Guidice, Jacqueline Laurita, Caroline Manzo, Dina Manzo, and Danielle Staub. Although, the housewives are all white, the Manzos and Teresa often emphasise their Italian heritage. All the housewives are married, except Danielle who is going through a divorce. The first season follows group tension, as Danielle becomes friends with Jacqueline. After the release of *Cop Without A Badge*, a book containing shocking
information about Danielle’s past, the wives decide they do not trust Danielle. This comes to a head in the season finale, when the housewives confront Danielle at a dinner party and Teresa gets so upset she flips a table over. The drama continues in season two, as the housewives try to distance themselves from Danielle. Jacqueline and Teresa have a baby boy and a baby girl, respectively. Caroline wants her husband to retire. Dina leaves the series after the seventh episode to spend time with her family. Teresa, Caroline, and Jacqueline travel to Italy to visit Teresa’s extended family. Back in New Jersey, Danielle takes legal action against Jacqueline’s unruly teenage daughter, Ashley.

*The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* is the most recent of the series I discuss and the sixth series of *The Real Housewives* to be filmed in North America. The luxurious lifestyle of these housewives exceeds that of their geographical counterparts in Atlanta and New Jersey. There are currently two seasons of Beverly Hills, starring six housewives, Taylor Armstrong, Camille Grammer, Adrienne Maloof, Kim Richards, Kyle Richards, and Lisa Vanderpump. The wives are all white and, with the exception of Kim, married. The first season follows a fierce dispute between Kyle and Camille, which contributes to growing tension between Kyle and Kim. Adrienne bickers with her husband Paul, Taylor struggles with her marriage to Russell, Lisa tries to get Cedric, her permanent houseguest, to move out, and Camille announces that her husband Kelsey has asked for a divorce. In the season finale, Kim arrives drunk to Taylor’s birthday party and has a huge blowout fight with Kyle. Tension between Kyle and Kim continues to build in the second season as Kim becomes more distant and less sober. Newly divorced Camille begins to make a life for herself, Lisa helps plan her daughter’s wedding, Adrienne struggles with business
decisions, and Taylor works on her failing marriage and unstable mental condition. Eventually Taylor leaves Russell and Russell commits suicide.

While few of the events described above sound particularly enjoyable, it is worth noting that all the tension, the name calling, the fights, the drunken abuse, the screaming, the table tossing, and the death threats occur against a backdrop of extreme wealth. The settings for the showdowns are elegant tea parties, black tie birthday parties, charity benefits, dinner parties, luxurious vacation resorts, hotel suites, and private fashion shows. The settings are primarily domestic, or, if public, associated with leisure. In terms of postfeminism, these leisurely settings provide a façade of liberation, independence, or choice. The women, in other words, are entirely responsible for their own behaviour—no one is forcing them to drink cocktails, wear $25,000 sunglasses, and start fights. Furthermore, associating such catty behaviour with leisure activities suggests, as Kyle’s husband Mauricio states, “Women love to argue.” Thus the very essence of the show already embodies themes of female success and female individualization by orienting all conflict within the realm of luxurious lifestyle politics.

**Feminism Dismantling Itself**

Much of Butler’s seminal work, specifically *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, tackles the assumption that gender exists as an absolute (binary) truth. Butler suggests that this dominant truth can be subverted through practices of performativity or repetition. She states,
If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e. new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid code of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible.\textsuperscript{lxxxii}

Butler herself remains somewhat hesitant about the level of individual agency such practices cause, as Sara Salih explains, “Butler is \textit{not} suggesting that the subject is free to choose which gender she or he is going to enact.”\textsuperscript{lxxxiii} Other scholars, however, have used her work to make progressive arguments about the fluidity of both gender and sex. What happens, then, when Butler’s work is removed from its gender context and her theory of performativity is used to examine other absolute truths, in this case, age? Here, I argue Butler’s work applies differently from her original text. Butler understands the practice of destabilizing gender as parody and thus, to a certain extent, subversive. I argue that, while this might apply to gender, other destabilized codes of the body actually reinforce hegemonic practices.

If, as Butler posits, the body is a denaturalized site, malleable and layered, then surely all the codes consigned to the body are placed in flux. By removing gender as a fixed category, Butler also opens the door to the displacement of age (and, for that matter, race) as a stable signifier. Therefore, if the body is denaturalized, one can perform their age, just as one can perform their gender. In forming identity, getting older proves no more inconvenient than having certain sex organs. This reveals the fine line between the ‘posting’ of gender and the ‘posting’ of feminism. In terms of the progressive effects of such denaturalizing, Butler is right to remain reserved. While, it is in some ways liberating to know bodies do not define a prefixed identity,
when this liberation is co-opted by the market, is the case with age, the practice of performativity becomes less a choice and more an expectation. In the postfeminist era, youth has become a product. The shifting concerns of feminist theory have placed the body (as opposed to the collective) as the new key battleground, in doing so the body has become the site where agency, resistance, and subversion occur. On the flip side, however, if the body is commandeered by the dominant economic regime (late capitalism) then true agency ceases and only false agency remains. Thus, as Couldry suggests, shows such as The Swan or Extreme Makeover function as a theatre of cruelty, subtly teaching the viewer that the practices of postfeminism are not only necessary, but also rewarding.\textsuperscript{lxxxiv}

How, then, does this translate to The Real Housewives?

Nowhere is the presence of this dismantled feminism of the body more apparent than in Taylor’s introduction. Taylor openly fears her husband will leave her for someone younger and prettier. Thus, in order to avoid heartbreak, Taylor surgically manipulates her body to maintain a competitive appearance. Here, the shifts in sexism begin to emerge; where once patriarchy dominated society through male control, now patriarchy uses the market as its primary tool for the oppression of women. Despite being married, Taylor does not feel the sense of security she might have in a previous era. She, however, does not position her husband as the cause for this anxiety. Instead, she blames the presence of twenty-something women—as if her husband is powerless to resist their bodies. Thus Taylor must continue to manipulate her body through costly and invasive procedures simply to ensure her husband stays with her. In a truly postfeminist sense, then, the stronghold of marriage is completely undermined by the stronghold of the market. While Taylor is the only housewife in the series I analyzed to undergo a cosmetic procedure in her introduction, other
housewives undergo surgeries both on and off camera in all three of the series I watched and, in her introductory segment, Teresa discusses her decision to get breast implants.

The importance of maintaining a youthful body is again emphasised through Danielle’s introduction. The opening section of Danielle’s introduction is entirely dedicated to showcasing her body. She states her age (forty-five) as if to prove it no longer factors into her appearance, simply by working out and ‘taking care’ of her body she is able to defy the fact of aging. In her introduction, we watch a segment of her age-defying routine; she suns herself by the pool, works out in her private gym, and tans herself in her personal tanning machine. All the while she remains scantily dressed in a bikini or workout bra and shorts. As Danielle lifts weights, the viewer watches her watch herself in the mirror. In this act, she embodies the narcissism of narrative cinema in which the viewer must always adopt a (sexist) male gaze. Here, the viewer watches a subject who has herself internalized Laura Mulvey’s gaze in which the subject emits “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Objectification, therefore, has become a self-practice. As both subject and viewer watch Danielle, all eyes are on the body, because, in postfeminist discourse, the denaturalized body, not age, functions as the key signifier of youth.

**Female Success**

Never in the introductory segments is feminism alluded to as the reason for the housewives’ success. This is not to say that the housewives do not view themselves as successful, even as successful women. However, the achievements of the women’s movement and the gains of feminism are never cited as the cause of this success. That
is, while feminism may have contributed to the housewives success, the housewives fail to acknowledge it as a cause. In part, this makes sense (and not only because of the presence of postfeminism). The women, after all, are housewives, and the women’s movement focused on liberating women from this position. Since these women ‘chose’ to remain in, or return to, the role of housewife, to a certain extent, they also ‘chose’ to reject feminist successes. This attitude is due, at least in part, to the failure of the women’s movement to prescribe a more nuanced ideal of what it means to be a woman. As Busch explains, following her comments on women mimicking a traditionally male nature, “Not only did feminism fail to overcome nature; it secretly, perhaps unconsciously, promoted male nature as superior to female nature.”

Thus failing to acknowledge the achievements of feminism in female success, specifically when success is contained within the domestic sphere has arguably as much to do with feminism’s failings as with postfeminism’s success.

Nevertheless, the danger of promoting female success sans feminism should not be understated, especially considering the demographic make-up of Bravo viewers. Despite the numerous fights and emotional crises these women appear to experience on a daily basis, there is no question that these women are successful (given that the dominant characteristic of success in a capitalist society is wealth). As Kim Zolciak states, “In Atlanta, money and class do give you power.” Thus, following the neoliberal tradition of reality television, the show simultaneously promotes an ideal of success that encourages participation in the capitalist regime, yet undermines the notion of having a social safety net. How, then, is the rhetoric of success positioned in *The Real Housewives*?

Perhaps more so than any other of McRobbie’s frames, the rhetoric of female success resonates across all introductory segments. It is, of course, essential that the
housewives be understood to live a life of leisure and luxury so that, as previously mentioned, their unruly behaviour can also be interpreted as leisurely. The rhetoric varies depending on the type of economic success the wives display (for example, living in a mansion versus being married to a millionaire), although clear themes do emerge across all three series. The principle causes for success, according to *The Real Housewives*, are geographic location, talent, hard work, good fortune, and fate. With the exception of geographic location, then, the causes for success are all based on the individual. Thus, not only is feminism absent, but the idea of success having anything to do with a collective movement or a welfare state is also completely undermined.

For the majority of housewives the source of their affluent lifestyles is depicted as both individual and uncontrollable. With the exception of NeNe, Kandi, and Adrienne, all of who acknowledge the importance of making life choices and working hard as key reasons for their success, the rest of the housewives attribute their success to either fate or good fortune. In other words, either some unknown cosmic force predetermined their success or they are just extremely lucky, whether that luck applies to having a talent for clothing design or to marrying a very wealthy man. Kyle, for example, explains she is “fortunate” that her husband makes enough money to support her and her children, Jacqueline states she and her family are “blessed to live the lifestyle” they live, and DeShawn balances her earlier comments on the benefits of geographic location by discussing how she was “meant for something more.” This focus on chance or destiny as a primary factor in achieving female success reinstates the traditional position of women as passive, compared, that is, to their active male counterparts. Thus not only does the show fail to acknowledge the importance of the women’s movement, it also undoes the movement’s progressive
work on the perception of women in society, laying the groundwork for McRobbie’s fourth concept, feminism undone.

Only DeShawn and Lisa Wu attribute geographic location as a reason for their success, and on both occasions the wives connect the importance of geography with race. DeShawn states that, “Atlanta is the land of opportunity for African Americans,” and Lisa states that, “Business women like me [half Chinese, half African American] can thrive in Atlanta.” Therefore, despite the overwhelming focus on the individual as the sole entity responsible for economic prosperity, there are moments when larger social factors are acknowledged and success is shown to transcend the individual. Thus, while the show comfortably situates itself within the discourse of postfeminism, the show seems less willing to accept the discourse of post-racism, or what Springer refers to as “post-civil-rights.” Ultimately, however, the dismantling of feminism combined with the rhetoric of female success promotes the message that women should work hard to look good (read: younger) and if they can do this, everything else will magically fall into place.

**Unpopular Feminism**

“Unpopular feminism” functions slightly differently than McRobbie’s other frameworks, since the concept is defined by tone as opposed to content. In other words, it is not what is portrayed, but how it is portrayed that matters. Thus, recognizing unpopular feminism as part of a television series requires interpreting a number of audio and visual cues as opposed to identifying specific narrative trends. Combined with elements of undone feminism, unpopular feminism accounts for the phenomenon of enlightened sexism on which Douglas’ book is based.
rejects the term postfeminism, positing that it suggests feminism is the cause for the current (sexist) cultural condition. Instead Douglas uses the term “enlightened sexism” suggesting that the media sells “fantasies of power” that not only depict an inaccurate portrayal of women in society, they also endorse sexist stereotyping. Douglas argues, “[I]f we look at what is often being said about girls and women in these fantasies—what we can and should do, what we can and can’t be—we will see that slithering just below the shiny mirage of power is the dark, sneaky serpent of sexism.” Just as false agency presents the illusion of choice and third wave feminism presents the illusion of liberation, enlightened sexism presents the illusion of power. Douglas continues,

Enlightened sexism is a response, deliberate or not, to the perceived threat of a new gender regime. It insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism—indeed, full equality has allegedly been achieved—so now it’s okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women.

This echoes McRobbie’s analysis of the 1998 Citroen commercial in which she claims, “Feminism is “taken into account” but only to be shown to be no longer necessary. Why? Because it now seems that there is no exploitation here; there is nothing remotely naïve about this striptease.” Just as there is nothing naïve about Claudia Schiffer’s striptease commercial, there is nothing naïve about the representation of women on The Real Housewives.

Even in the cases where the housewives might seem unaware of their own demeanour, the show maintains a critical distance; as if throwing the viewer a
knowing wink, which confirms that, yes, these women are ridiculous. For example, in the talking head interviews with the wives, they never look directly at the camera. Therefore, even when the wives are alone, the camera captures them having a conversation with some unseen entity. Thus the show never interacts with the wives directly, allowing the viewer to remain detached from the wives and watch only what the camera has passively captured. In Kim Richard’s introduction, for example, she tells a story about when she was an “icon,” as she talks she laughs awkwardly, attempting to offset her hubris attitude. Since she is not talking to the camera, however, the viewer is prompted to laugh at her as opposed to with her. Through subtle—and less subtle—techniques such as this, the show encourages the viewer to adopt a sexist gaze, a gaze justified by the logic of unpopular feminism.

This gaze is encouraged in a number of the introductory segments. In some cases, the wives have jobs that position their bodies as a site of spectacle. For example, Cynthia’s introduction focuses on her work as a model and Camille’s segment showcases her work as a dancer. However, neither of these introductions strongly evokes the satirical sexism of unpopular feminism. This excused, or enlightened, sexism is most apparent in the introductions to Teresa and Danielle. Teresa’s introduction begins as she emerges from a dressing room wearing a bikini. Caroline and Dina are both present, and the wives begin to comment on Teresa’s body. Dina jokingly asks Teresa, “Where do you get off having a body like that after three kids?” and Caroline comments that Teresa “needs bubbies.” Like the sexist advertisements in McRobbie’s critique, the scene indicates that, “it is permissible, once again, to enjoy looking at the bodies of beautiful women.” The women openly objectify Teresa, knowing, as the viewer does, that this behaviour is acceptable in a post-sexist, postfeminist world. Furthermore, Teresa encourages this type of ironic
objectification not only from her female friends, but from her husband as well. As her introduction continues, the viewer watches her visit her husband at work. She flirts with him, purposely dropping a pen so she can seductively bend down to pick it up. There is no doubt her behaviour is a joke; she is self-consciously resurrecting a stereotype from a pre-feminist era. However, in doing so, she also resurrects the sexism of this era.

Danielle’s introduction is less self-conscious than Teresa’s. Whereas in Teresa’s introduction the sexist critique is embedded in the diegesis of the show, in Danielle’s introduction the sexist gaze is primarily manufactured postproduction. The introduction shows Danielle’s glistening, scantily clad body as her voiceover talks openly about how proud she is of her figure. Even before her voiceover begins, however, the tone of her introduction is set through specific musical cues. As Danielle walks towards the camera in her bikini, the soundtrack mimics that of the theme for an overtly sexualized female cartoon (the kind that would make a male cartoon’s eyes pop out of his heads). This intertextual audio cue simultaneously encourages a sexist gaze and insists that this gaze be ironic. The sexism is thus excused, and any feminist who tries to say otherwise would be ruining all the fun.

**Feminism Undone**

McRobbie’s fourth concept, feminism undone, relates closely to her third, although the effects of feminism undone are arguably more severe than those of unpopular feminism. Whereas unpopular feminism relegates feminism to the past (because it no longer proves necessary), feminism undone actively disassembles the ideology of equality fought for by both first and second wave feminists. For
McRobbie and other contemporary feminist scholars this phenomenon manifests in the culture of and for women too young to remember a world prior to second wave feminism. The feminism-undone framework posits that postfeminist culture not only positions feminism as unpopular, but also encourages sexism. Furthermore, postfeminist culture silences women or, more specifically, girls who might object to such blatant sexism in society. McRobbie discusses the tolerance with which young women accept “the normalization of pornography,” arguing that, for young women, sexual liberation can only be attained if politics are left by the wayside. In other words, feminism has been hijacked, stripped of its values, repackaged, and sold, void of politics, back to young women (most of whom are smart enough to enjoy the irony of such overt sexism).

In *The Real Housewives* the undoing of feminism through the commoditization of sexual liberation proves less apparent than McRobbie’s other concepts. In part, this is because the concept is specifically about the cultural consumption habits of young women and, while young women may be the chief consumers of the show (61.4% of Bravo’s viewers are female and 57.6% of them are between the ages of 18 and 49), the majority of the show’s protagonists are over forty. My original hypothesis was that this would not matter; regardless of age, the show would still position the wives as sexy in the same way that reality shows about younger women (such as *The Bachelor*) brand their participants as sexy. However, with the exception of Teresa and Danielle’s ironic sexiness (and Camille’s less ironic dance routine), the show does not position the wives in the same “sexy” female stereotypes commonly found on reality television. Thus, as opposed to focusing on the wives sex appeal, *The Real Housewives* adds to the postfeminist divide between young girls and older women. Whereas Brandi, a young friend of the Beverly Hills”
housewives, lounges around in a tiny bikini and suggests throwing a “blow job party” for the “girls,” the (older) wives find her behaviour distasteful. Being sexy is therefore viewed as a young girl’s game and, for the housewives, comes secondary to their responsibilities as devoted wives or loving mothers.

In some cases, the housewives mock this lack of sex. Lisa Vanderpump, for example, explains that her husband calls her a “sex object,” and goes on to joke that “every time he wants sex, I object.” For Lisa, then, liberation is the freedom to not have sex. She deliberately invokes sexist irony, only to turn the concept on its head. What is significant though, in a postfeminist era, is the ease with which Lisa appears to control the sex (or lack thereof) in her marriage. In a sense, this control functions as a “fantasy of power.” It undermines the pressure put on women by the hyper-sexualized media and reaffirms the rhetoric of false agency. In other words, by dismissing sex so nonchalantly, Lisa upholds the illusion of power that women have achieved sexual liberation. Furthermore, as an older housewife, Lisa reinforces the generational divide, since, in postfeminist culture, sex is viewed as synonymous with youth. Lisa respects and endorses this discourse by removing herself from the sexual sphere. Danielle, on the other hand, wants to be seen as sexy despite her age and, as a result, the show encourages the audience to mock her.

The topic of sex, therefore, is not entirely absent from the introduction segments. In fact, in addition to Lisa, Kandi also discusses her decision not to have sex. Sex talk is also more common in later episodes of the Atlanta series where the wives discuss their “freak number” as an indicator of how sexually adventurous they see themselves. However, with the exception of Danielle, the wives do not position themselves as sexy. Instead, they focus on their identity as a mother, a wife, and/or a career woman. In her introduction, for example, Caroline calls herself a “throw back”
thus associates herself with the pre-women’s movement housewives of the 1950’s. She explains her children and her husband are more important to her than her career. While Caroline positions herself as an anomaly, in fact, most of the housewives follow suit—positioning their role as mothers as central to their identities. The housewives, then, position themselves neither as the promiscuous girls gone wild showcased by other reality television programs nor as the sexually liberated (and sex-driven) heroines of fictional shows such as *Sex and the City* or *Ally McBeal*. In their introductions at least, the women attempt to present themselves as devoted wives and caring mothers, suggesting that they might have more in common with their 1950’s counterparts than it first appears. Perhaps, then, the show portrays a different form of feminism undone, one specifically catered towards the postfeminist mother as opposed to her sexy daughter.

**Female Individualization**

In McRobbie’s fifth and final concept, the focus returns to the body, not in the denaturalized sense that Butler elucidates, rather in a Foucaultian sense in which the body functions in response to certain social disciplines. For McRobbie, female individualization embodies the collapse of gender roles and class structures in order to hold the individual accountable for their actions, theirs successes, and their failures. In relation to *Bridget Jones*, McRobbie explains,

Bridget portrays the whole spectrum of attributes associated with the self-monitoring subject: she confides in her friends; she keeps a diary; she endlessly reflects on her fluctuating weight, noting her calorie intake; she
For a Foucaultian analysis, it is important to understand how individual actions and choices are mediated through social norms in order to create discourse. In this case, it is important to understand how the housewives’ actions construct a postfeminist discourse. Continuing a Foucaultian critique, McRobbie’s reference to Bridget as a “self-monitoring subject” brings Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon into play. Counter to the teachings of third-wave feminism then, the female body has not been liberated; rather, women have internalized the discourse of oppression. Thus the Panopticon has been internalized, and postfeminism reveals itself to be a Foucaultian utopia (or distopia, depending on what side of power production one resides). The laws positioning women as second-class citizens are no longer necessary, and neither is institutionalized sexism—the discourse of postfeminism is all patriarchy needs in order to maintain its ideological control. Female individualization, in other words, is the practice of internalizing patriarchy.

Michel Foucault’s discussion of docile bodies proves particularly useful in understanding how women internalize power structures. However, as feminist critics have pointed out, while Foucault’s work proves useful, it fails to account for the difference in gendered experiences. Thus Foucault’s theory must be adjusted for feminist scholarship. Sandra Lee Bartky alludes to this problem, stating that,

Foucault treats the body throughout as if it were one, as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and as if men and women bore
the same relationship to the characteristic institutions of modern life. Where is the account of the disciplinary practices that engender the “docile bodies” of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men?

Bartky acknowledges that the theory of the docile body proves useful, however, she also acknowledges that the while Foucault seeks liberation, his work is symptomatic of the patriarchal structure in which he writes. Bartky, then, adapts Foucault’s paradigm in order to examine how specifically female bodies are repressed. For Foucault, the docile body is born from the practices of modern institutions such as the factory, the hospital, or the school. He explains,

A “political economy,” which was also a “mechanics of power,” was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, “docile” bodies.

For Bartky, these practices transcend the labour/leisure divide. She insists social and cultural expectations render the female body docile in a unique fashion. From the pressure to maintain a healthy weight and youthful appearance to the prescribed notion that the female gaze be one of passivity, women must continually (self) monitor their bodies in order to be successful in a patriarchal, postfeminist society. Thus, while female success and the unpopularity of second-wave feminism may make it appear that women have been liberated from the chains of patriarchy, in fact, their rebellion has been silenced.
How, then, do the housewives champion this individualized, internalized success that distracts them (and their audience) from their repression? Here, the focus turns again to Taylor, whose second season introduction proves particularly enlightening. Taylor’s opening segment in season two shows Taylor in therapy, seeking help in order to become a happier, stronger person. In fact, Taylor is in an abusive marriage—a fact that is revealed midway through the season (although due to her ex-husband’s suicide, the story was in the press before the season aired). Despite being physically and emotionally abused by her husband, Taylor attempts to fix herself. She views herself as the sole entity responsible for her own failings—she is the reason for her pain, and by seeking therapy she alone can overcome her hardship. Taylor does not expect any legal or social institution to intervene, nor does she expect her friends to intervene (in fact, when Camille does get involved, Russell threatens to sue her). Worse, however, is that Taylor does not expect Russell to stop abusing her, nor does she blame him for his actions. Rather, Taylor excuses her husband’s aggression and instead blames her own weakness for her pain, revealing the dangers of internalizing female individualization.

While for Taylor the consequences of female individualization might seem alarming, female individualization also manifests in a number of other more subtle ways. The constant presence of this individualization/internalization allows the show to construct a rhetoric that normalizes female individualization, thus, the show accepts Taylor’s attitude. In other words, the discourse of postfeminism successfully silences any feminist alarm bells that should ring out at the slightest mention of domestic abuse. The rhetoric is sly but constant, with female individualization proving discernible across the spectrum of introductions. The desire to shop, for example, that Kim Zolciak and Kyle both demonstrate reveals the practice of dressing the body in a
certain feminine fashion—again this practice has been internalized with Kim stating, “It makes me feel good to wear designer brands.” Furthermore, while Lisa Wu, Kim Zolciak, Camille, and Danielle are all shown exercising and Kyle, Dina, and Jacqueline are all shown preparing food for their families, none of the wives are shown eating in their introductions. In two cases (NeNe and Taylor) the wives are shown at restaurants, in both cases, however, their respective husbands are belittling them. Thus, although the wives are shown eating multiple times as the series unfolds, the discipline of slenderness creeps subtly throughout their introductions.

**Race, Age, and Marital Status**

I depart now from McRobbie’s terms in order to discuss the representation of race, age, and marital status. This positions *The Real Housewives* in the larger context of postfeminist culture and scholarship. With all three of the identity categories, the different series reveal diverse tensions and levels of exclusion and inclusion. In terms of race, only *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* shows any integration between different races. Furthermore, the series portrays race as an identity that extends beyond skin colour. Kim, for example, claims she is “a black women trapped inside a white woman’s body” and Sheree asserts she is a “white woman trapped in a black woman’s body.” *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* thus portrays racial traits as social or cultural as well as connected to skin colour. Rhetoric such as this encourages the stereotyping Springer discusses in her work on post-civil rights, postfeminist texts. If blackness is an identity defined, as Kim suggests, not by skin colour but by attitude, then it too shows signs of being internalized. From Butler’s perspective, then, the show depicts blackness as a performance. In contrast, a Foucault via Bartky reading would reveal it
as a discipline. That is, where Butler might see subversion in Sheree performing whiteness, for example, Bartky would see this articulation of race as a system of control. For the most part, however, while the subject of race is not ignored, neither is it positioned as a political issue.

In fact, within the introductions only once does the show allude to political concerns facing African American women. This occurs in Kandi’s introduction when she talks about her life as a single mother. She explains her mother, her sisters, her aunts, and her cousins are all single mothers and states that she “didn’t want to become part of the cycle.” While the information is anecdotal and personal, Kandi addresses the absence of the father in African American society. By acknowledging the “cycle,” Kandi is also acknowledging a world outside of Atlanta’s wealthy elite—a world where the single African American mother is an important, politically charged figure.

The representation of age again differs amongst the series, although the subject is more prevalent in The Real Housewives of New Jersey and The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills (especially after the introduction of Brandi) than in The Real Housewives of Atlanta. Both New Jersey and Beverly Hills have an older housewife (Caroline and Lisa Vanderpump, respectively) who assumes a mothering role, thus the other housewives seem younger in contrast and age appears somewhat on a spectrum. The Real Housewives of New Jersey is the only series I studied where age is a factor in the introduction segments; Jacqueline has had four unexplained miscarriages and she worries it is because she is pushing forty, Caroline discuss the age difference between her and Dina stating that she feels she needs to “look after Dina,” and Danielle explicitly states her age as if to prove she has defied it. Thus while age is seen to present different challenges and responsibilities, it is only
presented as an obstacle when it affects a specifically feminine task, primarily being a mother. According to *The Real Housewives*, then, age too promotes female stereotypes.

In terms of marital status, in contrast to the plethora of postfeminist texts circulating in popular culture, *The Real Housewives* does not draw clear distinctions between the single girl and the married woman. Obviously the wives who are married state they are married, and the “wives” who are single state they are single, and while one wife’s narrative may focus on the her marriage and another on her quest to find love, the show fails to draw any clear or consistent distinctions between the lifestyle of the married wife and the lifestyle of the single “wife.” This is postfeminist discourse at its finest. Here, the intersection between all five of McRobbie’s concepts unveils itself. Feminism has dismantled itself so that the female body—as opposed to women’s role or social position—can become the focus. Female success reveals a false sense of equality between married and single women. Unpopular feminism deconstructs the age divide between the single “girl” and married “woman.” Feminism undone ensures a stereotypical portrayal of the wives, to which no one objects. Lastly, female individualization reveals the myth of the husband in the postfeminist era; the disciplines constricting the wives are the same as those constricting the single women. The role of men no longer defines a woman’s place in society. This, however, is no cause to celebrate. Postfeminism is not feminism achieved, but the internalization of patriarchy. In other words, women have become their own oppressors.

**Summary**
While I have examined McRobbie’s concepts as individual entities, the concepts are in fact related and overlapping. Postfeminism cannot be identified through pointing out isolated trends or events. Rather, only by analyzing a text as a whole can the phenomenon be recognized. McRobbie’s terms prove so successful because they initiate a series of questions as opposed to a series of answers. How does the text relate to shifts in gender studies? How does the text portray women? What is the tone of the text? How does the text portray feminism? What discourse does the text promote? And, my own question, how does the text fit into context of other similar texts? I have attempted to answer these questions in order to gain a clearer understanding not only of The Real Housewives but also of postfeminist discourse writ large. By examining the short opening fragments of the series, I was able to focus in great detail on the methods through which the show exhibits postfeminism and draw my own conclusions about the effects of such exhibition. This form of close analysis reveals not only how rhetoric spreads but also how it manifests. The Real Housewives may be symptomatic of its era, but the text is also expressive. The show endorses and produces postfeminism in order to keep the disciplined practice of female self-oppression in place. To dismiss the show as trash, as one might be prone to do with all reality television, is to ignore the important ideological work that continues to influence social structures. By selling women their own repression, disguised as female liberation, The Real Housewives and other postfeminist texts ensure the continuation of patriarchy.
Conclusion

Danielle: I know who I am. I know I’m not a whore or a prostitute or a cokehead. I know I didn’t deserve a table thrown at me and I know I’m not garbage. The Real Housewives of New Jersey

While this project used The Real Housewives as a case study for investigating how postfeminist discourse manifests in popular culture, the show is not an anomaly. The Real Housewives is symptomatic of contemporary culture and social perspective. The show, after all, is successful entertainment, thus must fit into popular notions of what is considered not only socially acceptable but also entertaining. It is essential that the show be understood in this context; The Real Housewives phenomenon proves in no way isolated from larger cultural shifts in the women’s movement.

In this final chapter, I contemplate the American media’s recent representation of women and examine how the discourse of postfeminism helps discern the rhetoric surrounding such representations. Building on McRobbie’s initial framework, this thesis should ultimately be read not as a completed project but as a guide to interpreting and challenging the repression of women in popular culture. While I have chosen The Real Housewives as my text, the method of analysis I perform can (and should) be applied to the plethora of cultural texts that promote and reproduce postfeminism in order to dismantle the illusion of liberation that masks the internalization of patriarchy. Thus my conclusion aims to reveal the larger picture of postfeminism, and demonstrate how the discourse that manifests in the popular sphere is not unique from that which manifests in the political sphere.

In the months that this project unfolded, women and women’s rights have become increasingly present in the news media. From the threatened funding cut to Planned Parenthood to Rush Limbaugh’s comments about Fluke, women, it appears, have come under attack. In moments such as this, the dangerous effects of functioning
in a discourse of false agency reveal themselves. While certain critics have correctly claimed that the GOP’s war on women is nothing new, recent events have certainly brought women’s rights back into the spotlight. Although the attempt to cut Planned Parenthood funding last year failed on a federal level, in Texas, 90% of the program’s funding was slashed. This was combined with a further $73.6 million cut to state services providing female healthcare and family planning. In Tennessee, a bill requiring that the names of doctors who perform abortions be made public is currently moving through the House. The bill, known as the Life Defence Act of 2012, would also necessitate that the Tennessee Department of Health release the name, age, race, marital status, education level, number of children, location of procedure, and number of previous pregnancies of women who receive an abortion. Furthermore, in Virginia, the Republican governor briefly supported a state bill that demanded an invasive vaginal ultrasound for all women who wished to have their pregnancy aborted.

Following conservative attempts to cut funding to Planned Parenthood, Republicans tried to limit women’s access to contraception through employer healthcare plans—a procedure mandated by President Obama’s health care law. An all-male panel was called to testify in a House committee hearing. Fluke, a student at Georgetown University Law School who wished to defend the mandate, was banned from attending. Furthermore, on Limbaugh’s talk radio show, she was called a “slut” and a “prostitute.” Subsequent to the hearing, a financial supporter of Rick Santorum, the candidate most openly opposed to women’s rights in the 2012 Republican primary, declared that pregnancies could be prevented if “gals” put an aspirin “between their knees.” Republican candidates and representatives across the nation have endorsed this anti-contraception, anti-abortion agenda—a seemingly
bizarre strategy in a country where 53% of voters are female and an increasingly significant gender gap exists in states such as Virginia, Ohio, Florida, and Massachusetts. In Georgia, for example, state representative Terry England argued that women should carry stillborn fetuses to term because that is what cows and pigs do. Santorum openly opposes Supreme Court rulings such as *Griswold vs. Connecticut* and *Roe vs. Wade* and remains strongly anti-abortion even in cases where pregnancy results from rape. Mitt Romney, who will likely receive the Republican nomination for the 2012 presidential election, would cut all funding to Planned Parenthood, a service that not only provides abortions and contraceptives but also family planning advice, cancer screenings, and HIV tests. In an article on the GOP’s war on women, Frank Rich explains that Romney’s variety of sexism is just as sinister as Santorum’s, if a little less blatant. Analysing Romney’s answer to a question addressing contraception, Rich explains,

Santorum has always been completely candid about his view of women and their status; Romney was the one who had to be smoked out. Romney didn’t take the bait, but even so, his record is clear, and, unlike the angry Santorum, he has the smooth style of a fifties retro patriarch to camouflage the reactionary content.

Rich’s suggestion that donning the persona of a “fifties retro patriarch” in the debate on women’s rights successfully functions as a disguise to conceal sexist attitudes seems utterly bizarre and confirms the validity of McRobbie’s concerns about the undoing of feminism.
Most recently, in the “war on women,” Republican provisions being made on Violence Against Women Act of 1994 await a House vote. This is the first year the bipartisan Act has ever faced any difficulty getting through Congress. Outraged, Wisconsin Democrat Gwen Moore claimed, “It is pathetic and disappointing that it’s come to this.” Is it pathetic? Yes. Is it disappointing? Well, that, as Camille reminds The Real Housewives audience, depends on what your expectations were at the start.

One of the primary reasons for investigating popular culture texts is that they provide an insight into social thought and action. As McRobbie explains, “relations of power are indeed made and remade within texts of enjoyment and rituals of relaxation and abandonment.” In this vein, in an article for American Prospect, Amanda Marcotte investigates the feminist pleasures of watching Mad Men,

Feminist viewers take delight in watching Peggy and some of the other female characters endure and overcome sexist treatment in no small part because we don’t have to put up with that kind of overt misogyny anymore. We cringe when a male character tells Joan to her face that he thinks of her as a “madam from a Shanghai whorehouse” who is “walking around like you’re trying to get raped.” Then we get to revel when Peggy stands up to the offender, and feel gratitude for the real-life women like her that gave name to sexual harassment and shifted the power balance so men couldn’t just say things like that anymore.

Read in context, then, Mad Men subtly informs the viewer of the shifts in sexism and feminism between the mid twentieth century and today. The pleasure, according to Marcotte, derives from acknowledging the progress of women in society. Thus, for
Marcotte, the pleasure of watching the show is very much a product of her political stance. While the connection between pleasure and politics may or may not exist in the same way for viewers of *The Real Housewives*, the show still enlightens its audience on the cultural shifts in the perception of sexism in society. In other words, reading the show in the context of postfeminism brings into play larger questions surrounding sexism in society. Consider, for example, whether *The Real Housewives* would have been as successful in the 1970s as it is in 2010s? Will it continue to be successful if right wing talk show hosts keep calling young law students sluts? Will 4.4 million viewers still tune into the season finale of *Real Housewives of Atlanta* if Planned Parenthood funding is cut and *Roe vs. Wade* overturned? The answers to these questions, I argue, depend largely on how effectively female repression has been internalized. A further study into the uses and gratifications for watching the show might enlighten one as to why *The Real Housewives* proves so popular; however, this research was beyond the scope of this essay. I can on speculate that the show proves in keeping with Douglas’ critique of reality television in which the show proves enjoyable because the viewer understands it is meant to be ironic. Indeed the medium of television itself does much to construct the discourse of postfeminism. While this study has focused on representation, limiting my analysis for the most part to mise en scene, another area one could expand upon is the production of the show and how postfeminism is constructed in the shows marketing, for example.

This thesis, however, attempts to reveal and reverse the process by which patriarchy is internalized by looking at the text. While on the surface it may appear that feminism has achieved its goals, it only takes an incident such as Limbaugh’s remarks about Fluke to see the backlash women face if they break from their subordinate cultural position, a position that is dictated through “texts of enjoyment”
such as *The Real Housewives*. By addressing how previous scholars have defined and discerned postfeminism and how this phenomenon translates to the representation of women on reality television, I positioned *The Real Housewives* in its cultural context, demonstrating how the show fits into trends not only in the representation of women on reality television but also in the representation of women throughout western media.

McRobbie’s framework functions as an entry point into the text, thus, using her model, I performed a close analysis to reveal the layered construction of postfeminist discourse in *The Real Housewives*. Feminism’s self-dismantlement reveals the effects of denaturalising the body in a capitalist regime, where the body—specifically the female body—has yet to be liberated from patriarchy. Taylor’s surgical manipulation of her body and Danielle’s self-objectification, position the body within the passive sphere of lifestyle politics. Counter to Butler’s aim, then, the female body becomes a surface for consumption as opposed to a political tool for liberation. The rhetoric of female success aids this depoliticization by removing feminism from the narrative of female success. While the wives are presented as successful (read: wealthy), the reasons for their success are presented as random. Thus, in *The Real Housewives*, the logic of postfeminism positions fate, chance, and good fortune as key factors producing female success, as if the hardships faced by women of previous generations (or women in developing nations) was simply unlucky.

The framing of feminism as an unpopular and unnecessary political movement begins to address the growing presence of sexism in the media. Camouflaged by irony, sexism reasserts itself in society, causing women, such as Teresa, to openly invite a sexist gaze—in jest, of course. Continuing the resurgence of sexism, the
undoing of feminism works hard to ensure young women accept their place as the second sex in society and older women return to the domestic sphere, confined once again to the role of wife and mother. The complacency with which texts such as The Real Housewives are consumed is, in part, due to the neoliberal and postfeminist push towards female individualization. While female individualization might suggest liberation, in that women no longer depend on men, in fact, the individualized female body is also a docile body. Women (and men) have internalized the patriarchal system that determines a woman’s place as subordinate to a man’s. The coy manifestation of postfeminism in popular culture, then, promotes a discourse of oppression. While I believe the achievements of the women’s movement should be acknowledged and celebrated, feminism is far from complete.

How, then, should feminism proceed? Personally, I would advocate for a return to the collective, that is, a temporary reinstating of an essential category of woman. Sexism and patriarchy, however, have shifted in the past decades and the goals for contemporary feminists are not the same as those for their second-wave predecessors. Women and men alike must find a feminism that fits the needs of a postfeminist society. This, I argue, is a feminism that must go beyond the body into the collective social mind. Where once feminism tackled law, now it must take on ideology. For women, and men, seeking gender equality in both the cultural and the political sphere, the road ahead is long, but until this post-patriarchal world is realized, postfeminism has no place in society.
Notes

Introduction

v Ibid., 29-36.
vi Ibid., 29-36.

Review of Previous Literature


xxx Dow, 87.
Methodology
Discussion of Findings

McRobbie, 29-38.

Butler, 198-199.

Ibid., 198-199.


Couldry, 3-13.


Busch, 96.


Springer, 249-276.

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Conclusion


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