

AN ANALYSIS OF POPULAR MAINSTREAM FEMINIST WRITERS AND
THE "CRISIS" WITHIN FEMINISM

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the question of a crisis within feminism. This so-called “crisis,” is influenced and promoted by such controversial popular feminist writers as Camille Paglia, Christina Hoff Sommers, and Katie Roiphe. Through the study of the recent popularization of feminism in mainstream presses, including Susan Faludi and Naomi Wolf, and the role of feminism in the academy, I will explore what is being described as a “crisis” within feminism. I am interested in how some of these authors came to be labeled “anti-feminist,” specifically, Sommers, Roiphe and Paglia, while Faludi and Wolf remain firmly accepted in feminist circles. This study is initiated with a brief overview of the historical roots of feminism, reviewing as well, how the history of the women’s movement has come to be written. Chapters Two and Three analyze the recent publications of popular writers, Sommers, Roiphe and Paglia, who constitute the foundation of this examination. The fourth and concluding chapter considers the recent proliferation of the terms: “postfeminism,” and “anti-feminism” and how and what these terms mean to contemporary feminism. Finally, postmodern theory is employed to aid in interpreting the current dynamic in feminism; as well, postmodernism is used to recast the work and personae of Camille Paglia. I argue that the critical work of Sommers, Roiphe and Paglia is useful to contemporary feminism, in that it challenges feminists to enter the terrain of popular culture in order to disseminate feminism throughout mainstream society.

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FOREWORD

It is rather respectable to be a graduate student in our society, or so my experience suggests. I believe that being a graduate student is one of the few instances when one can earn a certain level of social respectability, despite not earning a paycheck. Yet, when someone asks me, “so, *what*, exactly, are you studying?”, I’m still not sure whether to tell the truth. Sometimes I beg off saying “History” or “English,” which are partial truths in themselves. To answer “Gender Studies” or “Women’s Studies” inevitably provokes some type of response or another. Whatever the reactions, they are never benign and generally require a protracted explanation of my politics. This was a part of graduate studies that I was not prepared for and probably indigenous to marginal or less traditional fields of study. These experiences have reiterated to me that the “f-word,” meaning feminist or feminism, is still associated with stereotypes of being anti-male, and definitely anti-sex. While my identification with feminism predates my current studies, Gender Studies has enabled me, to some degree, to consider and reconsider my feminist positions closely and develop a more sophisticated understanding of the women’s movement and ideological feminism.

The main impetus to this thesis was the experience of witnessing a dismissive attitude to feminists like Camille Paglia and Christina Hoff Sommers by individuals in the academy, although no one had actually bothered to read their work. Thus, not surprisingly, these two critics became as “forbidden fruit.” Thanks to a supportive thesis supervisor, I am able to work on a project that has tremendously affected my own feminism. I was and am curious about where and how the demarcation took place in deciding who is and is not acceptable to

academic feminism. What exactly, if any, is the relationship of the academy to feminism in people's lives? And, is feminism still a viable social movement? These questions and others have provoked this study.

INTRODUCTION

“Western” feminism as a social movement is in crisis; or so it would seem if one happened across some contemporary feminist writers like Camille Paglia or Christina Hoff Sommers. Is feminism turning into a parody of itself? Increasing critical and negative press is mounting and presents an opportunity for the academy to review its objectives. The academy in Canada, United States, and Britain, heading into a quarter century of teaching Women’s Studies and feminist theory, has produced sophisticated feminist scholars and a generation of students actively mentored by feminist teachers. Many respectable academic publications are devoted entirely to literary and feminist criticism as well as related materials obviously influenced by feminist discourse. Thus, Women’s and Gender Studies have a growing library of academic literature to consult. Nevertheless, feminism and Women’s Studies have long undergone scrutiny in the academy. Yet it is the scrutiny and criticisms from the pages of popular feminist books that I am most interested in. In using the term “popular,” I refer to books published by mainstream publishers, for broad distribution. The texts that I will consider are controversial in terms of feminism, but are not considered “academic,” and are even considered anti-feminist by the majority of feminist scholars.

This thesis will consider the recent popularization of feminism in mainstream presses. Can Women’s Studies or institutional feminism provide an arena for critical self-analysis for academic feminists? Should the academy even be concerned with popular mainstream feminist discourse? This thesis will explore these questions and

others in order to come to terms with this sense of “crisis” within feminism, thereby seeking to understand the conflicting messages of which feminism is increasingly becoming the purveyor in the public domain. In this thesis I contend that arguments proposing that feminism is in crisis are promoted by media and popular culture to undermine the goals of feminism. Furthermore, I view this perception of crisis as a modernist discomfort with the multiple feminisms characteristic of this postmodern era.

Chapter One begins with a glimpse of the formative and foundational stages of the women’s movement. Starting with the struggle for suffrage then moving onto the activism of the sixties and our contemporary movement, I am interested in the treatment of earlier women’s movements and feminism at the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States. How a social movement comes to define itself is often through looking at its own historical reflection. How this earlier history is rewritten, or reshaped, is discussed in the context of second wave feminism.

Chapter Two jumps indiscriminately into the nineties and is concerned with what I have referred to as the “popular domain” of feminism. I use the term “popular” and not “grassroots” because grassroots connotes a sense of activism, and popular domain suggests a wider scope of feminism which may or may not be activist oriented. This chapter will consider several note-worthy texts which I believe to be integral to many of these questions. Susan Faludi, Christina Hoff Sommers, Naomi Wolf, Camille Paglia and Katie Roiphe all produced successful and provocative texts on different aspects of feminism. I am interested in how some of these authors came to be labeled “anti-

feminist,” specifically, Sommers, Roiphe and Paglia, while Faludi and Wolf remain firmly accepted in feminist circles.

Chapter Three is a brief study of Camille Paglia, a professor of Humanities and best-selling author. Paglia positions herself as a feminist throughout the three books for which she is known, yet she is also a very public commentator on the ills and excesses of feminism. Paglia initiated a public criticism of feminism, at a time when feminist critique was reserved for scholars largely within journals. Paglia perceived the academic production of feminist critique to be more controlled and mediated than the media (including mainstream presses), although it could be argued that she is tapping into already existing media criticism of feminism. I will consider the implications of her forthright and arguably damning rhetoric on feminism and ask whether the feminist shunning of Paglia is justified.

Through the course of reading and writing about Paglia and Sommers, a single question kept plaguing me: “Why are they so popular?” Here are two academic feminists that are discussing some prominent themes in feminist discourse and selling them to popular audiences as something new and they are paid well to do it. Paglia, in particular, comes across as arrogant, brash, and ego-maniacal. Paglia has all the answers. Few intellectuals would ever, even if they felt they had answers, present themselves as such. I do not think Paglia’s appeal is in her ideas alone. It is also very much an issue of her “image.” Our culture thrives on “image.” Popular culture is the theology of our time and movie stars our theologians. Paglia is the Madonna of the academy. Lets face it, the

academy is not a seductive force in western culture; it is not glamorous. So Paglia, obviously a talented scholar, has taken that which is perceived as mundane, added sex, and provocation, and sold it to the public. The public buys it because the media has sold it to them as sensational, yet I personally can only name one individual in the academy that I know for certain who has read Sexual Personae.

Sommers' approach is slightly different. Her project is about feminism, whereas Paglia surveys Western civilization, culture and ideas about human nature. Sommers sets up, by her own definition, a game card of feminisms. She is a "classical equity feminist" and almost everyone else outside of Paglia and Roiphe are, according to her, "gender feminists." Sommers claims she wants to return to the liberal based feminism of the suffragettes — a more practicable feminism. One of the main criticisms of Sommers is her overwhelming use of generalizations. Generalizing reflects a simplistic understanding of the world; being general and appealing to the majority is the goal of marketing. Sommers, in an effort to appeal to the widest possible audience, has taken to generalizing feminism. She reflects a black and white view of the world. Yet feminism is not black or white nor could it be if it is to represent the complexities of women's lived experience across race, class, sexuality and gender lines. By tailoring her work for mass consumption, Sommers participates in the commodification of feminism.

Recent feminist scholarship has developed feminist theory or "theories" of inclusion. Some argue that this inclusive project of feminism is related to "the postmodern condition" that has influenced several decades of academic thought. Chapter

Four will discuss postmodernisms' relationship to popular mainstream and academic feminism. I use postmodernism as a explanatory tool to validate and embrace what I characterize as the "fracturing of feminism."¹ The fracturing of feminism refers to the increasing multiplicity and diversity that characterizes contemporary feminism, sometimes referred to as materialist feminisms, as Donna Landry and Gerald McLean indicate in the title of their book. A theoretical feminism, which heralds multiplicity, must also acknowledge the work of feminists like Camille Paglia whose writing is undoubtably politically incorrect. I believe it imperative for feminism at large not to selectively ignore but consider and challenge provocative works to ensure the future of feminism as a counter ideology and, more importantly, as a viable social movement.

Endnotes

1. The notion of “fracturing,” although not used explicitly, has been used by Landry and MacLean in their chapter, “The Theory ‘Race,’ Imperialist Fractures, and Postcolonial Subjects” in Materialist Feminisms, in which they discuss among other things the work of Winfred Woodhull and Julia Emberley. I am borrowing this notion of “fracturing” from this work in order to speak in more general terms about the “fracturing of feminism.”

CHAPTER ONE

The Roots of Popular Mainstream Feminism

In September 1921, in an effort to boost the late summer tourist trade, hotel owners in Atlantic City, New Jersey hosted the first “Miss America Contest,” an event coming on the heels of thirty years of feminist activism. “Miss America” represented a shift in the perceptions and images perceived as desirable for women. The social milieu of the twenties wanted a “transformed woman-soft and pliant,” and the symbol for this “new woman” was the beauty queen (Banner 167). Over forty years later, women would again gather in Atlantic City, only in 1968, it was to *protest* the image of woman represented as the “ideal.” This is part of the history of the women’s movement. As is so often the case with social movements, feminism has ridden high and low tides—often being treated as a generational concept, and therefore rarely heralded as having a long and active history. In considering contemporary feminism, I find it paramount to provide at least a cursory discussion of the history of the movement and the evolution of its ideologies. I am interested in the shifting goals of women’s liberation, how the language of feminism has changed, how ideologies evolved and who has informed these changes.¹

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the roots of feminism in the United States: specifically, women’s fight for suffrage, and the events impacting the resurgence of feminism in the 1960s, or what has come to be known as “second wave” feminism. Important to note is that this chapter does not seek to provide a comprehensive analysis of the history of the women’s movement, but rather a generalist approach in order to provide

a starting point and framework for a discussion of contemporary feminism. Furthermore, while sources will reflect an international influence, the bulk of this research is based in North American texts. Due to the overwhelming presence of the United States women's movement in subsequent chapters, this historical discussion will be contextualized in a United States framework. Furthermore, I will locate some of the specific ideological shifts within this history of feminism and speculate on the implications of these shifts for recent feminist struggles. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean in Materialist Feminisms discuss the impact and influence of poststructuralism in the context of writing histories: "If events themselves are never not discursively constituted, it follows that history, as the accounts of social movements and political struggles of the past and present, is constantly being rewritten" (129). In this view, which suggests that history is constantly being rewritten, history is seen as a narrative constructed and influenced by one's own social, political, gendered and other affectations; hence my location, or my textuality per se, according to Landry and MacLean, is integral to how I will present a history of feminism. Thus I will construct a "story" of the events affecting feminism and the women's movement based in the writings of social historians, feminist historians, and theorists (Landry and MacLean ix). Part of my intention is to present a glimpse of how feminist historiography was written in the late sixties and seventies in order to witness how precarious history is; how history can be molded and shaped; how it can be "rewritten"; and in terms of feminism, how history can dramatically affect its ideology and strength as a viable social movement. With this in mind, I walk on broken glass, piecing together

another history of feminism and the women's movement. This understanding of history and the rewriting of history are integral to an understanding of contemporary feminist writings and how feminism is consequently represented and understood.

The foundations of feminism are generally thought to be based in the mid-nineteenth century; yet it is the suffrage movement that is most commonly associated with the historical location, or genesis, of feminism (Cott 7). I am foremost concerned with the events of the twentieth century, the ideas and circumstances that have influenced and impacted contemporary feminism in order to come to some resolution regarding my personal experience with feminism.

The decades from circa 1890 to the early 1920s were some of the most dynamic in women's history. Some suggest, such as Carl Degler, that the twenties represent the seeds of all the social, economic, material and political gains that women in the late twentieth century enjoy ("Revolution with Ideology" 204-205). Degler proposes that realistically nothing has significantly changed: women, by the mid twenties had achieved the same legal rights as men, even if they "supposedly" did not exercise them. In terms of reviewing feminist history, it is curious how feminism, experiencing such broad support and profile at the turn of the century, could have evolved into the fifties, a period often perceived as particularly oppressive to women. Far from posing a comprehensive historical analysis of feminism, this chapter will consider the ebbs and flows of feminism. The metaphor of "waves"— first, second and now third wave of feminism— is very appropriate; it is the highs and lows that I wish to review. In this vein, it is also

appropriate to ponder whether these waves are actively reshaping the landscape.

The language of the early women's movement and its subtle shifts provide a glimpse of early ideologies. Until the first decade of the twentieth century, the movement was described as the "woman movement" and "woman's suffrage" (Cott 3). While many historians have ignored subtle changes, such as the shift from woman to women, Nancy Cott artfully reminds us that "nineteenth-century women's consistent usage of the singular 'woman' symbolized, in a word, the unity of the female sex, proposing that all women have one cause, one movement (3). The transition from "woman movement" to "feminism" and later "women's movement" signalled important ideological shifts. Initially, says Cott, "woman movement" reflected women's greater involvement outside of the home, the ways women moved out of the home, and into the public sphere in the form of charitable work, initiating civil rights activities as well as social and political rights and freedoms (3). In terms of ideological shifts, the use of the word "feminism" in the early twentieth century reflected a more specific yet larger objective than the initial woman movement. Cott describes this development: "It was both broader and narrower: broader in intent, proclaiming revolution in all the relations of the sexes, and narrower in the range of its willing adherents. As an ism (an ideology) it presupposed a set of principles not necessarily belonging to every woman—nor limited to women" (3).

The end of World War I witnessed an upsurge in the employment of women, particularly in the emergence of what came to be known as the "white collar worker" (Rosenfeld 57). "Dress reform" translated into "fashion," finally emancipating women

from the binding corsets and long skirts that heretofore were a given; women were cutting their hair, smoking, drinking, and even dancing in public (Berkin 275). Women were entering the academy in greater numbers, and female sexuality was becoming publicly pervasive. Many call the twenties the age of the “revolution of morals” (Degler, “Revolution Without Ideology” 198). In terms of feminism, the overriding assumption was that equality of the sexes had been achieved: “[t]he popular media treated liberation as a fait accompli, and, with a style both self-congratulatory and breathless, heralded the flapper as living proof of the revolution completed” (Berkin 275). This sentiment, proclaiming the end of feminism, would be repeated throughout the histories of feminism.

In history texts, this “death of feminism” is a popular motif for describing particular ebbs in feminist history. A materialist feminist review of history could point out that the inter-war periods were anything but a dormant stage for women. In fact, war, and ensuing civil unrest, could be theorized as paving the way for the shifts in the self-conscious activism which was to follow, not to mention landmark feminist texts like The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir first published in French in 1949 (Degler, “Revolution Without Ideology” 329).

Many have questioned why, after the seventy year struggle for suffrage, the women’s movement suffered such a massive retreat in activism after the passing of the 19th Amendment. In terms of how women dealt with winning the right to vote, Carol Berkin suggests that a continued political activism of women after gaining the vote presupposes several things: First, that women would become a conscious voting bloc

thereby using the vote as a political tool for gender interests; second, that a structure could be created by and for American women to communicate effectively, debate and resolve political questions in order even to be an effective political interest group; and finally, that the then political atmosphere was even receptive to women's issues and as participants in political institutions, thereby encouraging women to exercise this newly acquired opportunity (274).

Historian William O'Neill characterizes the suffrage movement as the "first failure" of feminism, remarking:

The women's rights movement expired in the twenties from ailments that had gone untreated in its glory days. Chief among them was the feminists' inability to see that equal suffrage was almost the only issue holding the disparate elements of the woman movement together. Once it was resolved, voters who happened to be female were released from the politically meaningless category of 'woman.' (264)

O'Neill maintains that suffrage was merely a symbol for the women's movement, and while important as a justice cause, it did not incite women to continue to work for social reforms, which in his mind were more important than the electoral equality for which they fought. A by-product of the campaign for suffrage was its role in unifying the various reform and women's groups with a single cause. As the campaign for suffrage grew in duration and intensity, it came to be seen and to be treated as the only issue and objective concerning women. Therefore, the passing of the 19th Amendment granting

women the right to vote, for all intents and purposes, meant the loss of a primary goal and symbol for many of these groups (O'Neill 268). It is not surprising then that historians describe the early twenties as the time when the women's movement "virtually died." Outside of isolated pockets of activism, "feminism was to lie dormant for forty years" (Hole 14). It is impossible to speculate how the movement would have developed had women not gained universal suffrage, yet I am inclined to say that the drive for suffrage was a critical step in the journey of advancing women's legal and social equality, not to mention setting a legal precedent for the status of women.

The history to which I refer is a classic writing of feminist history. O'Neill originally published this history of feminism in 1969 on the tails of a rejuvenated women's movement. O'Neill is implying that women were responsible for their own failure, due to their lack of foresight, neglect, or political sophistication to continue working for reforms after winning the right to vote (267). Specifically, O'Neill blames the activists and the methods of the then women's movement, and does not allow for the impact of mitigating social, government, economic and political events which may have contributed to the women's movement, not to mention, a society which included some constituencies that were very much opposed to the advancement of women (267). This type of conjecture is very similar to what eighties' "backlash theorists" have often accused the media of: blaming feminism for the ills befalling women.² However, media influence and backlash theories will be further discussed in Chapter Two.

Lois Banner argues that feminism did not have mass appeal to young women in the

twenties due to a generation gap of sorts. Twenties' youths were still reeling and rebelling against Victorian culture, mores and sex taboos that were indigenous to the period. "Flaming Youth" became the symbol of the twenties; familiar even now are the images of women in cropped hair, bright red lips, smoking cigarettes in curve-less, flapper dresses. Articulating the experience of being a young woman in the twenties, Lillian Hellman writes in her memoir An Unfinished Woman:

By the time I grew up the fight for the emancipation of women, their rights under the law, in the office, in bed, was stale stuff. My generation didn't think much about the place or problems of women, were not conscious that the designs we saw around us had so recently been formed or that we were still part of that formation. (quoted in Banner 146)

The thirties have often been described, in the many histories of the women's movement, as one of the dormant periods (14 Hole). It could also be said that this period gave rise to what Betty Friedan later described as the "feminine mystique." Many of the gains that women had previously made were quietly unravelling; women were marrying earlier, having more children, and were less politically active. The proportion of women in universities and colleges peaked in 1920 at 47.3 percent, a rate not to be equalled until after the sixties (277 Banner). The professional ranks suffered declines as well; in 1920 one Ph.D. in seven was granted to a woman, by 1956 the number had not risen but actually *decreased* to one in ten (O'Neill 305). In sum, the next forty years were turbulent ones politically, economically and socially. The twenties were but a brief

interlude to the soon to follow depression and Second World War. War, argues Carl Degler, was more significant in affecting social change and, thereby, women's lives than any feminist social movement:

Certainly the feminist demands for equality for women played a part. But a social factor of equal importance was war. By their very disruption of the steady pulse of everyday living, wars break the cake of custom, shake up society and compel people to look afresh at old habits and attitudes.

("Revolution Without Ideology" 199)

Degler goes on to say that while World War I had minor lasting impacts on the number of women in the formal labor force, it had a major impact on the kinds of jobs which opened for the members of the "feminine" sex ("Revolution Without Ideology" 200). However, this does not imply that these changes had any real impact in the post-war period; wage differentials actually increased during the decade of the twenties, and these were not to be challenged in the near future. Unionization was one of the few ways to effect change and the American Federation of Labor decided that women were not worth the effort to unionize. Women were a cheap, flexible and conciliatory workforce (Berkin 275-6).

It was World War II which significantly impacted the numbers of women employed in the formal economy. The exact numbers are not conclusive, but historians suggest that between four and six million new women workers entered United States factories and offices in the early forties (Berkin 274). The quantitative difference was that after the close of the war the numbers of women in the formal labor force not only

stayed high, but continued to grow (Degler, "Revolution Without Ideology" 200). The government, heretofore not actively encouraging married, middle-class women to engage in the formal economy, began massive propaganda campaigns and suspended the formerly protective legislation which locked women out of skilled work and higher salaries. Also significant to women's working in the formal economy was the establishing of federally funded day-care programs in effort to lure women out of the home (Berkin 279). This translated into a 11 percent increase in the numbers of women in the work force: from 25 percent in 1940 to 36 percent by 1945 (Berkin 280). Conflicts arose at the close of the war when women, particularly black women whose jobs in heavy industry were a massive improvement over their lower paid employment in domestic service, wanted to keep their jobs (Cott 131). By 1946 the United States government cut off federal funds for day-care and women were laid-off, demoted and simply fired in order to provide jobs for men in the civilian economy (Berkin 279).

Class dynamics is integral to the study of any history, yet the analysis of it, in relation to feminism, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Generally, middle-class women's working life was exclusive to their pre-marriage and child-bearing years, events which were simply assumed as woman's destiny. The doors of the academy were open to women during this period as well, yet while a third of all graduate degrees were conferred on women in the 1930s, less than 4 percent of full professors in the United States were women (Banner 155). Quotas in professional schools, such as medicine and law, were limited to a mere 5 percent for women until 1945 (Banner 155). The conflicts which

women lived and which later were an impetus in women working for political and social transformation were arguably based in the demands of working in the formal economy and the clash with roles and duties in the home. However, this was not the lived reality for most middle-class women, who generally worked outside the home only when young and single. It was primarily in the working class and black populations where the conflicts of the “dual shift” truly emerged (Banner 157). Yet these populations were often too overburdened to enact the mobilization of forces necessary to impact the status of women on a massive scale. Unfortunately, these challenges and questions would wait until women of the middle-class, in large proportions, felt the impact and conflict of their expected roles³ (Berkin 278).

In the post-war fifties, women of all classes, increasingly committed to working outside of the home, were filling newly created positions in the rising economic and bureaucratic institutions in post-war America. The fact that many of these workers were married, white and middle-class troubled social critics, and the literature of the day reflected this disapproval (Cott 130-135). The ills of modern society were laid on the shoulders of working women, particularly, working mothers. Yet as for many generations of women, the lived contradictions and social disapproval did not prevent them from working outside of the home in greater numbers than ever (Berkin 281). This does not suggest that working conditions, pay or status improved. Carol Berkin articulates how women often fulfilled prescribed positions in the formal economy:

Women could it seemed, enter the male sphere and be women; but the role

definition for men held no such reciprocal flexibility. Nothing symbolized the circumstances of the postwar woman more, perhaps, than the evolution of the secretarial position. Here the family homemaker could be the office homemaker as well. A threat to neither boss nor husband, the wife-secretary was welcome to their worlds. (282)

Although women, particularly middle-class women, were seemingly entrenched in the “cult of domesticity,” the period leading up to and including the early sixties was ripe politically and socially for a resurgence of feminist activity. Politically, liberal coalitions were becoming a reality as were reform activities in the guise of civil rights demonstrations, student radicalism and the antiwar protest. Unlike the social milieu at the turn of the century, female students were gaining skills and practice at organizing protests, demonstrations, and sit-ins (Hole 20). This, coupled with their increasing experience and awareness of sexist discrimination, provided women with the impetus for initiating a second wave of feminist activity.

Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, in their 1971 historical overview, describe the early sixties: “By 1960, the assumption that woman by nature was destined to be a full-time homemaker and mother was so widely believed to be true that it was as if there had never been a feminist movement in this country that questioned that assumption” (17). These assumptive roles of homemaker and mother were the first areas that feminist literature would address.⁴

Notable events of the early sixties include the first formal political interest in

women. Kennedy's Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, created in 1961 to study women in American society, was the first high profile commission to address this subject on an official level. With the appointment of former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt as Chairperson of the commission, it was clear to most that the commission would not be "feminist" in membership or intent—due to Roosevelt's public politics: "above all, [Roosevelt] thought that the focus of women's concerns ought to be on providing the qualities of compassion and self abnegation that were lacking in male dominated institutions. . . . Women have 'understanding hearts,' wrote Eleanor Roosevelt, while men have 'ability and brains' (Banner 174-175). Thus one can speculate about the political agenda behind the commission; nevertheless, it did contribute to the gathering of momentum of feminist activity during this period. Many of the commission's conclusions did reveal the low status of women in the work place, discriminatory laws, and educational disparities. Yet these conclusions were shadowed by the commissions' focus on the importance of the nuclear family and woman's role in maintaining it. Aside from taking a stand against the Equal Rights Amendment, the Commission's 1963 report recommended the provision of special training for young women to assist them in their future roles as wives and mothers. Seemingly, the constructs of "woman" and "family" were inseparable. The value of the commission was perhaps not in its conclusions, but rather in that it fueled the discourse on the status of women (Hole 20, 24; Degler, *At Odds* 441).

The budding discourse on and about women increased exponentially during the

sixties, often in the form of polemics. The overwhelming theme in these discussions was that of women's search for "identity" and sense of "self," which were the key concepts in second wave feminism. A discussion of second wave feminism would be incomplete without referring to the landmark work of Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique. Blossoming feminist activity of this period is best discussed in light of this best-seller, particularly as The Feminine Mystique has been described as the catalyst for the entire women's movement of the sixties (Hole 82). Based on her discontent in her own experience, Friedan interviews and describes in detail the personal experiences of white, educated, and generally middle-income, heterosexual, married women with children. Her search for the general malaise affecting American women came to be known as "the problem that has no name." The years following the publication of this treatise witnessed the creation of several national women's groups and political organizations, most notably: the National Organization of Women (NOW); the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs (BPW); and the Women's Liberation Front (WLF), a loose confederation of "sister chapters" throughout the United States and Canada (Morgan 518).

In 1968 the women's movement gained national prominence partially due to mass media coverage of a small protest staged by 200 women at the "Miss America" contest in Atlantic City. It was here where the popular description of feminists as "bra-burners" was born, although no bras were actually burned (Hole 123; Morgan 521). Women protested the "image" of Miss America, symbolically placing a large trash can on the

board walk in front of the Convention Hall where the pageant was to take place. A “freedom trash can,” as they called it, was filled with bras, girdles, false eyelashes, wigs, as well as representative issues of *Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Family Circle*, and any other such “woman garbage” (Hole 123). The protest was peaceful yet forceful. Protesters refused to be arrested by male police officers, which was problematic since in 1968 female police officers could not make arrests in Atlantic City. Likewise, protesters denied interviews to male reporters, in favor of “newswomen” (Morgan 522). As is often the case, the media highlighted the sensational aspects of the demonstration, while neglecting the core reasons of why this protest took place (Hole 125).

Significant texts of this period include, but are by no means limited to, Shulamith Firestone’s The Dialectic of Sex, Germaine Greer’s The Female Eunuch and Kate Millet’s Sexual Politics. These texts discuss the oppression of women in terms of biological differences, manifested in the prescribed roles of homemaker and housewife. They also mark a departure and expansion in feminist writing. Whereas Friedan focussed primarily on finding language to describe the nameless problem and, through this, focussed also on actively “consciousness raising” among women, Greer and Firestone began exploring the social constructions of gender as the basis of their critiques. The polarities between the theories of biological differences and social constructionism are paramount since they contributed to the infrastructure which determined how feminist theory was subsequently written. These texts reflect not only the clear intentions of the author, but also an urgency or impatience, evident in Greer’s introduction to The Female

Eunuch:

Hopefully, this book is subversive. Hopefully, it will draw fire from all the articulate sections of the community. The conventional moralist will find much that is reprehensible in the denial of the Holy Family, in the denigration of sacred motherhood, and the inference that women are not by nature monogamous. The political conservatives ought to object by advocating the destruction of the patterns of consumption carried out by the chief spenders, the housewives the book invites depression and hardship [sic]. This is tantamount to admitting that the oppression of women is necessary to the maintenance of the economy, and simply ratifies the point.

(21)

Published in 1971, a mere eight years from the introduction of The Feminine Mystique, Greer reflects the increasingly sophisticated voice of feminism. The women's movement was no longer about "the problem that has no name." Instead of describing the situational elements affecting women's oppression, feminist writers and activists were developing a distinctly feminist paradigm, thus critiquing the church, family, government, race relations, class and sexuality. It is during this period, the early seventies, when feminism as an ideology came "into its own," so to speak. The seventies and eighties saw this paradigm materialized and legitimized in the form of Women's Studies courses and programs throughout the country. To encapsulate some of the main ideas of second wave feminism, two distinct themes emerge as the source of women's oppression: namely the

rigorous analysis of “sexual or biological differences” and “feminist social critique.” This is where feminism began to be established as a critical ideology. Biological differences analysis, in the work of Greer for example, delves into a discussion of establishing what can be considered “unalterably female” or what we might refer to as “essentially feminine.” These works often follow, in form, the work of predecessor Simone de Beauvoir in their lengthy discussions of biology, reproduction, social codes, and sexuality. Greer’s The Female Eunuch in many ways mimics, only twenty years later, The Second Sex — a feminist manifesto of sorts.

Feminist social critique considers the oppression of women in terms of social, institutional and psychological manifestations. Furthermore, feminist social critique considers the insidious nature of oppression, as in language, literature, and the multifarious social-cultural spheres of life (Hole 195). The sixties witnessed a mounting dialogue in the study of psychology, and feminists contributed an added dimension to the evolving discourse. The politicization of psychology came to be known as the personalizing of the political, or the familiar: “the personal is political” (Hole 195). This is the core of second wave feminism, transforming personal statements, stories, artwork, and so forth, into the theoretical abstractions and political statements about the individual experience of women.

A popular forum for women’s voices is the anthology. For example, Robin Morgan’s edited volume Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement is considered one of the first such collections. Using a

myriad of sources which transverse class and racial barriers, Sisterhood is Powerful was described in a book-review in the popular magazine, *The Nation*, December 1970: “No composite feminist rises with upraised arm from these pages. Instead there is a parade of spunky personalities, disclosing their individual discoveries and frustrations—professional, social and psychosexual” (Haynes 632). Muriel Haynes’ tone connotes a watered-down, faint-hearted patronizing praise for these feminists. In terms of the anthology itself, in the context of a movement which has been long accused of racism, heterosexism, and classism, this early anthology is an indication of early efforts at diversity and inclusion.⁵

The ideological shifts in feminism during the sixties and early seventies also impacted on how the movement was described in linguistic terms. Literature of this period used the terms “feminism,” “women’s movement,” and “women’s liberation;” these phrases were not, in fact, used interchangeably until the mid-seventies. Until this time, the women’s movement connoted the equal rights efforts of moderate, conservative feminists and was definitely ideologically divided from the more radical women’s liberation movement. “Women’s liberation” as an adjective, referred to younger, more radical feminists who often had their formative experiences in student activism, the Civil Rights movement and leftist politics (Hole 180). “Feminist” and “feminism,” as noted earlier, were both used in the early twentieth century to depict a more radical ideology from that of the suffrage movement, but during the second wave these terms became more popular when used with a qualifying adjective such as “radical,” “socialist,” or

“liberal,” to specify context.

Giesela Bock summarizes second wave feminism as the belief that “equal rights alone can bring about women’s liberation” (10). These sentiments echo those of the early suffragettes, the vote being the single path to women’s liberation. O’Neill argues with such a liberal feminist position: “Women’s suffrage thus became a substitute for all the things feminists were unwilling to do or consider. As their vision narrowed, the emotional weight they invested in the ballot became all the greater, and their need to exaggerate its value all the more urgent” (48). Thus O’Neill implies that feminists lost sight of their original vision; a strong judgement of this important human rights achievement. As discussed earlier, O’Neill described the passing of the 19th Amendment as marking the expiration of the women’s rights movement. Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier label this period as the first abeyance or temporary suspension of feminism. Taylor and Whittier label the second abeyance of feminism from 1983 to circa 1991. Taylor and Whittier compartmentalize the other periods of feminism as the resurgence or second wave: 1966-71; and feminist heyday: 1972-82 (534). While such labels are perhaps generalizing in the extreme, they are useful when considering the ebbs and flows of feminism.

Second wave feminism can be credited with identifying “the problem,” recognizing it and initializing discourses on the oppression of women. It challenged popular myths and conceptions of women as merely pre-destined mothers and homemakers. Second wave feminism was a revolution, a time when women questioned

all major social, political and religious institutions. Contemporary feminism has moved far beyond the “consciousness raising” sessions of the sixties; it has very sophisticated constructions in the form of contemporary feminist theory. Taylor and Whittier wrote during what they called the “abeyance of feminism” (‘83-‘91), yet “backlash” is the more popularly used term. As for the nineties, some refer to the late twentieth century as the “third wave”; others declare that feminism is dead: there are postfeminists, anti-feminists, and faux feminists.

In briefly reviewing one version of the “history,” we have seen how feminism’s highs and lows are often blamed on feminism itself, as opposed to looking at a larger projection of the political, economic and social landscapes. Interestingly, when we jump to contemporary history, as will be the case in the following chapters, it again becomes evident how feminism is blamed for “causing” its own unpopularity as well as causing hardship for women. Recently, a new drama is taking place under the general rubric of feminism. Influenced by the institutionalization of feminism which developed sophisticated constructions of feminist theory, a new discourse is taking place outside of the confines of the academy. This new discourse entails critical challenges to feminism published in a popular context to a general audience. Deciphering the impact to feminism and the implications of these events will be further developed in subsequent chapters. A central question is, if and how a new discursive construction of feminism is taking place outside of the academy and how this may or may not affect feminism as an ideology and as a strong social movement.

Endnotes

1. It is important to point out that a materialist feminist position emphasizes that a historical overview of women cannot be isolated to a discussion of gender alone. The challenge is to avoid the oversimplification of the contributing factors affecting the status women. While it is not the point of this discussion to present an in-depth analysis of all the political, material, and social contexts that impacted women—I would be amiss if I did not suggest that race and class in late 19th century and early 20th century America had huge ramifications on women's lives. Much of this discussion on the struggle for suffrage is limited to a white, middle-class representation of women. I hope to clarify this in the body of the chapter.
2. See Susan Faludi's Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991) on backlash and the eighties.
3. For a comprehensive analysis of race and class, see Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton Eds., Women in America: A History (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), and Nancy Woloch's Women and the American Experience (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), both have excellent bibliographies and suggested reading lists.
4. To be accurate and to illustrate the middle-class origins of feminism, the literature addressing the role of mother and homemaker were directed and written mainly by white, middle-class, heterosexual, married women.
5. Studying contemporary feminism in the context of academia, I am very cautious of race and class analysis. The point being made here does not intend to minimize past controversies within feminism in terms of its racist, classist and heterosexist shortcomings.

CHAPTER TWO

Popular Feminism: Faludi, Sommers and Roiphe

In the Afterword to Rebecca Walkers's edited volume To Be Real: Telling the Truth and the Changing Face of Feminism, Angela Davis contemplates the current state of late twentieth century feminism:

[w]hen questions about the direction of contemporary social movements—or the lack thereof—are posed to me, my usual response is that such questions will have to be sorted out by young people, and not primarily on the level of contemplative theory but, rather, in the process of developing new strategies for political practices that weave together the last quarter-century's lessons about the intersections of gender, race, class and sexuality. (280)

Davis does not suggest that feminism is in a crisis per se, but she does imply that “new strategies” will have to be developed and employed which are mindful of where feminism has come from and where it is going. This chapter considers some of contemporary feminisms' significant participants. Susan Faludi and Naomi Wolf are best-selling authors on feminism, and Christina Hoff Sommers and Katie Roiphe have received significant media attention. The messages that they present are severely conflicted. Faludi and Wolf write of how women have been, and continue to be oppressed by direct and indirect societal forces, while Sommers and Roiphe argue that specific brands of feminism possess disproportionate amounts of power in mainstream society as well as the

academy. *Is feminism in crisis?* Is the relationship, or, non-relationship between feminism in the academy and popular mainstream feminism part of this crisis? Are the recent negative commentaries on feminism truly indicative that feminism is in “crisis”? Feminism has, at various times since suffrage, been described as in crisis in the sense that it is in decline— this is not implying that it is not a viable political struggle. “Crisis” has come to stand for the problem of backlash and subsequent responses to it.¹ References to a crisis, are prevalent in contemporary feminist discourse, in the academy as well as in popular work. For example, Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge in their book Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales From the Strange World of Women's Studies describe some of “the troubling aspects of Women's Studies” noting such things as “ideological policing,” “intolerance,” and “dogmatism” (xiv-xv). Furthermore, they write, “[w]e believe that it is feminists, not their opponents, who must speak out on contemporary feminism's tendency to turn into a parody of itself” (xv). Outside of the academy, in popular magazines such as *Newsweek*, a series of articles appear in the October 1993 issue devoted to feminism. The by-line ran: “Sexual Correctness: Has It Gone Too Far?” While the theme of sexual correctness focussed on date rape, harrassment, and victimization, the message conveyed was one of a “feminist battlefront” (56). In another article featured in *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “Feminism's Identity Crisis,” Wendy Kaminer writes,

“[t]oday, three decades of feminism and one Year of the Woman later, a majority of American women agree that feminism has altered their lives for

the better. In general, polls conducted over the past three years indicate strong majority support for feminist ideals. But the same polls suggest that women hesitate to associate themselves with the movement. . . only a minority, a third at most, identify themselves as feminist. (52)

These articles and Faludi's book clearly indicate that feminism is perceived to be in a state of "crisis." The authors that I will be discussing in this and subsequent chapters all allude to the troubled status of "feminism" in Western society today. This chapter will begin to pursue these questions in considering the work of Susan Faludi, Christina Hoff Sommers, and Katie Roiphe.

Feminism has undergone massive changes in scope, direction and, arguably, purpose since the second wave. I will examine some of these changes in ideology, perceptions and practice that have impacted contemporary feminism. This involves considering the recent celebrity status of two of feminisms' more vocal critics: Christina Hoff Sommers and Camille Paglia. Twenty years ago it was relatively easy to describe and identify the major actors and forces shaping the women's movement. In the late twentieth century, feminism has come to represent an entire spectrum of ideologies, theories and disciplinary influences, since its institutionalization in the form of Women's Studies programs across North America. This institutionalization, while lending another form of credibility to the movement as a whole, is not without its costs.

The women's movement of the late nineteenth century was issue based, focused on a liberal feminist agenda, principally "suffrage." More recently, the feminist agenda has

expanded to include radical feminism, socialist feminism, postmodern feminism, and material feminisms.² This historical shift from a liberal based feminism to a myriad of feminisms, grew out of the sixties, a period often referred to as the sexual and educational revolution.³ It is this period that was responsible for the institutionalization of feminism. Women's Studies serves as a conduit for analyzing social, economic, and political forces and actively rereading the many disciplines for analyses which include gender, race and class. Feminist theory has begun to challenge monolithic constructions of woman and theory, as a result of acknowledging, particularly in the last decade, the importance of women's experience in terms of race, class, nationalism and sexual orientation. Yet the years of growing pains and the maturation of this discipline have been lost on some of feminism's latest critics: Christina Hoff Sommers, Katie Roiphe and Camille Paglia, which is evident in their denial of, or omission of, significant work of feminists in the academy. For example, Paglia omits reference to the sexuality debates in the early 1980s, an issue I will return to in Chapter Three. This scenario is accentuated by the arrogant tone of Paglia's work, for one, and the presentation of her work in a very public venue.

Differentiating between academic and popular mainstream feminism can be problematic because there is little to hold up as "truly" feminist. Therefore, these distinctions between academic and mainstream have less and less meaning. For example, several feminist scholars who work and teach in the academy, often engage in "mainstream" discourse. In other words, the work of Sommers and Paglia, for example, is published by trade publishers (ie., for a general audience) and sold at popular

bookstores. This is not to suggest that “mainstream” discourse is unidimensional. Conversely, it covers the widest possible scope of views and positions, within the marketing objective of a willing publisher. There are, however, feminist scholars who write strictly for an academic audience. Their work is published by scholarly journals or academic presses. These works tend to be less accessible to the average reader in terms of availability and readability. Texts rarely slide back and forth between these two categories. Exceptions always remain: an early example is Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, which had impressive results in the public arena despite its length and intensity.

I will use the term “academic feminism” to refer to the scholarly production of feminist criticism and theory in the academic institution. The notion of an exclusive “academic feminism,” however, does not always hold.⁴ Many feminist scholars are taking it as their responsibility to write for broader audiences. An example of which is bell hooks:

[t]here must be more effort to write and talk about feminist ideas in ways that are accessible. Those of us who already have been successfully working in this way must strive individually and collectively to make our voices heard by a wider audience. If we do not actively enter the terrain of popular culture, we will be complicit in the antifeminist backlash that is at the heart of mass media’s support of antifeminist women who claim to speak on behalf of feminism. This speaking is really a seductive foreplay

that intends to provoke, excite, and silence. The time has come to interrupt, intervene, and change the channel. (90)

What hooks describes as “seductive foreplay” could be said of critics such as Christina Hoff Sommers, best known for her controversial book, Who Stole Feminism: How Women Have Betrayed Women. If Sommers is part of the anti-feminist backlash, we have to ask where do we ideologically place the New Right’s criticism of feminism?⁵ Landry and MacLean write, “the later 1980s and early 1990s provide ample evidence of a New Right backlash in the US directly aimed at these political gains for women and minorities. And in the last several years the New Right backlash has itself been gaining widespread cultural legitimacy in the work of academic patriarchs like Allan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch, Jr.” (14). The ideological “Right” is becoming a crowded place. Any sort of criticism which is not vehemently “liberal,” now faces accusations of leaning “right.” Sommers, in fact, tells her reader that she has been publically described as a “right-wing ideologue,” a position that she does not necessarily refute (263). In terms of Camille Paglia’s media success, her example underscores hooks’ point about accessibility and media backlash. However, a new question emerges concerning Paglia as to how we define “accessibility.” I would suggest that despite her media sophistication, Paglia’s goading writing style is far from “accessible,” in terms of prose and thought. Paglia’s first best-seller, Sexual Personae, reads more like the dissertation that it is than provocative bedtime reading. Consider also in this regard the success of Stephen Hawking’s Brief History of Time, a book that has sold millions, but which is nevertheless

difficult even for the learned physicist.

[H]ooks' point is that the voices sermonizing on feminism are speaking on behalf of feminism as a whole and, therefore, are silencing other, perhaps more marginal, feminists from taking the stage. Yet, impressively, she is challenging fellow academics to engage in popular culture—to be heard and, in essence, to leave the confines of the “ivory tower”— in order to balance what she sees as a one-sided representation of feminism. This demonstrates the developing awareness of the disparity between feminisms.

The nineteen-eighties were a relatively unproductive period in popular feminist discourse; yet, interestingly, a prolific period for the production of feminist theory in the academy. One might suggest that the eighties was a period of the fermentation of ideas which created in the nineties—a period of intensive feminist articulation in a popular context. The prevalent use of terms like “pro-feminist” and “anti-feminist” in the popular domain of feminism emerged during this period.⁶

A major “pro-feminist” best-seller of 1991 was Susan Faludi's Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women. This text responds to the decade of the eighties. For Faludi, feminism is indeed in crisis, in the form of a malaise of sorts, which she sees as a result of “backlash.” Faludi claims that this backlash was a result of women making *too much* progress, thereby precipitating a reactionary backlash from forces as varied as the Reagan administration, media and popular culture. In the popular domain of feminism, Susan Faludi is generally considered “pro-feminist” and her colleagues

Christina Hoff Sommers and Katie Roiphe have been labeled “anti-feminist.” These distinctions are consistent with the mass of responses to their work.⁷

The focus of this chapter will be these three popular feminist authors of the early nineties: Susan Faludi’s Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women, Christina Hoff Sommers’ Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women, and Katie Roiphe’s The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism. I will consider these respective texts, and their reception in academic and popular feminist discourse.

In the first three chapters of Backlash, Faludi delineates the two conflicting messages confronting American women in the late eighties. The first message is that “women have it all,” in other words, have achieved full equality (ix). The second message is that “women are miserable” and that feminism or the women’s movement is to blame for the misery affecting women (ix). The primary causes for this misery are “burn out” among the ranks of professional women; an “infertility epidemic” the same women are suffering from; and a new source of anxiety, a so-called “man-shortage,” demonstrated by statistics and studies suggesting that college-educated women over thirty had extremely poor chances of securing a mate (x). Faludi elaborates how the concept of equality, or feminism by association, came to be blamed for the current state of malaise toward feminism among American women. Faludi relates how women were repeatedly told that they are miserable: “This bulletin of despair is posted everywhere—at the newsstand, on the TV set, at the movies, in advertisements and doctors’ offices and academic journals” (ix). To support her argument, she outlines how government, Hollywood, major

newspapers, magazines and popular culture, not to mention academics and economists blame feminism for the plight of women: "women are unhappy precisely *because* they are free" (x). The message is that the women's movement is the enemy and that equality does not mix with marriage and motherhood, which according to the critics, are the core of women's existence. Faludi writes,

[t]he truth is that the last decade has seen a powerful counterassault on women's rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women. This counterassault is largely insidious: in a kind of pop-culture version of the Big Lie, it stands truth boldly on its head and proclaims that the very steps that have elevated women's position have actually lead to their downfall. (xviii)

To emphasize her points on how women are manipulated in society, Faludi refers to several "largely propagated myths" that many will be familiar with (3-4). According to Faludi, the function of these myths "supported the backlash against women's equality" (4). These myths consist of four popularly cited studies. The first is the famous "man shortage report" stemming from a 1986 marriage study by Harvard and Yale researchers suggesting that a college-educated, unwed woman at thirty will have a 20 percent likelihood of marriage; at thirty-five, 5 percent chance; and at forty, a 1.3 percent chance (Faludi 3). The second study dealt with the severe economic effects that new "no-fault divorce" had on women (Faludi 3). A 1985 Stanford study revealed that the average

woman suffers a 73 percent drop in living standard after divorce, while the average man enjoys a 42 percent rise (Faludi 3). The third study Faludi dismantles is a 1982 French study stating that women between thirty-one and thirty-five stand a 39 percent chance of not being able to conceive, subsequently labeled an “infertility epidemic” striking professional women who postpone childbearing (4). The fourth case is comprised of the numerous psychological studies which contend that single and career women are depressed, burnt out and suffer from declining mental health (3). Faludi initially demonstrates how the media responded to these assertions, and then goes into detail to retrace the steps of how these studies came to be accepted as “truths,” revealing the errors and miscalculations that they perpetuate. Contrary to accepted belief, most of these studies were not published by the authors, but found their way into articles by overzealous reporters and writers looking for a “good story.” Interestingly, when revised or challenging figures were presented by another researcher or independent source, the stories were no longer front-page headlines, instead the revised and, supposedly, correct figures somehow were lost in the bowels of the publication, if they were published at all.

The crux of Faludi's argument in Backlash is that various institutions, including government, the educational system, mass media, and popular culture, overtly created, influenced and sustained the backlash that American women experienced during the decade of the eighties. Reading Faludi makes one think that women suffered a reign of terror during this period. Not that I categorically disagree with Faludi, but she certainly has a knack for representing every possible circumstance as an affront against women.

As Elayne Rapping writes of Faludi's interpretation of the media: "Her world is as black and white as that of her rightwing adversaries, and it gets in the way, unfortunately by similar methods" (260). Faludi constructs a contemporary history of women using a motley crew of sources, including tabloid publications, scores of local and national newspapers and magazines—all apparent in reviewing the eighty-one pages of endnotes. Faludi's major targets are the media and its "anti-feminist slant," and popular culture—its anti-feminism, according to Faludi, evident in the plethora of anti-woman, anti-feminist depictions on television and film. The combination of these forces produced, according to Faludi, the message that the political, economic and social progress made in the sixties and seventies brought unhappiness and misery to women. "From the 'man shortage' to 'the infertility epidemic' to 'female burnout' to 'toxic day-care,' these so-called female crises have had their origins, not in the actual conditions of women's lives, but rather in a closed system that starts and ends in the media, popular culture, and advertising—an endless feedback loop that perpetuates and exaggerates its own false images of womanhood" (Faludi xv).

Faludi reveals how women in the eighties were systematically eliminated from the work force and pushed, by all accounts, from "trend" experts like Faith Popcorn, to the resurgence of the far right campaigns, into the home and to make babies. The curious thing is that many of the women whom Faludi revealed as fighting the hardest against feminism, organizations like Concerned Women for America, a New Right organization espousing "family values," were managed by professional career women often "juggling

career, husband and children” (241-256). Faludi points out this type of irony and hypocrisy many times in Backlash:

[t]he activists of Concerned Women for America could report to their offices in their suits, issue press releases demanding that women return to the home, and never see a contradiction. By divorcing their personal liberation from their public stands on sexual politics, they could privately take advantage of feminism while publicly deploring its influence. They could indeed ‘have it all’—by working to prevent all other women from having the same opportunity. (256)

Citing the religious “New Right,” the Reagan/Bush administration, and authors of self-help best-sellers as fueling and influencing the backlash, Faludi ensures her reader that she is not suggesting a conspiracy (xxi). Yet she does claim that a plethora of influences are at work to push women into “‘acceptable’ roles—whether as Daddy’s girl or fluttery romantic, active nester or passive love object” (xxii). Faludi focuses primarily on the effects of backlash on white, heterosexual, middle and upper-class women. Working-class women are noted, but almost entirely lacking is a discussion of African-American women, Native American women and lesbians. In essence, it is a very heterosexual and “white-washed” text.

One area of Faludi’s text, upon which I would like to elaborate, is the press or media’s influence on the backlash. As feminist discourse is increasingly expanding in the popular domain, the positive and negative effects of media influence are magnified.

What is representative of a movement like the women's movement and what sells papers may be mutually exclusive. Faludi attacks the press, whom she credits as promoting phrases like "the man shortage," "the biological clock," "the mommy track," "postfeminism," and perpetuating ideas such as those who would suggest that women, amidst all their success, were dissatisfied, and feminism was to blame. Faludi reviews some of the heavy weight journalists' treatment of women: she tells how in 1986 Peter Jennings hosted an ABC Special Report on "What has happened to American women?" with Jennings responding, "The gains for women sometimes come at a formidable cost to them." *Newsweek*, in the same year, posed a similar question describing the current dynamic of American women as "the new problem with no name." Again, feminism was to blame. The media never probed for possible sources of women's unhappiness, or even asked if women were *actually* unhappy. The recurring message was that feminism had robbed women of what they really wanted: romance and maternity (78). Faludi notes the history of press influence on the women's movement:

[t]he media's role as backlash collaborator and publicist is a familiar one in American history. The first article sneering at a 'Superwoman' appeared not in the 1980s press but in an American newspaper headline at the turn of the century. Feminists, according to the late Victorian press, were 'a herd of hysterical and irrational she-revolutionaries,' 'fussy, interfering, faddists, fanatics,' 'shrieking cockatoos,' and 'unpardonably ridiculous.' Feminists had laid waste to the American female population; any sign of female

distress was surely another ‘fatal symptom’ of the feminist disease, the periodicals reported. ‘Why Are We Not Happy?’ the male-edited *Ladies’ Home Journal* asked in 1901—and answered that the women’s rights movement was debilitating its beneficiaries. (78)

Another significant pro-feminist text of the early nineties is Naomi Wolf’s The Beauty Myth. Like Faludi, Wolf sees American women as in crisis. Wolf’s discussion is focused on what she calls the tyranny of beauty; women are enslaved to trivial concerns of the body and appearance. For Wolf this obsession is also the result of a backlash, a cruel parallel; as women have made more legal and social progress, the burden of conforming to media images of female beauty intensifies accordingly. Wolf posits this as a perverse method of social control that women have complied with by “buying into” the pursuit of beauty: “We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement: the beauty myth” (10).

The work of Faludi and Wolf gained wide attention. As feminist darlings, they spoke to students, were invited to appear on TV talk-shows, and graced the cover of *Ms.* magazine as did Gloria Steinem and bell hooks. Elayne Rapping, who was sharply criticized for her reviews of Backlash and The Beauty Myth in The Women’s Review of Books, describes Faludi and Wolf as engaging in “dogmatic puritanism” and “ultra-correct rigidity” (264). In this, Rapping sees Faludi and Wolf as taking hard lines, black and white if you will, on multi-dimensional issues like the media, the cosmetic industry,

fashion and even pornography (264). Rapping asks, "How is it possible for these two women to write books so oblivious to the ferment in feminist theory, so locked into an ideologically dated world?" (265). She continues, saying that one reason might be that since the second wave and the ensuing institutionalization of feminism, academic feminists have already started to work through issues surrounding sexuality, fashion, and popular culture "which should have informed and enriched the analyses of these two young writers, [yet it] appears in esoteric academic journals and in language accessible only to initiates of theory-talk" (265). Rapping views women as having made advancements in the academy while, ironically, losing ground in the "larger public battle" (265). This is a clear example of the distant relationship of the academy to popular literature. Women's power in the academy is a particularly contentious issue: are women making gains or is it a "chilly climate?" Christina Hoff Sommers, a recent media phenomenon, has some direct views on this subject.

Publicly identifying herself as "feminist," Sommers describes her recent book Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women as a critical exposé of feminism; it is a response to popular feminist works like Faludi's Backlash, Gloria Steinem's The Revolution From Within, and Naomi Wolf's The Beauty Myth, as well as a probing critique of feminism in the academy. Who Stole Feminism? is written by a self-described disenchanted "classical equity feminist" (Sommers 274). In the text, Sommers does admit, somewhat defiantly, that she has also been described as a "disreputable philosopher and a right-wing ideologue" (Sommers 263).

Sommers is one of the most vocal and well-funded critics of feminism and Women's Studies. In fact, the money, reviews and attention from the media are far more forthcoming to scholars like Sommers, who claim to expose and criticize feminism, than it is for scholars who engage in a similar discourse outside of the mainstream press. Anti-feminist critique is lucrative; Who Stole Feminism? fetched a *six figure* advance from Simon & Schuster.⁸ Clearly, women in the academy, who publish in scholarly journals, do not receive six figure stipends for their publications

Sommers is a classic case of an academic turned popular writer. Sommers is an associate professor of Philosophy at Clark University, therefore one might assume that academic feminist discourse would have informed her writing. Yet there seem to be other factors at play here. To write the book she received a two year leave from Clark, a Mellon Faculty Development Grant, as well as the Higgins Research Grant. Outside funding was provided by the Lynne and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Carthage Foundation and the John M. Olin Foundation, all foundations known to be politically right-wing. Laura Flanders in an Internet review of Sommers book remarked: "Had a comparable book been funded by an alliance of ardently left-wing foundations, one might have expected mainstream reporters to use that fact as an excuse to discredit the book—or, more likely, to ignore it. If, on the other hand, mainstream media gave regular attention to debates within popular mainstream feminism, much of Who Stole Feminism? would have sounded old" (4). Sommers, facing a barrage of media interest since the publication of Who Stole Feminism?, has appeared on such nationally syndicated

programs as ABC's *Lifetime Magazine*, PBS's *Talk of the Nation*, CNN's *Crossfire*, ABC's *Nightline* and *Eye to Eye with Connie Chung*, as well, a strong litmus test of current popularity— a request from the *Oprah Winfrey* show to discuss gender bias— all indicate the popularity of Sommers' text, despite the cancellation of the *Oprah Winfrey* show when the other invited guests refused to appear with her.

Sommers' premise in Who Stole Feminism? is based on labeling two main factions within feminism: "gender feminists," and "classically liberal," or "equity feminists."⁹ The crux of the book is a critique of gender based feminism:

American feminism is currently dominated by a group of women who seek to persuade the public that American women are not the free creatures we think we are. The leaders and theorists of the women's movement believe that our society is best described as a patriarchy, a 'male hegemony,' a 'sex/gender system' in which the dominant gender works to keep women cowering and submissive. The feminists who hold this divisive view of our social and political reality believe that we are in a gender war, and they are eager to disseminate stories of atrocity that are designed to alert women to their plight. The 'gender feminists' (as I shall be calling them) believe that all our institutions, from the state to the family to the grade schools perpetuate male dominance. Believing that women are virtually under siege, gender feminists naturally seek recruits to wage their side of the gender war. They seek support. They seek vindication. They seek

ammunition. (16)

These remarks, which are also prominently displayed on the back cover of the book, comprise the books' major theme. One could easily assume that some of Sommers' comments are leveled directly against Faludi, since Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women does contain strong metaphors of warfare, which is obvious in the title. I believe Sommers to be overstating the situation; the drama is being used only to sensationalize the situation and situate herself as a lone voice of reason. Sommers believes that feminism is badly in need of scrutiny and "frank and honest critique" (18). In the preface, Sommers states that she will "evaluate" the views of feminists like Gloria Steinem, Patricia Ireland, Susan Faludi, Marilyn French, Naomi Wolf and Catherine Mackinnon (17). However, it appears that these individuals are used merely to lend the book profile and interest value. Sommers does make comments in reference to the above noted feminists, but no systematic analysis is included. Rather, Sommers cites and attacks flawed and misquoted statistics that these authors are guilty of using.¹⁰ Sommers spends more time "evaluating" Foucault and his impact on "gender feminists" than on the views of these feminists directly (229-230). It might be more accurate to characterize Sommers' analysis as using aspects of "gender feminist's" work to support her own thesis that "gender feminists" are engaged in a "gender war."

Sommers throws a meaty hook to her readers in the preface. One is immediately taken with Sommers' revelation of the research and statistics that Naomi Wolf and Gloria Steinem have cited in the past. Steinem, who has been practically elevated as a guru of

feminism—at least by the media—is an obvious target. Sommers specifically refers to Steinem's Revolution From Within and Wolf's The Beauty Myth. Smugly at times, Sommers systematically reveals the errors in research which, due to the sensitive subject matter, had already resulted in significant media attention. An example is Wolf's statistic that 150,000 women die of anorexia each year, which, when sourced, proved to be a misquotation. Sommers traces the number back to the original source, the American Anorexia and Bulimia Association, to find that these numbers were quoted as *sufferers* and not fatalities. Sommers' information from the United States Division of Vital Statistics at the National Center for Health Statistics reported 54 deaths from anorexia nervosa in 1991 (Sommers 12). Her point here is that due to the sensitive and sensational environment that "gender feminists" have created around women's issues, figures like Wolf's misquotation quickly become replicated in multiple publications—including Women's Studies textbooks. The fact that Wolf has corrected the faulty numbers in subsequent printings is insignificant to Sommers; she believes these errors to be intentional (15, 203). Referring to a flawed and publicized "March of Dimes" study on spousal abuse, Sommers states, "in today's environment for feminist research, the higher your figures for abuse, the more likely you'll reap rewards, regardless of your methodology. You'll be mentioned in feminist encyclopedias, dictionaries, 'fact sheets,' and textbooks" (201). Sommers' unraveling of the sources for numbers, how statistics find their way into publication, is very similar to Faludi's work. Yet Sommers is labeled anti-feminist by popular mainstream feminists in reviews and websites, while Faludi is

called pro-feminist. Faludi is employing statistics to hold up what she sees as the oppression of women by society in many forms; meanwhile, Sommers is using statistics to blame gender feminists for inflating statistical evidence on oppression and victimization to gain funding and power. Curiously Sommers' own research is not above reproach if one is to look through the magnifying glass of social science methodology. Laura Flanders reports, "This number [of deaths from anorexia] is highly dubious, since it is based on a count of death certificates, which rarely list anorexia as a cause of death. . . the long term fatality rate may be 15 percent higher" (2). By her rigorous attacks on feminist scholarship, Sommers has opened herself up to close scrutiny by feminist scholars such as Flanders, and despite the fact that her arguments are compelling, she disregards elements of interpretation, subjectivity and human error. Academic feminists have written extensively on research methods. Shulamit Reinharz in Feminist Methods in Social Research writes, "[i]t may be that people consider statistics authoritative when they support a view already held, and dismiss them, when their views are challenged. . . . The public seems to accept that one can lie and say anything at all with statistics, and that statistics are decisive" (90). Thus it becomes apparent how Sommers and Faludi can employ similar methods to much different ends. McDermott, for example, notes that "most of [Sommers'] charges concern the circulation of ideas in the popular press by non-academic feminist advocacy groups and the interpretation of privately funded studies by popular press feminist writers: she actually addresses very few pieces of feminist scholarly research directly" (674).

Sommers engages in an intense and inflammatory writing style. Gender feminists are described in so many ways that it is mystifying at times to ascertain who exactly they are. Whomever gender feminists represent, which includes professors of Women Studies, Sommers has arbitrarily categorized most feminists under the banner of gender feminism. It is disappointing to see talented scholars like Sommers engage in this form of criticism, notwithstanding the entertainment value. It is difficult to discern whether Sommers' style, in a fashionably *politically incorrect* way, is more a function of attracting a specific audience or publishers. While authors like Camille Paglia, who will be discussed in the next chapter, often personalize their targets, for example, an attack on MacKinnon and Dworkin, using their physical attributes as fodder for her criticism, Sommers is much more vague in her use of the all-inclusive term "gender feminists." Her use of alienating and vengeful language is profound. Gender feminists are referred to as "resenter feminists"; women who are "articulate and prone to dramatization" (21); who "do not like criticism" (38); and who engage in a "feminist colonization of the Academy" (50). They are also called "transformationists" (59), and accused of contributing to "academic incompetence" (62). They "resent male culture" (63), because they feel they "are superior to men" (77). Thus they "engage in moral one-upmanship" (79), are "racist," "deny the possibility of objective learning" (98) and "foster a McCarthyist atmosphere" on college campuses (107). As well, they are "rampaging" (133), "hypersensitive" (271), "ideologues" (273), "fanatics" (274), and suffer from "intellectual affectations" (274). These are but a few of the terms Sommers uses to disparage gender feminists. At times

Sommers' writing slips into moralizing about the state of feminism as opposed to offering the critical analysis that she purports to do. The assertion here is that gender feminism is entirely dependent upon and based upon feminist's exaggerated claims of women's subordination by men. Her method of critique is mainly through researching the basis of advocacy research, which translates into popularly cited studies on women in the areas of self-esteem, anorexia, violence against women, and rape, which, according to Sommers, produce the skewed and flawed conclusions that she terms "noble lies" (Sommers 188). Sommers conjectures that, without a rigorous system of review, which she reports is lacking in feminist research, the result is shoddy research replicating these noble lies which Sommers claims are soon accepted as "knowledge" (201).

Sommers' analysis of research methodology certainly gives one pause when tempted to cite unconfirmed statistics and it should, yet the issues are much more complex than merely laying blame on "gender feminists." Her arguments are strong and convincing, yet problematic, due to the loose nature of her categorization of gender feminists, thus naming all feminists, particularly those in the academy as guilty by association. While Sommers' critique of the methodology used by many social scientists, her criticism is reserved for gender feminists. If her assertions regarding gender feminism are correct, it would mean that all United States institutions from universities to governments are controlled and manipulated by the outrageous agenda of gender feminists, a conspiracy theory of sorts. Sommers claims that these mysterious gender feminists have created an atmosphere in which no one can or will refute their claims.

This must therefore include all interdisciplinary work that feminists in the academy are often involved in, participation in “non-feminist” orientated conferences, and work published in humanities and social science refereed journals. Sommers explains that gender feminists engage in presenting arguments and issues as “nonfalsifiable” and, even more bizarre, that journalists, even media-watch agencies, are too intimidated by gender feminists to check sources and verify information (96). Given such a climate, gender feminists are able to present inaccurate information and promote hysteria around specific causes and issues to the point of precipitating the United States Congress to pass Bills on this misinformation: “[T]hey engage in exaggeration, oversimplification, and obfuscation...” (Sommers 15).

Sommers subscribes to a liberal feminist agenda, or as she calls herself, “a classical liberal feminist or equity feminist.” She models this on the “first wave feminism” of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. As we know, this feminism was based on women gaining equality before the law as in the right to vote, own property, and the access to education. Sommers’ praise of liberal feminism is based on the notion that its aims are “clearly stated, finite and practicable” and based in a tradition of liberal democracy (Sommers 35). While I do not wish to debate liberal feminism, I find Sommers’ contextualized use of it shortsighted, since Stanton and Anthony’s work in achieving suffrage is a much more concrete agenda than say, “breaking through the glass ceiling.” Sommers is asking for a clearer, more finite feminist agenda in a time when oppression against women or minority groups is often covert, subtle, and systemic.

Sommers describes gender feminism as equity feminism's "unscrupulous twin" (135). She continues, "Equity feminists believe that American women have made great progress and that our system of government allows them to expect more. They do not believe that women are 'socially subordinate'" (Sommers 230). The ideas that women are making progress and the government allowing them to expect more are troublesome. First, Sommers is inconsistent, since she believes that gender feminists already have an indeterminate amount of influence in government. Second, the dependence on a bureaucracy, such as the United States Government, for progress implicitly gives this political institution a level of trust that appears misplaced. A government whose military budget is close to 300 billion dollars and which, at the same time, forces women to procure illegal abortions is not one that I see as trustworthy when it comes to personal liberties.¹¹ Sommers' line of reasoning confirms her as a privileged, white, middle class, educated woman. While these attributes are a common location around which to attack, I point them out because categories like "white," "educated," and "middle-class" connote privileged categories, and in terms of academic feminism, have all been questioned. However, Sommers appears to accept this identity unproblematically. Finally, the suggestion that equity feminists do not view women as "socially subordinate" implies that gender feminists adhere to this logic. "Gender feminism" suggests quite the contrary: that the essentializing construction of difference is used to perpetuate women as socially subordinate. Sommers' credibility would be greatly enhanced had she limited her critique of feminists to verifiable accuracy, in that initially she cites the work of Steinem, Faludi,

Wolf, et cetera, but then strays to apply her critique to all feminists working in the academy without including specific evidence.

When it comes to the elusive task of assessing how American women define themselves in terms of feminism, Sommers cites a poll (*Time/CNN*) which suggests that 63 percent of the sample did not consider themselves feminists. Sommers therefore extrapolates that gender feminists do not represent the grass roots constituency or “mainstream” to which they lay claim (18). Interestingly, equity feminism is used interchangeably with classical or mainstream feminism throughout Sommers' text, thus implying that there actually *is* a “feminism” that is representative. It is this type of conjecture that blatantly disregards the massive strides feminist theory has made in the academy, notwithstanding the influences of postmodernism and post-structuralism. Another contradiction arises in Sommers failing to acknowledge her own use of statistics after spending an entire chapter on the dangers of misinformation and methodological short-comings.

A significant portion of Who Stole Feminism? is focused on gender feminisms' influence in the academy. Sommers describes gender feminists as penetrating the classroom and academy to the point where they are “disproportionately represented in dean of students' offices, in dormitory administration, in harassment offices, in offices of multicultural affairs, and in various counseling centers” (Sommers 32). Not only do they represent the largest growth area in the academy, but they are hostile to any “exact thinking” which is considered “male” and they hold “paranoid exposés of ‘phallocentric

discourse’” (Sommers 33). Gender feminists promote political correctness *ad nauseam*, according to Sommers in her description of the National Women’s Studies Conference in 1992 (33). She also describes gender feminists as racist. Sommers refers to the piece “Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister to Sister Dialogue” by Barbara Smith and Beverley Smith. This essay deals with the authors’ experiences as Black feminists in the women’s movement, specifically in the context of the issues and concerns of class and race. Sommers uses Smith and Smith’s criticisms and reflections on race and class in feminism and then applies them directly and only to gender feminism as opposed to the women’s movement or feminism in general. In doing so, Sommers conveniently omits any discussion of race, class or even sexuality in the discourse of equity feminism. Sommers’ omission of race in her discussion of equity feminism is contradictory. Parading statistics and studies on how well women are doing in America, she virtually eliminates the staggering numbers which delineate the poverty of single, female-headed households, particularly those of women of color (Sommers 241). The fact that these glowing statistics exclusively represent pay equity for women in the 25-34 age bracket is not alarming to Sommers; this rings as narrow and perhaps classist. It appears that while gender feminists are interested in looking at and embracing the differences among women in terms of race, class, and sexual orientation, Sommers, in her, “as American as apple pie, and it will stay feminism” is too busy refuting gender feminism to even address this important discussion (Sommers 275).

Sommers’ experience, in “feminist classrooms” and in studying hundreds of

Women's Studies syllabi, has revealed this conclusion: "My experience with academic feminism and my immersion in the ever-growing gender feminist literature have served to deepen my conviction that the majority of women's studies classes and other classes that teach a 'reconceptualized' subject matter are unscholarly, intolerant of dissent, and full of gimmicks. In other words a waste of time" (Sommers 90). Yet when one wonders what her real issues are, when one reads the following statement, as quoted in *Esquire* February 1994: "There are a lot of homely women in women's studies. Preaching these anti-male, anti-sex sermons is a way for them to compensate for various heartaches—they're just mad at the beautiful girls" (quoted in Flanders 3). According to Sommers, Women's Studies is basically glorified camp, where in a regulated atmosphere, women sit around, consciousness-raise, talk about menstruation, and are encouraged to expose their victimization at the hands of men.

Sommers representation of feminism and Women's Studies is important to this discussion due to a very significant factor: the extensive press and media exposure that she has gained through the publication of this text. Who Stole Feminism? has been reviewed in numerous national publications and featured in, to name a few, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *New York Daily News*, the *New York Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, the *National Review*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and *World Report*. While many of the themes that Sommers brings to light in Who Stole Feminism? are not original to feminist discourse, Sommers is presenting them as so. Therefore, without a thorough and ongoing knowledge

of the concerns and debates within feminism, Sommers can be heralded as “brave” and “courageous” by the popular press for criticizing feminism in an arena that is somewhat naive to the feminist cause (Flanders 8). In her essay “On Cultural Authority: Women’s Studies, Feminist Politics, and the Popular Press,” Patrice McDermott sums up the net result of this situation: “[W]idespread press coverage of Sommers’s book has, once again, forced feminists into a position of reacting to, rather than initiating, a public debate about the legitimacy of their cause in terms that have been defined for them by others” (670). While academic feminists have, until recently, limited discussion to an academic arena, it may be the press that has had limited interest in the debates surrounding feminism. It appears somewhat convenient that so much attention has been paid as of late to those like Sommers who have polarized the debates within feminism. This is not to say that feminism is a cohesive ideology; in fact, as will be discussed in the following chapter, I argue that feminism is characterized by fracturing and multiplicity. What Sommers has, in fact, created within feminism, is another binary opposition, an “us against them” situation that works contrary to the laborious work of academic feminists to embrace “difference.”

Sommers is not the only author bringing debates within feminism to popular audiences. Katie Roiphe has also entered the terrain of feminist critic and media personality. Roiphe’s first book The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism has received similar accolades to the work of Sommers. Unlike Sommers, Roiphe sets parameters for her criticisms, presenting a self-reflexive polemic on her experience as a student at Harvard and then at Princeton.

Compared to Who Stole Feminism?, The Morning After is written on a much smaller scale, filled mostly with personal anecdotes, yet the attention it has provoked speaks more perhaps than the book itself. The Editors' Introduction to the review "If Morning Never Comes?" begins,

Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus* is not simply a book, a feisty anti-feminist polemic, but a major anti-feminist media event. Accompanied by pre-publication interviews in the major women's magazines, a *New York Times* cover story, endless talk show and late night TV appearances, and finally a featured spot in the February *Esquire*'s ecstatic report on 'Do Me' feminism, for at least several months this Fall and Winter, Katie Roiphe was ubiquitous. (sic 57)

Evidently, reviews by feminists were not so flattering; those in the popular press however were stunning:

"A brilliant young contrarian voice, à la Mary McCarthy." — *Kirkus*

"Katie Roiphe writes from the trenches of gender warfare. *The Morning After* is clearheaded, wry, disturbing." — *Washington Post Book World*

"Remarkable—the first intelligent cry of protest from Roiphe's generation against what feminism has wrought in the name of woman." — *Commentary*

Roiphe enters this debate as a student reflecting on the state of feminism on American university campuses today. The discussion is focused on the current (hetero)sexual climate, specifically the politics of "rape." In her introduction, she takes

pains to explain to her reader that feminism needs to tolerate dissent and sustain critique to continue to be a vital movement. However, there are no studies here to deal with, no methodological analysis, only a self-reflexive tale of Roiphe's experience in Ivy league halls. Her concerns about feminism would make Catherine MacKinnon's head spin. Roiphe speaks to date-rape, "Take Back the Night Marches" and the politics of sex. She sees feminism as propagating an oppressive discourse of sexuality. Like a child wanting to shock her parents, Roiphe tells us tales of how she participated in the party scene, which entailed the consumption of alcohol and dancing in her bra. In this context of "partying," she flippantly states that using the current feminist definition of rape, she too could consider herself raped. Similar to Camille Paglia and praised by Sommers, she remarks "Female authority is not (and should not be seen as) so fragile that it shatters at the first sign of male sexuality. Any rules saying otherwise strip women, in the public eye, of their hard-earned authority" (90).

Roiphe includes stories of her own peers, telling us of personal interactions and the musings of her colleagues whom she names (a horrifying concept really, who wants to be reminded of the intellectual growing pains of college days). The book is a strange juxtapositioning of a critique of victim feminism, and vignettes of campus life culminating in a misty-eyed recollection of graduation. Regarding Roiphe and The Morning After, bell hooks writes,

Roiphe completely ignores the connection between maintaining patriarchy and condoning male violence against women. She is so eager to be

provocative that she is willing to pollute her polemic by declaring in a serious way that male violence against women—including sexual assault—is utterly acceptable in our society, and that the various ways women organize to protest that violence, despite excess or flaws in strategy, should be praised and applauded. (104)

The most obvious problem is that Roiphe's text is seeking to dialogue with the larger issues of "what feminism has become," but it is localized to Harvard, hardly a representative microcosm of society. Excuse the redundancy here, but once again we meet the phenomenon of a fearless crusader out to remedy feminist political correctness. Elsbeth Robson, a student at the University of Oxford, UK writes, "the book suggests that it has been written to attract maximum attention. Unfortunately, the attention-grabbing shock tactics also make it difficult at times, to take the author seriously" (110). But let me remind you for a second, this is the same book that has been critically acclaimed by the popular press. What is happening here?

Both Sommers and Roiphe have been heralded by critics with adjectives like "brave" and "courageous." Yet the themes and issues they raise are *old* news to feminists. Contentious debates on the social construction of sexuality, essentialism/antiessentialism and victim ideology have long been discussed and written about by feminists in the academy (McDermott 670). On Roiphe's construction of this lone dissenting voice, hooks writes, "Roiphe does not stand alone. She stands in the shadows of feminist thinkers who have passionately worked to bring to the public a

deeper awareness of the political significance of feminist movement, who have sought to deflect popular attention away from a simplistic equation of feminism with anti-male and anti-sex sentiments” (106). Interestingly, these recycled discussions are now only differentiated from past discourse by the vehicle they are riding in, the name on the first page of each book—the publisher. Sommers and Roiphe have merely redressed these issues and sold them to the popular press and added a good dose of provocation for marketability. The press in turn has interpreted these voices as the first reasonable feminists in recent memory, thus labeling them “brave and courageous.”

Patrice McDermott closely considers this phenomenon. McDermott describes the damage done to feminism by critics like Sommers and Roiphe, in that these authors are “promot[ing] a version of women’s studies that trivializes feminist analyses of power, undermines attempts to effect social change, and casts feminism as a hegemonic bully on American campuses. In this popular press scenario, exaggerated feminist propaganda, not material inequity, is responsible for the oppression of women in contemporary society” (671).

The women’s movement and feminism are not new to the press, but the press has paid an inordinate amount of attention to these new feminist critics. McDermott believes it is the style of criticism and, of course, the target that has attracted so much attention. She describes Sommers’ argument as “invoking the power of ‘facts’ and the rhetoric of rational rather than moral argument” (671). By doing so, continues McDermott, “these critics effectively undermine the cultural authority of feminist scholarship and the

institutional legitimacy of Women's Studies that have been painstakingly gained by over two decades of work in American universities, one of the most important cultural locations of feminist influence in contemporary society" (671). The feminist project in the academy has been shaped by a blending of "academic traditions" with "activist concerns" (672). McDermott suggests that this tradition in feminist scholarship, which has in it a theme of analyzing structural or systemic power, will always run against "the ideological assumptions of mainstream media" (672). These epistemological questions are at the heart of this disjuncture witnessed in the work of Sommers and Roiphe, who forsake power analyses in favor of more media-acceptable positivist assumptions (McDermott 674). It is not surprising, then, that these authors chose and succeeded in the popular press. The media needs "news" and the women's movement has been around far too long to constitute anything sensational or seductive. What we are witnessing is a new form of feminist scholarship (some would take issue with the use of the adjective "feminist"), as the dialogue becomes one of openly critiquing feminism in the public arena. Heretofore feminist polemics, consciousness-raising and philosophical arguments were situated on a binary opposition, either pro or against the efforts of feminism or the women's movement. The situation now is somewhat different. The crisis in feminism seems to be embedded in the public domain. Mainstream feminist critique involves characterizations of who is and who is not a feminist. I term this the "fracturing of feminism" because of how, metaphorically, it is breaking down the collective strength of a feminist project. I say this in full awareness of how academic feminism has participated

in, and even embraced a fracturing of sorts. Yet, while the academy is acknowledging multiplicity and diversity, it appears at the same time to be broadening a base, strengthening the foundation, rather than the splintering the main artery. The current barrage of anti-feminist feminist criticism will be elaborated further in a another chapter in a deliberation on media queen/academic feminist/best-selling author, Camille Paglia.

Endnotes

1. A good example can be found in Karen Lehrman's article in Mother Jones Sept.-Oct. 45+. This article demonstrates the differences among responses to Faludi's book, Backlash. The responses indicate both positive and negative reactions to Backlash which in and of itself has come to be known as the crisis within feminism. Therefore, what initially was a crisis in society as per Faludi, turned into a crisis within feminism.
2. For a detailed explanation of these different feminisms, see Valerie Bryson, Feminist Political Theory: An Introduction (New York: Paragon House, 1992) 12-66; on materialist feminisms, especially, see Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean Materialist Feminisms (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1993).
3. See, for example, Juliet Mitchell Woman's Estate (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); Kate Millett Sexual Politics (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969).
4. My use of academic feminism and feminist academics is very specific for the purposes of this paper. This is not meant to gloss over the concerns of academics over Women's Studies programs and the accusations of "educational fundamentalism," in terms of the suggestions that feminists in the academy engage in ideological policing and intolerance, see Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge's Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales From the Strange World of Women's Studies.
5. For discussions on the "antifeminist backlash" see: "Anti-Feminist Page." Online. Internet. 14 Jan. 1997; Laura Flanders' "The 'Stolen Feminism' Hoax: Anti-Feminist Attack Based on Error-Filled Anecdotes." Online. Internet. 30 Nov. 1995.
6. The usage of the terms "pro-feminist" and "anti-feminist" are prevalent. See for example, Susan Faludi's "I'm Not A Feminist, But I Play One on TV." Ms. Mar.-Apr. 1995. 30-39; Laura Flanders "The 'Stolen Feminism' Hoax: Anti-Feminist Attack Based on Error-filled Anecdotes." The Women's Desk. Online. Sept.-Oct. 1995; "Anti-feminist Page: Faux Feminists." Online. 1 Jan. 1997.
7. A dramatic example of the anti-feminist label bestowed upon Sommers, Roiphe, and Paglia is found on the website entitled "Anti-Feminist Page: Faux Feminists." The opening quotation: "They define themselves as feminists, but their dismissive-to-downright hostile attitudes toward feminist issues-from sexual harassment to domestic violence-locate them firmly on the antifeminist side of the ledger." From Susan Faludi's article "I'm Not a Feminists But I Play One on TV," Ms. Mar.-Apr. 1995. 30-39. Ruth Picardie's review of The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism begins: "Move over Camille! The Hot New Antifeminist in Town is Katie Roiphe." In New Statesman & Society 14 Jan 1994.
8. An Internet search revealed that the Olin, Bradley and Carthage Foundations gave Sommers at least \$164,000 between 1991 and 1993 to write this book. The Boston Globe also reported that Sommers received a "six figure" advance from Simon&Schuster (Boston Globe 5/17/92). From "The Stolen Feminism" review by Laura Flanders at <http://www.fair/extra/9409/stolen-feminism-hoax.html>.

9. Sommers' definition of gender feminism: "women, even modern American women, are in thrall to a 'system of male dominance' variously referred to as a 'heteropatriarchy' or the sex/gender system. According to one feminist theorist, the sex/gender system is 'that complex process whereby bi-sexual infants are transformed into male and female gender personalities, one destined to command, the other to obey.' Sex/gender feminism ('gender feminism' for short) is the prevailing ideology among contemporary feminist philosophers and leaders. But it lacks a grass roots constituency" (Sommers 22).

10. For example, see pages 11-12, 146 on Steinem and Wolf, and misquotations on the use of statistics.

11. The actual 1996 figures for United States Military spending was 282 billion dollars, from Issues '96: "The Candidates Briefing Book" Chapter 16 The Heritage Foundation. Compiled by Thomas G. Moore, Baker Spring and John Hillen. Online.

CHAPTER THREE

The Sexual Personae of Dr. Paglia

On January 27, 1991 *Newsday* ran an article by Camille Paglia on the subject of “date rape.” This event provided the spark for the quietly smoldering controversy the theme of rape had initiated by the publication of Paglia’s Sexual Personae the prior year. In fact it was because of Paglia’s views on the subject that *Newsday* asked her to write the provocative article. As Paglia herself relates the events:

The *Newsday* piece inspired hysterical, irrational letters from feminists from Alaska to Atlanta, who bizarrely condemned me as “anti-woman” and “pro-rape” for my deviation from the official party line (“Rape is a crime of violence but not of sex,” they kept repeating as robots; “‘No’ always means ‘no’”). It was these letters that convinced me that feminism is in deep trouble, that it is now overrun by Moonies or cultists who are desperate for a religion and who, in their claims of absolute truth, are ready to suppress free thought and free speech. (*Sex, Art, and American Culture* 304)

Paglia’s views on all aspects of sex, sexuality, erotica and sexual behavior would come to dominate her own personae. Since the introduction of her first book and best-seller, Paglia has been the eye of the storm in public feminist discourse. Few academic feminists have responded to Paglia’s work, for the most part ignoring it, perhaps in hopes that she will soon go away. This chapter is devoted to a cursory study of Camille Paglia. While personally identifying herself with feminism, she has been branded both by academic feminists and non-academic feminists as “anti-feminist.”

Personally, I find Paglia titillating. In fact, from time to time I may even find myself in agreement with her viewpoints. This chapter considers Paglia's politics and why she has been ostracized by the academic and popular mainstream feminist community. Furthermore, I will ponder whether individuals such as Camille Paglia actually harm the feminist cause. Finally, I will argue that the so-called crisis within feminism is promoted by authors such as Paglia in order to provide a platform for their own arguments. Whether these forays into the public arena are due to a disenchantment with academic feminism or are merely intended to provoke and disrupt remains a question throughout this thesis. Thus, I go back to 1991; some of the headlines ran as follows:

"Hot Critic: Camille Paglia," —*Rolling Stone*, May 16, 1991

"Paglia: An 'Academic Terrorist': Feminist Professor adopts aggressive style," —*The Baltimore Sun*, May 19, 1991

"Faux Feminist Award to the new media darling, Camille Paglia," —*Ms.* May/June 1991

"The ability to infuriate both antagonists in an ideological struggle is often the sign of a first rate book....[Paglia] is a conspicuously gifted writer...and an admirably close reader with a hard core common sense....[Her] book is every bit as intellectually stimulating as it is exasperating." —*The New York Times Book Review*

"The Many Masks of Camille Paglia: Part Poseur, Part Philosopher, Part Outrageous Neo-Feminist, the Myth-Making Writer Has Brought Sex, Sensationalism, and Rock'n'Roll to the Temple of Academia," — Deanne Stillman, *The Los Angeles Times Magazine*, February 16, 1992

"The Anti-Feminist Feminist: Has Camille Paglia Replaced Germaine Greer as the Bad Girl of Feminism?" —Micki Moore, *The Toronto Sunday Sun*, September 22, 1991

These commentaries provide a tiny glimpse into the media career of Camille Paglia. Paglia is perhaps the most outspoken self-described feminist criticizing feminism.¹ Her intense interdisciplinary “stream of consciousness” style of writing, and even her constant lamentations of the intellectual and activist utopia over the sixties, make her frustrating but compelling to read. It is difficult to discuss Paglia without first locating her feminist politics. She seems to morph continually concerning a feminist agenda, yet always holding fast to her personal model as a sixties libertarian. Paglia’s style often gets in the way of her message. Her bulldozer approach is entertaining, but grows tiresome—as a class-clown or over-zealous school-yard bully. One often has to weave through yards of rhetoric to capture the essence of her message. When she does present a straight-forward idea, it is difficult to ascertain the true meaning or intent of her statements. Paglia positions herself as a “feminist” and an ardent reformer of both feminism and academe; in fact, she even sees herself as “saving” feminism. Yet, identifying with Paglia is difficult because she continually sets herself “apart,” either as marginalized for her critical views, or possibly above those who she considers as unenlightened. Paglia behaves, to me, as the newly converted evangelical who suddenly has the corner on “truth.”

It is onerous at times to analyze Paglia’s work. The tendency is to be seduced or, at least, caught up in her infamous “rants” and simply string together a series of enticing quotations. While I will use and refer to her snappy statements, my intent is to provide an impression. Outside of her polemical collections of essays, Sexual Personae: Art and

Decadence From Nefertiti To Emily Dickinson, her first book and a “best-seller,” is a 700-page treatise which she herself considers of epic proportions. In it, Paglia provides an unapologetic and intense examination of the origins and foundations of western culture, examining antiquity, the Renaissance, Romanticism and how Romanticism gave birth to Decadence. Paglia revels in reviving Paganism to consciousness, pronouncing that Judeo-Christianity “never did defeat paganism, which still flourishes in art, eroticism, astrology and pop culture” (preface xiii). Chapter One of Sexual Personae provides the core of her positioning, where she addresses ideas of nature, society, sex, gender and art. Paglia’s foundations for discussing sexuality, nature and society are based in Sade: “aggression comes from nature” (*Sexual Personae* 2). By speaking to Sade, whom she considers grossly unread in the context of western literature, Paglia consciously rejects Rousseau ideals which she sees as foundational to contemporary feminism. One cannot understand Paglia’s other polemics without reference to Sade, who believed that society is an artificial construction, necessary to keep human nature subjugated from the brutal pagan forces of sex and nature (*Sexual Personae* 2). I will often quote Paglia at length, believing that her use of language is integral to her message, rather than providing tidy summations of her work.

For Sade, getting back to nature (the Romantic imperative that still permeates our culture from sex counseling to cereal commercials) would be to give free rein to violence and lust. I agree. Society is not the criminal but the force that which keeps crime in check. When societal controls

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weaken, man's innate cruelty bursts forth. The rapist is created not by bad social influences but by a failure of social conditioning. Feminists, seeking to drive power relations out of sex, have set themselves against nature. Sex *is* power. Identity is power. In western culture, there are no nonexploitative relationships. Everyone has killed in order to live. Nature's universal law of creation from destruction operates in mind as in matter. As Freud, Nietzsche's heir, asserts, identity is conflict. Each generation drives its plow over the bones of the dead. (*Sexual Personae* 2)

Through an examination of Greek and Hellenistic traditions, Paglia aligns woman with nature and man with culture, a major feminist *force de résistance*. Paglia flaunts essential human nature and in the process of reinstating it, affirms a gender hierarchy. Or, as bell hooks puts it: "Paglia makes the female body the site of her insistence on a binary structure of gender difference, particularly in relation to the issue of sexuality, of desire and pleasure" (88). Regarding her nature/culture positioning, Paglia writes,

[t]he identification of woman with nature is the most troubled and troubling term in this historical argument. Was it ever true? Can it still be true? Most feminist readers would disagree, but I think this identification not myth but reality. All the genres of philosophy, science, high art, athletics, and politics were invented by men. But by the Promethean law of conflict and capture, woman has the right to seize what she will and to vie with man on his own terms. Yet there is a limit to what she can alter in herself and in

man's relation to her. Every human being must wrestle with nature. But nature's burden falls more heavily on one sex. With luck, this will not limit woman's achievement, that is, her action in male-created social space.

(*Sexual Personae* 9)

These conservative projections of gender underlie Paglia's arguments on women, feminism, and sex. Accordingly, Paglia suggests that even the anatomical differences between men and women act as metaphors for social achievement: "Here we come to the source of man's cultural achievements, which follow so directly from his singular anatomy" (*Sexual Personae* 19). Waxing rhapsodic, Paglia insists on presenting the sexes as oppositional and hierarchal: "An erection is *a thought* and the orgasm an act of imagination"(20); "Male urination really is a kind of accomplishment, an arc of transcendence. A woman merely waters the ground she stands on. Male urination is a form of commentary" (21); "Man's genital visibility is a source of his scientific desire for external testing, validation, proof. . . .Woman is veiled" (22); "The penis is like an eye or hand, an extension of self reaching outward. But a girl is a sealed vessel that must be broken by force" (23).

Paglia sees contemporary feminism as unable to deal with sex, due to what she perceives as a denial of human nature. Describing nature as "[t]he background from which and against our ideas of God were formed, nature remains the supreme moral problem" (*Sexual Personae* 1). In a slightly more animated tone regarding feminisms' continuing discourse on essentialism/anti-essentialism, Paglia declares: "No one wants to

talk about *nature* now...You mention the mere word 'nature'— '*Essentialism!*' That's it..

What— ? I *mean*— !...It is appalling, the situation now, that you could *think* about talking about sex without thinking about nature" (*Sex, Art, and American Culture* 258 sic). Paglia's issues concerning essentialism appear to stem from her disdain of anything which remotely resembles Lacan, Derrida and, particularly, Foucault: "The elevation of Foucault to guru status by American and British academics is a tale that belongs to the history of cults" (*Sex, Art, and American Culture* 174). Curiously, Paglia seems to think that there has never been a feminist essentialist ethic, dismissing a decade of work by a myriad of feminists including Tania Modleski, Teresa De Lauretis, Diana Fuss and Gayatri Spivack, all of whom discuss strategic uses of essentialism in feminist discourse (Landry and MacLean 150). In fact, Paglia even speaks of meeting Fuss after attending a lecture of hers, yet her seeming ignorance or disregard of the discourse on essentialism/anti-essentialism and the interrelationship of these concepts is inexcusable. Fuss writes, "Anti-essentialist materialists run the risk of too quickly dismissing both biology and psychology as essentializing discourses, often failing to recognize the irreducible essentialism informing their own theorizations" (50). It is not a black and white discourse, although Paglia loves to represent it as such. Paglia's essentialism appears strategic at times, in that her libertarian politics seem to release her from the category of "woman;" when she flippantly remarks that she is not really "a woman," because she has decade by decade acclimatized herself to her sex role (*Sex, Art, and American Culture* 256). But Paglia makes comments like, "No one wants to talk about

nature now. Meanwhile, the entire student population of the world is thinking about nature, the environment, they're thinking globally, but our faculty are off in their little corners talking about social constructionism" (*Sex, Art, and American Culture* 258). Paglia has grossly oversimplified the entire discourse, so that she can make comments like, "It is appalling, the situation now, that you could *think* about talking about sex without talking about nature. That you could claim you are an expert on gender without knowing about hormones! The contempt for science that's going on among humanists is contemptible" (*Sex, Art, and American Culture* 258).

Paglia seldom writes solely about feminism or any other single topic. As in most conversations, she weaves in and out of tangents often providing a colorful backdrop to her original topic. In 1991, Paglia spoke at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) a lecture entitled "Crisis in the American Universities." In this lecture, Paglia clearly stated her position on feminism: "I'm not trying to get rid of feminism. I'm trying to reform it, save it, to bring it into the twenty-first century, in a way that allows the sexes to come together instead of being alienated from each other, that allows sex to be *hot* and not have, like, wet blankets of sermonizing thrown over it" (*Vamps and Tramps* 274).

While honorable in intention, the idea of "reformation" is arguably puritanical and imperialist. Whether it is "civilizing the natives," or reforming the church, it could be said that "saving" feminism is beyond the scope of an individual feminist agenda.

Interestingly, Paglia, Sommers and Roiphe have all stated an intent and wish to "save feminism" from itself. To me this suggests a form of unity and is totalizing, since savior

status, as a metaphor, is indicative of “I am the Way, the Truth and the Light.”

Paglia sees no intellectual grounds as sacred and will target anyone, with sharp criticism and detachment, even those she claims to support such as United States President Clinton. One of her most touted areas of critique is of the American education system, at all levels. She advocates a restructuring of the academy and education curriculum, an example of which is the “abolition of all literary conferences” and the replacement of Women’s Studies and Gender Studies with “Sex Studies.” She despises “dogma” and considers gay activism and “established” feminism to be entrenched in dogmatic thinking: “I hate dogma in any form. I hated it in the Catholic Church and Girl Scout troops of the 1950s and I hate it in gay activism and established feminism today” (*Vamps and Tramps* 102,103-4). Paglia implies that feminism is embedded in rigid, narrow thinking, that has no room for creative insightful discourse.

In the Introduction to her collection of essays, *Vamps and Tramps*, Paglia informs her reader: “I want a revamped feminism. Putting the vamp back means the lady must be a tramp” (ix). As Paglia explains, the English use of “vamp” has its roots in French. It is derived from the noun “avant” to indicate the leather strap of a military boot “the thing that is ‘in the front’” which later became “avant-garde.” The popular usage of “vamp” came to indicate the repairing of an old garment or item with something new. The leap to its later usage in reference to jazz becomes evident: “vamping” or creative improvisation creates energy and excitement (xiii). Currently, “vamp” is technically defined as “a woman who uses her charm or wiles to seduce or exploit men” (*Webster’s*). In this

linguistic context one can see Paglia's vision for feminism; it needs improving, updating and recycling by charming and exploitative women. "Tramp" is used to refer to a stereotypical pre-sixties usage: a sexually free woman, vagrant or whore (x). Paglia summarizes, "Vamps and tramps are Babylonian personae, pagan outcasts. They live again in our bold drag queens and gay hustlers, midnight cowboys of the urban canyons. . . . Female sexuality, freed from Judeo-Christian sequestration, returns to animal nature. The woman 'on the stroll' (streetwalking) is a prowler and predator, self-directed and no one's victim" (x). This statement quite accurately demonstrates much of Paglia's general leanings, specifically towards feminism and women; consider the images that she initially presents— bold drag queens, gay hustlers and midnight cowboys— they are all male. Living in an inner-city, I am constantly aware of the sex trade going on right before my window. The "predator" and autonomous image Paglia presents of "women on the stroll," is not in keeping with the reality of barely teenaged girls being "pimped" while strung-out on heroin. Outside of the cities which patrol the sex trade with the intent of accepting its presence and providing a degree of safety, the street is increasingly a dangerous place for prostitutes.² Paglia's depiction is simply a fantasy. She continually glamorizes homosexuality in men—particularly drag queens— as well as unbridled heterosexual male sexuality, and themes around sexuality such as pornography and prostitution. As in Sexual Personae, she repeatedly speaks to "animal nature," heralding it in straight and gay men in terms of prolific sexuality and criticizing woman's lack of the same. Animal nature to Paglia is evidently infested with aggression, raw sexuality—a

stereotypical andro-centric perception of non-human life. Paglia's overwhelming and recurring theme, or complaint, is that feminism desexualizes woman. Engaging in the virgin/whore opposition is quite powerful, but Paglia seems incapable of describing women in any other context, outside of lesbians whom she characterizes as simply boring (*Vamps and Tramps* 104).

Paglia has delivered harsh criticism on what she sees as "victim feminism," especially on the subject of date rape. Paglia's opinions on date rape, like those of Roiphe's, have provoked many of the attacks on Paglia by other feminists. On the subject of date rape, Paglia asks women to be more responsible, saying in effect, that when a young female university student drinks half a bottle of Tequila, smokes a joint, and invites a freshman male up to her quarters at three AM something is bound to happen. If, upon waking, the female student has vague recollections and is full of regret, the situation does not then constitute a "rape." By no means is Paglia unsympathetic to what she describes as "real" rape, but asks women to understand their own sexuality:

We have *got* to make women realize they are *responsible*, that sexuality is something that belongs to them. They have enormous power in their sexuality. It's up to them to use it correctly and to be wise about where they go and what they do. And I'm being accused of being 'anti-woman' because of this attitude? (*Sex, Art, and American Culture* 267)

Paglia is essentially saying that if women "want it all" in terms of sexual liberties and sexual expression, they also have to be prepared to deal with the real world, the "street"

per se, which to her involves strong male libidinal energy. Continually proselytizing to women that they are victims, or future ones, creates hysteria: "It's very, very bad to convince young women that they have been victims and that their heritage is nothing but victimization. This is another perversion" (*Sex, Art, and American Culture* 274). In reaction to Western society's focus on male sexuality, the male gaze and women as sexual objects, Paglia is seeking continually to re-sexualize women as *active* participants, not merely the erotic prey of men.

For all of Paglia's work on Western culture, she lacks a thorough analysis of issues of race and class. Taking pains to position herself in the debate by laying claim to her own "working-class immigrant" roots, her discourse screams of, "I did it, why can't you!"³ Again, at the M.I.T. lecture, her comments on race, which contextually followed comments on the WASP establishment in Ivy league schools, are as follows: "Now, I'm loud. Did you notice? I'm very loud. I've had a hell of a time in academe. This is why I usually get along with African-Americans. I mean, when we're together, 'Whooo!' It's like I feel totally *myself*-we just let everything go! It's like *energy* " (*Sex, Art and American Culture* 271). Having seen Paglia interviewed, it is not difficult to imagine this feisty, arrogant, hypersonic speaker making these comments. Given the setting, a packed lecture hall, "a stone's throw from Harvard" as she points out in her opening comments, one really must imagine a WASPy audience. At any rate, the reduction of African-Americans to being "loud" and thus claiming this as a basis for connection is without question feeding into racist stereotypes. Whether these comments are thoughtless

rambling or stereotypical affronts, Paglia's representation and treatment of race is problematic. [B]ell hooks for one, takes them as racist. In an essay entitled "Camille Paglia: 'Black' Pagan or White Colonizer?", hooks refers specifically to the above statement and replies, "Throughout her work, Miss Camille unabashedly articulates white cultural imperialist representations of her beloved neoprimitive darkies, sharing tidbits such as "'we don't need Derrida, we have Aretha'" (85). Often boasting of her "Immigrant, Italian-Catholic, working-class roots," Paglia considers her work exempt from racial and class analyses. Because Paglia identifies with many marginalized groups, the concept of "othering" for Jews or African-Americans does not appear to apply to her. Paglia's remarks concerning Jews resemble the very tone of her comments on African-Americans: "Whenever I'm surrounded by Jews I'm happy. . . . My mentors have always been Jews, Harold Bloom and so on, and they're the only ones who can tolerate my personality" (*Sex, Art, and American Culture* 271).⁴ To that extent, her remarks support doris davenport's sentiments from her essay, "The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimmin": "It is apparent that white feminists still perceive us as the "Other," based on a menial or sexual image: as more sensual, but less cerebral; more interesting, perhaps, but less intellectual; and more oppressed, but less political than they are" (86).

Honoring men and eulogizing gay men, women seem to be the target of Paglia's toughest criticism: "Overprotected in the paternalistic past, women have a special obligation to liberate their personae" (xii). It is interesting to note to whom Paglia is

assigning all of the responsibility here: “paternalistic” does not carry the same weight as “oppressive,” and “obligation” connotes a sense of duty or debt to be repaid to another. To “liberate” suggests that women’s “personae” is universally in bondage. And finally the use of the word “personae” is problematic in that a personae is an image, or facade which removes the authenticity of who people are. I concede that we all possess “personae,” how we represent ourselves in myriad of social settings, yet the use of the term here appears overly superficial when it comes to issues of oppression. This preoccupation with “image” per se, the outer aspect of human existence, betrays the lack of seriousness of much of Paglia’s work.

Paglia’s feminism is much like her public personae: bold, aggressive and fearless. At times, one wonders whether she only sees women as weak and deficient: “Women will never succeed at the level or in the numbers they deserve until they get over their genteel reluctance to take abuse in the attack and counterattack of territorial warfare” (xii). These comments are troublesome. There are scores of under-employed women whose “success” or lack of, has little to do with taking “abuse” or in being “genteel.” Her use of military metaphors is not only outdated and unoriginal, but lacks in-depth analysis in terms of the systemic nature of the history of women’s oppression.

“The theme of Vamps and Tramps is wanderlust, the erotic, appetitive mind in free movement” (xiii). One might also add that the theme of *Camille Paglia* is wanderlust, the erotic, appetitive mind in free movement. Her criticism of feminism, as lacking in “sexual personae,” inflicts her 1980s, Madonna-esque, sexual, in-your-face attitude on

everything. Anything that she interprets as puritanical, such as her take on MacKinnon and Dworkin's positions on pornography, is applied directly to the movement or feminism at large. She denies overtly the multiplicity and diversity of feminism, as well as the longstanding and articulate feminist discourse on sexuality which has been alive and well since the late seventies. The anthology Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality arose out of the 1982 conference, at Barnard College in New York City. This conference entitled "The Scholar and the Feminist IX: Towards a Politics of Sexuality," was a clear manifestation of the ongoing tension the topic of sexuality has created among feminists. Feminist viewpoints on sexuality are generally demarcated into two camps: the anti-sex or anti pornography, and the pro-sex, pro-expression positions— although the divisions are sometimes blurred. Carole S. Vance eloquently elucidates the friction arising out of the concepts of pleasure and danger regarding female sexuality. In part, she concludes,

[f]eminism should encourage women to resist not only coercion and victimization, but also sexual ignorance, deprivation and fear of difference. Feminism should support women's experiments and analyses, encouraging the acquisition of knowledge. We can begin by examining our own experience, sharing it with each other, knowing that in sexuality as in the rest of social life, our adventures, risks, impulses, and terrors provide clues to the future. Feminism must insist that women are sexual subjects, sexual actors, sexual agents; that our histories are complex and instructive; that our

experience is not blank, nor a mere repetition of what has been said about us, and that the pleasure we have experienced is as much a guide to future action as the brutality. (24)

Vance in no way presents the puritanical view of sexuality that Paglia accuses feminists of in much of her work. Yet, in the binary opposition of pro- and anti-sex positions that pervade feminist discourse, Paglia clearly is positioned on the extreme end of the continuum of the pro-sex camp, while the New Right in their morality crusades exists, ideologically, at the far right. Speaking in reference to the voices in feminist politics of sex, Vance writes,

Above all, feminism must be a movement that speaks to sexuality, that does not forfeit the field to reactionary groups who are more than willing to speak. We cannot be cowardly pretending that feminism is not sexually radical. Being a sex radical at this time, as in most, is less a matter of what you do, and more a matter of what you are willing to think, entertain, and question. (23)

In light of this, Paglia could be seen as more than willing to push the boundaries to the extreme in terms of sexual expression. However as Landry and MacLean point out, it may be appropriate to consider not only what Paglia is saying but *what she is not* (64-65). Paglia's silence on the history of the sexuality debate and her refusal to cite feminist allies strikes me as not only arrogant and elitist, but disingenuous and exploitative.

Paglia describes herself as a "militant reformer of feminism and academe,

follow[ing] the sixties design of protest and opposition” (xvi). All well and good. The sixties was indeed an interesting historical period, but one is justified in asking where it has got us and whether protest and opposition are iconographic of the sixties, but not necessarily exclusive to them. In terms of feminism, the sixties was a transformative period, but is Paglia glamourizing consciousness-raising, polemics and protest while ignoring the historical development and intellectual project we recognize in present-day feminisms?

Like a wound that itches to be scratched and hurts when you do, it is hard not to be seduced by Paglia. I find that in myself, as I have noticed in other reviewers of Paglia who are either in support or critical of her work, that her influence tends to foster a feistiness in those that write about her. Sue O’Sullivan’s review of Sex, Art, and American Culture in *Feminist Review* is about as colorful as Paglia’s own style. In her review, O’Sullivan writes, “In it [Paglia] expounds *ad infinitum* on her main themes, including the news that rape is one of life’s little miseries, that paganism and astrology are deep and meaningful, that American academia sucks, French intellectuals suck, feminism sucks, lesbianism sucks, Madonna is fabulous and so is PAGLIA” (108). Interestingly, the dominant trend in reviewers of Paglia is often to be so put-off by her pretentiousness, that thoughtful analysis is lacking. O’Sullivan does take pot-shots at Paglia, but she also comes through with thoughtful, substantiated rebuttals. At the outset, O’Sullivan describes Paglia’s writing as “numbingly boring,” “repetitious and tediously predictable” (108). She is frankly baffled by Paglia’s apparent success and popularity.

O'Sullivan lays out her position regarding Paglia, citing all the reasons that she is not opposed to Paglia: her pro-pornography stance, her support of sadomasochism, the fact that she is an academic, loves Madonna, adores gay men and describes herself as a Freudian. On the other hand, O'Sullivan "loathes" Paglia "because of the positions she takes about nature, society, men and women, politics, rape, sexuality, feminism, gay men, and religion;" she even accuses Paglia of a reactionary world-view (109). Basically, O'Sullivan is covering the bulk of Paglia's critical views in this list. Regarding the discussion at hand, O'Sullivan attacks Paglia's feminist politics by saying "Camille is as vacuously reductive in her boring denunciations of 'the feminists' as any feminist has ever been in her denunciation of patriarchy" (110). O'Sullivan ridicules Paglia with a good dose of sarcasm: "[Paglia] is also saving feminism from the spoilsport, whiny, middle-class women's studies' academics and their wussy male counterparts on campuses all over America. Each and every one of these places is apparently in the grip of a sorority of po-faced Lacanian, leftist, liberal, anti-pleasure women" (*sic* 109). As a feminist scholar, this is perhaps one of the most irritating aspects of Paglia. One can almost accept her Freudian leanings, her pontificating about nature and culture and the like. But since Paglia presents herself as an expert in interdisciplinary studies, she sets herself up for criticism, particularly by feminists—who are painfully familiar with a dynamic and fractured feminist cause and who have worked continually to analyze and support feminism with all its contradictions. O'Sullivan is clearly frustrated by Paglia's naturalist leanings, claiming that this parading of woman and nature is only substantiated

by Paglia's mid-life discovery that *she too* is affected by hormones. So, while women are relegated a "maternal fate," conversely, "male lust," is the "energizing factor in culture" (O'Sullivan 110). O'Sullivan denounces Paglia's self-described libertarianism, instead proclaiming Paglia "transparently a libertarian conservative," based in, I would surmise, her extreme individualism meshed with her essentialist or nature/culture positioning of the sexes (109).

Much of Paglia's writing walks the edge of the vulgar and profane. It tends to reflect the nineteen-eighties mentality of shock value with which we have been inundated in films and images. Sexuality, sex, style and passion are often at the forefront of Paglia's ideas. I do not recall a time when feminists or feminism were ever as sexy as Paglia would have us believe. In fact one might go as far as to say that popular mainstream and academic feminisms in a traditional sense had, as one of its aims, the goal to de-objectify women as purely sexual beings. Perhaps this contradiction in Paglia's feminism is worthwhile to consider. The essentialist theme in Paglia's work points to women as sexual beings. Practically speaking, she is asking women to understand the power of their sexuality and be accountable, as I noted in her comments on date rape. Sexual Personae is a dramatic example of Paglia's sexual politics, reviving Paganism in terms of situating it in the forefront of art and popular culture. The theme of sex in Paglia's feminism is, in part, due to her critique of feminist aesthetics. Claiming that feminists reject the notion of beauty due to its perceived role in objectifying women is fundamental to Paglia's critique of feminism: "We should not have to apologize for

reveling in beauty. Beauty is an eternal human value. It was not a trick invented by some nasty men in a room someplace on Madison Avenue. I say in *Sexual Personae* that it was invented in Egypt. For 3,000 years at the height of African civilization you had a culture based on beauty” (*Sex, Art, and American Culture* 264). Paglia writes how the historic revolts against beauty, of the late sixties and early seventies, was due to the burden that had been placed on women to conform to beauty standards. Paglia argues that “[a]round 1980 you felt the culture changing. And women of my generation began to recover the language and the historical paraphernalia of female sexuality. . . .So I think what’s happened is that the culture has changed and moved backward toward beauty and recovered beauty, while feminist ideology has not” (*Sex, Art, and American Culture* 286). In essence, one could say that much of Paglia’s talk of sex is intended to excite and provoke, and while sustaining a liberal view of sexuality, Paglia is asking feminists to get off the social constructionist band-wagon pertaining to sexuality and *live it* instead. Paglia seems somewhat out of touch with the workings of popular culture here, since the eighties and early nineties definitely witnessed the style of “grunge,” initially set forth by the alternative music movement. Paglia adores popular culture as the high art of her time, yet grunge, which widely influenced fashion— consider the surge in Doc Marten shoe sales— actually desexualized and mocked “beauty” in conventional women’s fashion while promoting an alternative sense of beauty. While women of “her generation” may not have embraced this fashion fad, and the implications for feminism is beyond the scope of this project, it still warrants note.

Paglia's views are outrageous, but their influence in the popular domain means they need to be addressed, as opposed to simply sweeping them out of the way or denying their existence. Academic feminists have begun to respond to Paglia quite directly. A strong and noteworthy example being bell hooks:

Sadly, radical/revolutionary feminist thinkers have been unable to intervene strategically and alter the public understanding of feminism that audiences receive from the messages of Paglia. Such an intervention is necessary. Paglia would never have been able to publicly cast herself as feminist activist, even with the support of the male-dominated mass media, if there had existed an organized radical/revolutionary feminist movement. (87)

[H]ooks suggests that there are reasons this game works for Paglia. First, Paglia's criticisms of feminism are really appropriately cast only on conservative feminists.

[H]ooks says, "She calls out the conservative crowd, the antimale, antisex, close-your-skirts-and-cross-your-legs, gender-equality-with-men-of-their-class, reformist, professional girls she knew up close and personal" (86). This comment would also apply to Katie Roiphe and Christina Hoff Sommers. Furthermore, the mass-media, according to hooks, has presented conservative feminist thought as representative in feminism, and thus it becomes an easy target (86). Finally, hooks reflects that although feminism does have spokespersons, teachers and mentors who "educate for critical consciousness, teaching feminist thought and practice, we have lost an organized base from which to project revolutionary agendas" (87).

Whatever one's opinion of Paglia's politics, one might say that her real triumph is in being heard. The problem with Paglia is that she continually speaks as the lone voice in the wilderness. Her libertarianism inundates her work; as opposed to merely espousing extreme individualism, it is deployed in her critique of feminism, for example, to suggest that she is the *one and only one* approaching the issues with an insightful, prescriptive criticism. Nevertheless, Paglia undeniably comes across as ignorant of the continuing discourse in feminism. The question as to whether this is a strategy employed in order to appear to the masses as original, as opposed to a willful blindness of the continual work of feminists inside and outside of the academy is becoming clearer. As O'Sullivan says, if Paglia acknowledged the multiplicity of feminism, "she couldn't make the outrageous statements which send the press and anti-feminists into paroxysms of joy" (110). Paglia's disregard and disdain for deconstructionists and by association, postmodern feminists, may be at the core of how she positions herself. After all, in the context of a destabilized postmodern feminism, Paglia's critique of feminism becomes increasingly benign.

In 1997, the waters are as muddy as they ever could be regarding an "identity" for feminism. It is not out of a nostalgic desire for a monolithic concept of feminism that I say this, but from the fact that it is increasingly difficult to even identify oneself as a feminist without a protracted explanation of one's politics. If asked what religion you subscribe to, it is relatively easy to say "Catholic" or "lapsed Catholic," both have a particular meaning. Even the more vague, New Age or Pagan constructions are identifiable with some recognizable concept.

Referring to the proliferation of books on the market on feminism's excesses and failures by self-described feminists, the editor of a homepage on feminism wishes facetiously, "[m]aybe its time for some organization to claim feminism as its own intellectual property. Patent it, trademark it, license it, but most importantly, clearly define what feminism actually is today. Then we could just look for a feminist seal of approval on any new book on feminism" (Roby 1). While mildly interesting, this type of attitude belittles the impact of the academy, specifically the influence of postmodernism and poststructuralist discourse on feminism. Landry and MacLean in Materialist Feminisms define "overdetermination" as describing "how things don't have a single or a simple cause" (4). To reduce feminism to a tidy package, easily identifiable and compartmentalized disregards the convolution of the interaction and interrelation of feminism to the structures and forms that continually impact on it as an ideology. The heterogeneous and morphing nature of feminism not only reveals this complexity, but also points to it.

Twentieth-century feminism has seen many new informants. I have limited my discussion so far to three "dissident" views. My disappointment is that Paglia, Sommers and Roiphe have presented their views as *original*, as the voice of reason in an unreasonable moment in history. The reality of the situation is that academics, working in the academy, speaking at conferences, and interacting with students, have spoken to the identity crisis in feminism before these "dissident" views were even published. In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway talks about the diversity within feminism:

It has become difficult to name one's feminism by a single adjective-or even to insist in every circumstance upon the noun. Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute. Identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic. With the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for the belief in 'essential' unity. There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. . . . Painful fragmentation among feminists (not to mention among women) along every fault line has made the concept of *woman* elusive, an excuse for the matrix of dominations of each other. (155)

'Unity,' per se, is no longer a goal of feminism, nor has it been one since women of color and lesbians pointed out the exclusionary nature of the women's movement during the second wave. The women's movement has reached a critical mass; contestation, struggle, even confrontation are not only expected, but are useful in order for feminism to continue to evolve. The fracturing of feminism (meaning that its identity is dynamic, contextual and evolving) dismisses the idea of dissent. Dissident feminists presuppose the concept of unity or group consensus. While we might lament the loss of a potent feminism linguistically, what has been gained is much richer, denser and ultimately includes a larger feminist constituency.

The most significant problem with these "dissident" views is the failure to see feminism as on a continuum, as a word used to describe a wide array of positions. The danger of these texts is that while they appear to understand the ramifications of their

work, they have gratuitously provided the “right wing” with increasing grounds on which to criticize feminism as a whole. To many, and these books, marketed to mass-appeal, gender feminist or dissident feminist views will merely read as “feminist.”

I have alluded to some of the contradictions that are evident in contemporary feminist works. I use the broad term “feminist works” to include works of popular best-selling authors like Paglia, as well as academic offerings. While popular works on feminism tend to position themselves in more direct ways (ie. name-calling in the style of “I’m a real feminist, you’re not”), but academic feminists effectively critique one another in a very similar but more sophisticated and impersonal fashion. Landry and MacLean, writing from a academic standpoint, describe this situation with clarity, situating themselves within the discourse at hand:

Differences within feminism can take on a peculiarly agonistic quality because they contravene the concept of sisterhood. How can ‘we’ be united against ‘patriarchy’ and ‘capital’ if each of these terms is subject to problematization and to respectification in different concrete situations, different material contexts? How can nonsynchronous, sometimes intersecting, sometimes contradictory forms of oppression and self-representation be articulated? Hence the language of multiple and mobile subject positions, and of situated discourses within a postcolonial and global context. (54)

Landry and MacLean follow this thread using the academic institution as an example of

where, in relation to feminism, the differences that permeate ideology in feminist discourse, translate into rivalry and competition for academic rewards, status, promotion and the like:

Rather than political debate, and the possibility of working through differences collectively, boundaries are established, positions are consolidated and replicated defensively, and gate-keeping and policing are institutionalized. Since policing has its origins in the defence of private property, the policing of feminism frequently takes the forms of claims to ownership of the purest feminist praxis. (54)

This policing is alive and well within the myriad of feminisms, particularly in the current field of writers that I have been discussing. It is dismaying at the very least to try and make sense of the competing critiques of feminism. How it appears to me is that, in most cases, there is a presentation of an “authentic feminism” in each case, a “true,” or “original,” feminism. Evidently, the force of argument is often more a product of one’s self-confidence or arrogance if you will, “to speak one’s truth,” and not necessarily located in the argument itself. Perhaps, these “authentic” representations of feminism would better be described as “singular,” a quest for a return to a monolithic feminist ideology. Critiques of racism, for example, provide an explanation as to why a monolithic feminism is a problem. In “La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness,” Gloria Anzaldúa speaks to the possibilities when she writes,

En unas pocas centurias, the future will belong to mestiza. [*mestiza*, refers

to a consciousness of the Borderlands, a dual or multiple personality plagued by physic restlessness, a dilemma of mixing]. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos— that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, by the way we see ourselves and the ways we behave— *la mestiza* creates a new consciousness” (379).

Interestingly, the issues facing contemporary feminism are not “new.” As Anzaldúa suggests, the strength in feminism may be in embracing its contradictions.

Hence, Paglia, Sommers and Roiphe are actually useful to feminism. Much of what they are speaking to is already mirrored in academic feminist literature; they have merely redressed the issues and concerns in feminism and brought it to mass attention. They corporately demonstrate that an individualist interpretation of feminism fails in melding the personal and political for feminism as a movement. However, focussing only on the shortcomings of feminism pushes all of the responsibility on women; women have created this situation, therefore they are to blame. These types of analyses fail to consider the systemic nature of oppression. Coupled with the strategic location of their arguments, the popular press, this means that they should not be avoided but rather responded to. Are they really anti-feminist? Not really. The feminist cause may be momentarily hindered by these outspoken and critical feminists, but unless the academic establishment wishes to return to a more monolithic conception of feminism, the fracturous voices within and around feminism must be, at the very least, acknowledged.

Endnotes

1. I recently subscribed to a "Paglia discussion group" on the Internet. Paglia herself credits the "Internet," speedy information access and communication for the success of Sexual Personae. My original purpose for subscribing to this list was to get a sense on how "probable" admirers would describe Paglia. One thing is abundantly clear: Paglia has a following—love her or hate her—people talk about her. For a period of weeks I was a "silent lurker," a voyeur of sorts—sitting alone and reading peoples' conversations. The shocking but not really surprising fact is that the vast majority of the participants are male, or at least they claim to be. The talk has little to do with Paglia—it is a group of Paglia wannabes. Lots of intellectual muscle flexing or mental masturbation, if you will. Some of its members, despite their obvious intellectual vigor of sorts seem not even to like women. Inflammatory remarks, superlatives and creative adjectival use abound. Following are two examples taken from the Paglia-L archives@listserv.aol.com. It is important to note that these comments are responses to "threads" of topics that weave into back and forth discussions. So while some of the comments will be entirely out of context, one can gain a sense of the type of discourse that I speak to. I have edited messages for length.

Subject: Re: Female Genius
From: Kevin Solway
Date: Tue, 14 Jan
1997 17:41:51 + 1100
Mailing List: PAGLIA-L@listserv.aol.com

FF wrote:

"One of Paglia's mainstays is the notion of sexual allure as power, not submission."

"Firstly, the central part of a woman's sexual allure is her submissiveness-not to man but to Nature. No woman is a virgin-she is externally impregnated by her environment. Woman's sexual allure has as much power over me as do the flowers outside in the garden-which is not much."

"As an outside, years ago I was good friends with a French woman aesthete (hey, Kevin: she had a PhD in analytical philosophy from the Sorbonne; they must have given it to her for her cheekbones)" (sic).

"Men don't go to Universities. Feminine people are given PhD's because there's no-one else to give them to" (sic).

"Straight people often claim to see it *only* in the opposite gender [speaking of beauty], while in my experience the majority of lesbians can take or leave Men as a physical species, while gay men *speak* of female beauty as an abstract ideal, while often neglecting it in tactile human form."

"I must agree with you here. *All* people find women beautiful. Both men's and women's magazines are full of pictures of women in various states of undress, and gay men are very

much attracted to femininity in other men.”

“This is because I believe femininity (unconsciousness) is the lowest common denominator. We all have femininity within us so we can all relate to it and are to some degree at home with it. Masculinity (consciousness), by contrast is something much more recently evolved and difficult to cope with. It is very much a spanner in the works which gets in the way of simple enjoyments....”

Subject: GOODBYE

From: erik bloom

Date: Tue, 28 Jan 1997 13:34:06 -0800

Mailing List: PAGLIA-L@listserv.aol.com

“If my subject was blunt enough to grab anyone’s attention, then I would like to bid you all adieu, at least for now....Sorry I haven’t contributed to the conversation for the past weeks, but to be honest I neither had the time nor the interest — do you realize how long you have gone back and forth on the homosexual thing for example?....This leads me to some parting thoughts on Ms. Paglia. Marvelous woman, but one wonders while in the womb if she kicked anytime her mother tried to finish a sentence. The best that might be said of her is that she gave a clear and LOUD voice to a way of thinking and critically seeing that those in the university had all but silenced by pompous and short-sighted decree. A group of academics had decided unilaterally that the debate, the discussion was over. Anyone who played outside the boundaries was condemned as being equivalent to the worst of reactionaries. It was, in the indiscriminateness of judgement which is their downfall (sic). At their worst they are nothing more than McCarthyites for their own cause. I reiterate this now familiar tale to recognize her importance as I now see her deep and abiding flaws. I’ll just hint at what I mean.”

“First, an assumption of hers that has never been challenged here, is that nature is identified with the female, and therefore everything male is in opposition to nature, if not completely Other. She resorts to mythology to back up and demonstrate this physical “truth.” Yet, as a professed lover of everything Egyptian she conveniently forgot, edited out, or willfully perverted a significant dimension of their mythology. Namely, Ra and Isis, respectively the male sun-god, sky-father and moon-goddess, earth-mother, have counterparts of the opposite gender, Nut and Geb. Because, Geb is usually depicted lying on the ground with erect phallus pointing towards the stars of Nut, he is not therefore fleeing the earth, a longing arising from the earth, not to meet some abstract male principle, but consummate with sky-mother, which is the apotheosis of the initiate. Here the universe itself, nature, is made divine by the informing principal of all the gods in resonance with each other. There is a story that when Plato visited Egypt he was told that the Greeks were only children. And much of their mythology reflects that, as glorious as it is. When swallowed too rigidly, that is making their imaginative limitations our own, when we judge a particular state of being, psychology, whatever, as the only one, as the truth (sic)....”

2. Here I am specifically thinking of cities like Amsterdam where prostitution is regulated, and women are able to stay off the streets and have their clients come to them in a space they control.

3. To be clear, Paglia does position herself in terms of an immigrant Italian-Catholic working-class family. According to a September 1992 *Vanity Fair* interview, her father was a professor of Romance languages, Paglia herself received a PhD from Yale.

4. Images, particularly when they are contrived, speak volumes. A September 1992 *Vanity Fair* feature on Paglia contained a two page photograph of Paglia between two beautiful, black men. She was leaning over, with her arms over their shoulders, flashing painted fingernails, complete with some serious cleavage. As Paglia grinned into the camera, her two bodyguards—whom she calls “her centurions,” clad in revealing muscle shirts and various necklaces and earrings, unemotionally look into to the far distant left and right. An interesting and provocative image.

CHAPTER FOUR

Camille Paglia: Modernist in Postmodern Attire

Anti-feminist feminist might adequately describe Camille Paglia, a contradiction of sorts. Heretofore, I have argued the importance of acknowledging the current tangent of popular mainstream feminist discourse which is critical of feminism. This chapter will demonstrate some of the theoretical tools provided by postmodern theory that foreground the contradictions in Paglia's work and the usefulness of deploying postmodernism as a strategy for feminism.

Feminism, as I have been arguing, has come to be characterized by its diverse positions. The phrase, "the fracturing of feminism," connotes a less embracing attitude in the context of feminism, than the concepts of multiplicity, diversity, or difference, the terms often employed to demarcate the postmodern (Best 4). To me fracturing suggests exactly what the visual image of splintering wood represents, or the breaking of a limb: pain, force and damage. The second wave of feminism promoted terms like socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, liberal feminism, and radical feminism. At present, we see anti-feminist, faux feminist, and postfeminist. We should notice how the newer prefixes are most commonly applicable and used in conjunction with singular or individual references to feminist. As opposed to signaling the influences of ideologies, such as Marxism, the prefixes "faux," "anti" and "post," enact a fracture of the primary concept of feminism. For example, "faux" identifies artificiality which undermines feminism, "anti" connotes a contradictory attitude, and "post" demonstrates a superceding of the goals of

feminism.

This chapter will further explore popular feminist discourse and the ongoing theme of a crisis within feminism. Engaging in the discourses of feminism and postmodernism, I will use postmodernism as an explanatory device to explain the fracturing of feminism, in order to recast the work of Camille Paglia. To do so, I demonstrate the influence and relevance of the growing ascendancy of popular culture in Western society and how this is elucidated by a postmodern analysis. Furthermore, I will briefly discuss the relationship of the academy in a postmodern age to the social movement of feminism; how they are informing one another; as well, I will discuss the phenomenon and impact of the institutionalization and commodification of feminism. I propose that the relationship between feminism and academia has lost its potency and therefore, perhaps, frustrated with academia, authors like Paglia are choosing to publish in a venue, less directly critical in terms of peer review, but more available to a broader audience. While Paglia is not a representative sample per se, of popular feminism, I choose her not only for her provocation, but because she challenged me. This challenge, it seems to me, is part of and is indicative of the fracturing of feminism and needs to be incorporated by academics, as well as the general reader, if feminism is to turn such fracturing into a productive and postmodern challenging of metanarratives. Finally, this chapter will review the aforementioned concepts of anti-feminist and postfeminist, specifically in light of how they are used in reference to the individuals who have informed this project, in an effort to decipher the latest feminist rhetoric.

Postmodernism and the language of the “postmodern” were initially best known and described in architecture and popular culture. It is in these sites that postmodernism is most easily identified and possibly least contested (Strinati 228-229; Connor vii). Dominic Strinati suggests that popular culture, mass media, and architecture provide an “empirical identification” of postmodernism in contemporary society (223). The preceding chapters have discussed several prominent feminists critically discussing feminism in a popular context. Since critics of feminism like Camille Paglia often couch their work in the symbolism of popular culture, the consideration of popular culture and the postmodern interpretation of it are important to this discussion. In “The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture,” Gamman and Marshment provide a provisional definition of popular culture:

Popular culture is a site of struggle, where many of these meanings (of the power struggles over the meanings which are formed and circulate in society) are determined and debated. It is not enough to dismiss popular culture as merely serving the complementary systems of capitalism and patriarchy, peddling ‘false consciousness’ to the duped masses. It can also be seen as a site where meanings are contested and where dominant ideologies can be disturbed. Between the market and the ideologues, the financiers and the producers, the directors and the actors, the publishers and the writers, capitalists and workers, women and men, heterosexual and homosexual, black and white, old and young— between what things mean,

and how they mean, is a perpetual struggle for control. (quoted in Strinati 216)

Strinati follows that this struggle is manifested in the form of “the emergence of ‘populist’ analyses based on the notion of the recipient of popular culture as an ‘active reader’ or ‘subversive consumer’”(216). Assuming, by Paglia's critique of feminism, that she views feminism as in danger of being driven by dominant ideologies, popular culture, when viewed in the context of Strinati, is an appropriate place to engage in contesting feminism. Popular culture, when linked to a powerful mass media, has resulted in the increasing “commercialisation of culture,” symbolizing a new theocracy (Strinati 2). Here I am appropriating Strinati’s interpretation of postmodernism in Western society in terms of his explanation of how popular culture and mass media have come to determine and mediate “all other forms of social relationships” (224). Thus, it becomes apparent why authors like Paglia have come to publish their work outside of traditional academic circles, for herein rests a site of power, a compelling medium in which to present an inspired or subversive message. Evidently, academia, or the “usual” site of discourse for academics does not offer or hold the same access to power. This does not suggest a critical attack on Paglia for one, for participating in a “power play” via the mainstream media and press. At present to have a voice in the muddled 500-channel universe is a feat in itself. Paglia’s provocative, sex-drenched rhetoric may actually inspire greater dialogue among feminists inside and outside the academy. Notwithstanding the political or cultural paradigms as represented in Paglia’s or

Sommers' work, the major issue of concern for me arises in their seeming lack of any commitment or concern for feminism on a social and political activist level. This is a criticism often levied against academic feminism, yet it can also be assigned to the work of many popular critics of feminism whose lack of commitment to the movement that feminism embodies, divorces them from the real conditions of women's lives, particularly in reference to the concept of social transformation. Leola Johnson writes that these authors who are "critical of the feminist project," or those who are, as she says, replacing Phyllis Schlafly as "this decade's most visible anti-feminists" are, through their individualist politics, "render[ing] invisible the collective nature of feminist struggle" (713).

An important question at this point, then, is what role, responsibility, or input the academy might have in regard to this dynamic. Heretofore, I suggested that the growing number of academic and non-academic feminists turning to the popular press and media to work through their concerns regarding feminism reflected a growing frustration with the effectiveness of the academy as a conduit for criticisms of and reflections on feminism. In Chapter Three, in the context of Paglia, I reflected on how feminist scholars claimed that these public criticisms of feminism acted to "undermine the cultural authority of feminist scholarship" (McDermott 671). Yet, moving outside of the academic arena, an obvious point is that these authors might also be serving public interest by *creating* public interest. Consider that the popular press is a corporate commercial vehicle, and as such, the regulation and control of it is subject to the

economic viability of its ventures. This says nothing of the content of published works, or whether academic feminists agree or disagree with the dissemination of popular feminist critiques. The economic viability of these projects, which reflects the growing consumption of feminist discourse as a currently strong commodity, irrespective of the scholarly interpretation of these works in terms of where they sit on the spectrum of feminisms, betrays much of the rhetoric of the supposed waning interest in feminism. As Deborah Rhodes says, "Many women have access to the women's movement only in the terms that the press provides. If we are to realize feminism's potential, feminists need a greater voice in shaping its public image"(705).

As discussed in Chapter One, the academy has had a profound influence on feminism since the introduction and evolution of Women's Studies programs. In fact it is common to indict the academy for the institutionalization and commodification of feminism. Concerns of institutionalization and commodification seem to loom large in the context of the academy, but are deflated when one considers the relative influence of the academy. Landry and MacLean write, "the US academy continues to be a site of incomparable privilege and possibility, perhaps as a direct index of its intellectual marginality in relation to mainstream culture" (48). Moreover, Landry and MacLean suggest that the commodification of feminism should not be so surprising, "because the commodification of cultural developments is inevitable within capitalist societies." Continuing, they write, "Rather than declaim against consumer society, we see new forms of consumer practices as potentially new sites of political activity" (50). To clarify

regarding how commodification affects feminism, Landry and MacLean use Marx's notion of the commodity composed of use-value and exchange-value. Feminism's use-value is epitomized in the freedom and power that women have found or what it represents in their lives. Academic feminism's use-value is the impact of feminism on social and cultural institutions and changes brought about by the women's movement over the last thirty years (Landry and MacLean 51). According to Landry and MacLean, it is feminism's exchange-value that is focused upon in discussions of the academy. They cite the exchange of "women and theories" to be precise, which mutates into more concrete and material privileges in the academy complicated by the process of competition for promotions, research and publishing monies. Furthermore, Landry and MacLean suggest that these material pressures and concerns ultimately influence the trading of ideas and thus produce some of the dynamics of an imperialist style of feminist behavior. Thus the conflicts which often characterize feminism are a result of this commodification, a protection of one's "turf":

Rather than political debate, and the possibility of working through differences collectively, boundaries are established, positions are consolidated and replicated defensively, and gate-keeping and policing are institutionalized. Since policing has its origins in the defense of private property, the policing of feminism frequently takes the form of claims of ownership of the purest feminist praxis. (Landry and MacLean 54)

This begins to explain the adversarial attitude toward individuals, particularly scholars

like Paglia and Sommers, who pay no heed to the policing within the academy or elsewhere. Ironically, Sommers does speak to it in reference to her colleague, Camille Paglia:

Perhaps the most conspicuous target of feminist opprobrium is Camille Paglia, who managed to confound her attackers by striking back publicly and to great effect. After her book *Sexual Personae* became an unexpected best-seller but also was hailed by a number of scholarly critics, she could reasonably have expected to be acknowledged as an outstanding woman scholar even by those who take strong exceptions to her unfashionable views. . . . But the *Women's Review of Books* branded *Sexual Personae* a work of 'crackpot extremism,' 'an apologia for a new post-Cold War fascism,' patriarchy's 'counter-assault' on feminism. (133)

For added effect, Sommers also repeats the comments of Paglia's mentor and ardent supporter Harold Bloom:

Yale professor Harold Bloom has pointed out that "someone as brilliant, as learned, as talented, and as ferociously burning an intellect as Camille Paglia" belongs in the Ivy League or at someplace like the University of Chicago. But the "bureaucrats of resentment who are appointed by others in the network because they are politically correct" will continue to do their utmost to make sure that this does not happen. "They will continue to blackball her everywhere." (133)

Sommers presents Paglia as marginalized in the academy for her controversial works which, according to her best-seller status, have a strong populist following. This is an incredible dynamic: Paglia and Sommers are academic feminists who declare themselves as reformers and saviors of feminism through their critiques of feminism; academic feminists ignore them or make reference to them not as saviors, but as “anti-feminists”; and Sommers makes claims of discrimination within the academy. Thereby, as comic as it appears—like a playground battle of the wills—this situation demonstrates ideological hegemonic confrontations spilling over the walls of the ivory tower. Is this situation *caused by or explained by* the influence of postmodernism in the academy?

Postmodernism has become an important concept in academic scholarship. Similar to the signifier “feminism,” postmodernism has no agreed upon singular meaning. My understanding of postmodernism, as used here, is embedded in postmodern theory’s rejection of the organizing principles used in the enlightenment discourse of modernity, specifically in claims of objectivity, universality, and totalizing theory¹ (Nicholson 2-4; Best and Kellner 3-5). On defining postmodernism, Linda Nicholson remarks, “[P]ostmodernism must reject a description of itself as embodying a set of timeless ideals contrary to those of modernism; it must insist on being recognized as a set of viewpoints of a time, justifiable only within its own time. By doing so, of course, it opens itself up to objections by feminists and others as being potentially dangerous for our times” (11). Dangerous because of what Jane Flax outlines “as [the] lack [of] proper appreciation of the role of memory, of history, and of those forces which form relatively ‘core’ aspects of

our personality” (quoted in Best and Kellner 211). Others have spoken of the lurking danger that postmodernism poses for feminism, yet Michèle Barrett in her introduction to the 1988 edition of Women’s Oppression Today describes postmodernism as much more benign than how it is often portrayed in a feminist context: “Post-modernism is not something that you can be for or against: the reiteration of old knowledges will not make it vanish. For it is a cultural climate as well as an intellectual position, a political reality as well as an academic fashion” (xxxiv).² This cultural climate, or intellectual position, is referred to by Landry and MacLean as “the postmodern condition,” a phrase aptly taken from the title of the formative work of Jean-François Lyotard. For my purposes, Lyotard’s much cited characterization of postmodernism is quite suitable: “the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. . . .Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives” (quoted in Landry and MacLean 7). The social and political usefulness of postmodernism to feminism is glaringly evident in this context, since it is the metanarratives of feminism which this thesis is foremost interested in questioning. Therefore my understanding is couched in Landry and MacLean’s theme that postmodernism “need not end in a complete paralysis of political criticism and action, as sometimes has been claimed. The skepticism towards grand political projects, totalizing theories, and great synthetic narratives characteristic of postmodern or poststructuralist thinking may well prove indispensable for any radical democratic politics” (1). Jennifer Wicke and Margaret Ferguson introduce postmodernism and feminism by saying,

The feminism practiced, theorized, and lived by many women (and men) today is set against, or arises within, the vicissitudes of a transforming postmodernity—as a set of practices, an arena of theory, and a mode of life. . . .Postmodernism is, indeed, a name for the way we live now, and it needs to be taken account of, put into practice, and even contested within feminist discourses as a way of coming to terms with our lived situations. (1)

Therefore, as opposed to debating all the problematics of postmodernism, I am assuming its constructive presence within feminist discourse. I also use it to come to terms with my own interpretation of contemporary feminism. Wicke and Ferguson propose that postmodern feminism can be used as a style of commentary “an aesthetics of analysis capable of using postmodern theory as a feminist power tool” (5). While I will refer to some of the lively discourse, it is not the function of this thesis to engage at length on the politics of postmodernism. Postmodernism, in and of itself, poses a quandary of sorts for the feminist project. Its presence as an ideology, a cultural moment, or passing fashionable discourse has been discussed at length by scholars from several disciplines. To be clear, I am not proposing a blind acceptance of postmodernism, but in the style of Landry and MacLean, feel that its uses for feminism can be strategic (9). Steven Best and Douglas Kellner usefully point out the broad range of meaning attributed to postmodernism. They write “there is no unified postmodern theory, or even a set of positions. Rather one is struck by the diversities between theories often lumped together as ‘postmodern’ and the plurality — often conflictual — of postmodern positions” (2).

Nevertheless Best and Kellner provide a partial and provisional "definition" of postmodernism that I wish to take up:

postmodern theory provides a critique of representation and the modern belief that theory mirrors reality, taking instead 'perspectivist' and 'relativist' positions that theories at best provide partial perspectives on their objects, and that all cognitive representations of the world are historically and linguistically mediated. . . . Postmodern theory also rejects modern assumptions of social coherence and notions of causality in favour of multiplicity, plurality, fragmentation, and indeterminacy. In addition, postmodern theory abandons the rational and unified subject postulated by much modern theory in favour of a socially and linguistically decentred and fragmented subject. (4-5)

I am suggesting that postmodernism with its valorization of multiplicity provides, not only a tool as Wicke and Ferguson suggest, but a strategy with which to characterize the present situation of *feminisms*. Specifically, in the context of writers like Paglia and myself, I believe that a postmodern strategy allows me to interpret the contradictory impulses in her work. Moreover, and ironically, postmodernism also accounts for the fractures in academic and popular mainstream feminism.

In the hue of a postmodern moment, Paglia's work takes on a decidedly different glow. Wicke and Ferguson interpret Paglia as "adopt[ing] something like a postmodern anti-feminism with strong individualist overtones" which are evident in her libertarian

politics (6). They follow, “Camille Paglia is an admitted thorn in the side of feminism, but she can be, perhaps, a goad for a feminist postmodernism able to harness the flamboyant, and potentially liberatory, fantasies the imagistic world of the postmodern sets free” (Wicke and Ferguson 7). Paglia’s major media and popular press successes are perhaps due in part to the postmodern condition itself. In using the term “postmodern condition,” I am speaking specifically of a cultural and social climate; Strinati claims that in analyzing modern society, mass media and popular culture, a postmodern condition can be identified. Accordingly, I will briefly summarize Strinati’s main points. Strinati describes postmodernism’s influence in modern society as the emergence of a “media-saturated society,” which has a tremendous influence on how social reality is created and mediates social relationships; a society where “images dominate narrative;” where “consumption is bound up with popular culture because popular culture increasingly determines consumption;” where “style,” “image,” and “signs” gain disproportionate value over content, substance and meaning. In this society, there is increased blurring of culture. Finally, postmodernism is characterized by the decline of metanarratives, thus it rejects the claims of any theory to absolute knowledge (223-228).

It is revealing to reiterate that Paglia has little time for poststructuralism, the critical discourse that most informs theorizations of postmodernism; this is evident in her dismissive attitude to Lacan, Derrida and Foucault (*Vamps and Tramps* xvii; *Sex, Art and American Culture* ix). Paglia is clearly modernist in her linear representation of history, use of historical metanarratives, and emphasis on sexual difference as the etiology of

women's oppression. However I would argue that Paglia's work is part of the postmodern condition, as is evident in her worship of popular culture, the power popular culture represents and in the style of her delivery. Paglia's postmodern personae is also evident in comments she made in conversation with Neil Postman in the Harper's article entitled "She Wants her TV! He Wants His Book!": "When I wrote my book, I had earphones on, blasting rock music or Puccini and Brahms. The soap operas—with the sound turned down—flickered on the TV. I'd be talking on the phone at the same time" (47). These contradictions situate Paglia as postmodern and, just as postmodernism cannot escape its relationship with the modern, Paglia is thoroughly situated in modernist tendencies while appearing undeniably postmodern.³ Strinati suggests that one element of postmodernism "is that in a postmodern world, surfaces and style become more important, and evoke in their turn a kind of 'designer ideology'" (225). As discussed in Chapter Three, Paglia adores the sexual personae of drag-queens, eschews it in lesbians, and revels in her new media-inspired image, so much so, as to reprint media clips and parodic cartoons in appendices to Vamps and Tramps and Sex, Art and American Culture; they are entitled "A Media Chronicle," "A Media History," "Cartoon Personae," and "Profiles, Interviews, Debates, Exotica." Consider Paglia's declaration of Madonna as "*the* true feminist;" an entertainer who is iconic for her constant flux in image, style and brilliant self-promotion (my italics, 4 *Sex, Art and American Culture*). From Paglia's Introduction to Sex Art and American Culture:

Popular culture is my passion. It created Sixties imagination. I define pop

culture as an eruption of the never defeated paganism of the West. Its brazen aggression and pornographic sexuality are at odds with current feminism, whose public proponents are in a reactionary phase of hysterical moralism and prudery, like that of the Temperance movement a century ago. (vii)

These comments beautifully illustrate Strinati's empirical demonstrations of postmodernism. In the context of feminist discourse, there are few personalities who better embody a postmodernist phenomenon than Paglia.

On the other hand, in terms of postmodern theory, of which the decline of metanarratives is a salient feature, both Paglia and Sommers inadvertently suggest a return to a more unified, monolithic feminism; this is evident in their attitudes regarding the problems within and remedies for contemporary feminism. Again, this demonstrates postmodernist contradictions, in the case of Paglia specifically, a conflict emerges in Paglia's postmodern personae and her modernist, nostalgic notions of "saving" contemporary popular feminism. However, it is in the feminisms in the academy where postmodernism can actively empower feminism by providing the potential and tools to reexamine "the multiple sites of feminism" (Wicke and Ferguson 7). It is tempting to view postmodernism only in terms of what it offers feminism. In "Social Criticism without Philosophy," Fraser and Nicholson assert "that an encounter between feminism and postmodernism will initially be a trading of criticisms" (20). The relationship is more reciprocal than often assumed. "A postmodernist reflection on feminist theory reveals

disturbing vestiges of essentialism while a feminist reflection on postmodernism reveals androcentrism and political naivete” (Fraser and Nicholson 20). Fraser and Nicholson imagine a feminism which takes the best from each perspective, without ending in an ideological or philosophical paralysis. This tends to be rather idealistic in terms of carefully isolating the desirable elements of feminism and postmodernism. In “Feminism and the Politics of Postmodernism,” Nicholson again articulates that the postmodernist function for feminists is to “counteract the totalizing perspectives within both the hegemonic culture of liberalism and within certain versions of Marxism”— two significant ideologies which have widely influenced feminist theorizing (59).

Postmodernism redresses long held assumptions of the historical, theoretical and ideological foundations so central to feminist discourse (Flax 446). In this light, Paglia’s essentialist underpinnings must be questioned and her fundamental thrust must be challenged. As discussed in the previous chapter, Paglia's essentialism is evident in her emphasis on, indeed, almost obsession with, "sexual difference." It should be noted, however, that according to Best and Kellner: “Feminists tend to be critical of modern theory because the oppression of women has been sustained and legitimated through the philosophical underpinnings of modern theory and its essentialism, foundationalism, and universalism” (206).

Having discussed Paglia in the context of postmodernism, I will now review and scrutinize the language that has now become embedded in and used on these critical exposés. The description of Paglia, Sommers and Roiphe as “anti-feminist” is a well-

worn description and the casual usage of the term deserves some discussion. The prefix “anti” indicates an opposing or hostile position, sympathy or practice, stemming from the Greek word “against” (*Webster’s*). This begs the question of how labeling takes place within feminist discourse. It could be argued, for example, that Paglia’s *self-stated* aims are within the framework of a feminist project, yet in academic analysis she is often described as “anti-feminist.” The problem perhaps is what the implied meaning of “anti-feminist” is when applied to Paglia, as opposed to someone like Rush Limbaugh, or the fictional archetype of Al Bundy on the situational comedy *Married...With Children*. Susan Faludi’s definition of anti-feminists is quoted on the website “Anti-feminist Page: Faux Feminists”: “They define themselves as feminists, but their dismissive-to-downright hostile attitudes toward feminist issues—from sexual harassment to domestic violence—locate them firmly on the anti-feminist side of the ledger” (1). Despite Paglia’s self-promoted feminist leanings, she is considered “anti-feminist” by both academics writing in refereed journals, as well as by more populist authors like Faludi. The use of anti-feminism seems to be to represent much more than the literal definition of it as I have suggested. For one, it seems to signify a reactionary response, even inflammatory and somewhat blasphemous. “Anti-feminist” in these contexts is not qualified; in fact, it is deemed acceptable to make statements about one’s politics due to what I would suggest is an overriding base conception of what feminism should be. This language seems to be acceptable, I would venture, because of the fractured nature of feminism—a full contextual and qualifying explanation of one’s use of a word like “anti-

feminist” is rendered unnecessary. In this manner, the use of “anti-feminist” is likened more to profanity. Steve Roby exemplifies that one actually does make internal calculations about the use of such controversial language:

Dismissing someone as an anti-feminist is not a particularly useful maneuver. Context is too important. If Susan Faludi denounces someone as anti-feminist, I’ll accept that she may be right, though I might want to investigate further. If Catherine MacKinnon denounces someone as an anti-feminist, I won’t take her seriously. If Phyllis Schlafly denounces someone as an anti-feminist, I’ll wonder what drug she’s been taking. (1)

Thus, one could suggest that the use of “anti-feminist,” due to its relationship to “feminism” is again “context-bound.” The fact that these concepts can be used so freely by both ends of the spectrum— academic and non-academic, reveals two base issues: one, that feminism has multiple meanings of different weights (we would not freely describe individuals as anti-Semitic without ample evidence or as a critique of their politics without qualification); and second, there are fragments of a monolithic construction of feminism that remain deeply embedded in feminist discourse. This points to the question of whether a “postmodern feminism” is at present in an infantile stage, that feminism, while fractured in a sense of mobile positions, is still deeply rooted in binary oppositions. Herein lies a contradiction. If the multiple meanings of feminism or anti-feminism are rationalized through a postmodern lens, they cannot be used as grounds to situate a judgement of someone’s politics. It becomes easy to make inflammatory

remarks about feminists like Paglia by using a description like “anti-feminist” because the term is significantly more benign than when using the prefix “anti” on the word “gay” for example. Paglia has oft criticized Gay activist behavior, but I have yet to come across an “anti-gay” label bestowed upon her.

“Postfeminism” represents another construct in the field of feminisms which must be considered in order to understand adequately the tensions of the fracturing of feminism. Again, as in the signifier “feminism,” it has come to have multiple meanings. Suzanna Walters posits two threads to “postfeminist” discourse. As the popularity of a postmodern theoretical position has inundated the academy, postfeminism, in one sense, has come to be associated with it in terms of the postmodern and poststructuralist project. . . . heralding “identity politics” (Walters 117). The second version of postfeminism, at home in a popular rather than academic context, has more of a descriptive function related to what Faludi described as “backlash.” Walters postulates that the term “postfeminism” encompasses the backlash sentiment as well as “anti-feminism” which has widely been used to describe authors like Paglia, Sommers and Roiphe (117). Alternatively, Landry and MacLean’s notion of postfeminism is that it signals feminism’s demise; that is, the goals of feminism have been achieved, rendering feminism obsolete, therefore, superceded by postfeminism (xi). Landry and MacLean however, do point out the connection that postfeminism may have with postmodernism, in terms of the use and significance of “post-” in symbolizing the contemporary moment, as in post-Marxism, poststructuralism, post-industrialism, and post-coloniality (10). Similarly, Judith Stacey

describes postfeminism as “[t]he simultaneous incorporation, revision and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second wave feminism” (quoted in Rapp 32). Unwittingly, feminist critics like Sommers and Paglia participate in, or embody postfeminism in their respective emphases on the “individual” feminist subject. Rapp describes this saying that “depoliticization often takes the form of the reduction of feminist *social* goals to individual ‘lifestyle.’ It’s a process as American as apple pie, in a culture where hegemonic claims are strongly influenced by a very Protestant notion of free and individual will” (32). In the context of this thesis, I tend to view postfeminism as influenced by postmodernism. Therefore, as opposed to signaling the demise of feminism or connoting backlash, I choose to claim it as useful for describing the evolving dynamics of late 20th century feminism. As Best and Kellner write, “‘post’ in postmodernism signifies a dependence on, a continuity with that which follows, leading some critics to reconceptualize the postmodern as merely an intensification of the modern, as a ‘hypermodernity’” (30). Thus it can be argued that postfeminism might indicate a continuity with feminism in the sense that feminism is constantly engaged in a self-critical process. In other words, it is neither in demise nor transforming into its opposite.

In the light cast by a postmodernist feminism, I am wary of any defining labels. Postmodernism aids in providing meaning to contemporary feminism, refreshes it, challenges it and is useful in understanding the work of feminists like Paglia, Sommers and Roiphe. At times it is ideologically arresting, even frustrating, but the waves continue. Contemporary feminism, particularly the feminisms which are influenced by

the academy will be inherently destable by virtue of the laws of inclusion. When isolated in an academic setting, a.k.a., the ivory tower, this dynamic is perfectly acceptable. However the challenge this thesis represents is to extend these postmodern principles of inclusion and multiplicity outside of the academy, to the feminisms that ultimately inform the vast majority of individual women and men.

Endnotes

1. Some excellent discussions of postmodernism are found in: Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations by Steven Best and Douglas Kellner; Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary by Steven Connor; The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture edited by Hal Foster; and Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism by Fredric Jameson.
2. Regarding the threat of postmodernism to feminism and/or its political usefulness to feminism see: Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson "Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism" in Ross (1988): 83-104; Feminism/Postmodernism edited by Linda J. Nicholson; Feminists Theorize the Political by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott; "Feminism and Postmodernism—Another View" by Mary Poovey.
3. In Postmodern Theory, Best and Kellner discuss the possible meanings that "post" can signify in postmodernism. One of which is that "the 'post' in postmodern signifies a dependence on, a continuity with, that which follows, leading some critics to conceptualize the postmodern as merely an intensification of the modern, as a hypermodernity" (30).

CONCLUSION

This thesis reflected on the changing and evolving dynamics of feminism, a central theme of which was the question of the crisis within feminism. In demonstrating how history constructs feminism, how constructions or interpretations have strong implications for shaping ideology and popular opinion, I argued that the idea of crisis, or of feminism's demise is a well worn threat throughout the history of feminism. Indeed, this theme has emerged repeatedly since the second wave of feminism.

In my study of several controversial populist feminist writers, specifically Christina Hoff Sommers, Katie Roiphe and Camille Paglia, I argue that they represent feminism selectively, at times rather histrionically, and in doing so have indulged their own individualist feminist platforms. Dissenting voices are not new to feminist discourse. Yet media and press attention gives these authors a profile which demands attention. Many suggest that these authors be ignored, and the academy has, for the most part, done just that. However, surveying the bookshelves in mainstream bookstores indicates that these writers can no longer be ignored, and are only the beginning. Consider, for example, Rene Denfeld's The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order, Donna Laframboise's The Princess at the Window: A New Gender Morality, Daphne Patai and Noretta Kortege's Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales From the Strange World of Women's Studies, Elizabeth Fox Genovese's Feminism is Not the Story of My Life: How the Elite Women's Movement Has Lost Touch With Women's Real

Concerns. All of these authors either allude to a crisis within feminism and/or Women's Studies, or point to its excesses and problems, and all are published in mainstream presses. Each writer has a personal agenda in setting forth what she herself knows is a fairly critical, and in some cases, damaging rhetoric concerning feminism. One might say that these works represent a new tangent in feminist discourse.

Furthermore, I engaged in a discussion of postmodernism's involvement in the current dynamics of feminist literature and its usefulness as an explanatory tool for situating the writing of Camille Paglia. While authors like Paglia disregard much of current postmodern discourse, ironically, I see her as a symbol of the postmodern condition, if not someone actively producing its contradictions and conditions. In briefly considering the relationship of the academy to popular mainstream feminism, the commodification of feminism and how naming takes place in feminist discourse, I examined the labels of "anti-feminist" and "postfeminist." These terms are clearly constitutive of multiple, diverse and decentered feminisms. Writers like Paglia eschew postmodernism but are unwittingly its very promoters.

I chose to study Camille Paglia and Christina Hoff Sommers precisely because they have been criticized heavily by feminists in the academy. I think that these voices should not only be heard, but should be recognized as making a valuable contribution to all feminisms, in that they prompt feminists to consider, if not reconsider, their relationship to popular culture and what it would mean to reach a broad female and male

readership. Feminists must embrace this “crisis” by negotiating with the burgeoning influences posed by alternative readings of feminism in the popular and public domain. Once again, I turn to bell hooks: “Radical/revolutionary feminist thought and practice must emerge as a force in popular culture if we are to counter in a constructive way the rise of Paglia and those who eagerly seek the same spotlight. This meaning that we must work harder to gain a hearing” (90). [H]ooks speaks of engagement with popular culture in a constructive sense and she has quite clearly stated that she does not mean to become the “black Camille Paglia.” Thus, academic feminists must respond to the challenges presented by populist feminism, without, like Paglia, reducing or ignoring the complexities of feminist discourse. This is a challenge, indeed, but should it be met, academic feminists will show themselves willing to embrace and participate in the dialogue of multiple feminisms in a popular as well as academic context. If Paglia and Sommers have inadvertently been the catalyst to this challenge, then they will have, however ironically, contributed to feminism continuing to be a dynamic social movement.

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