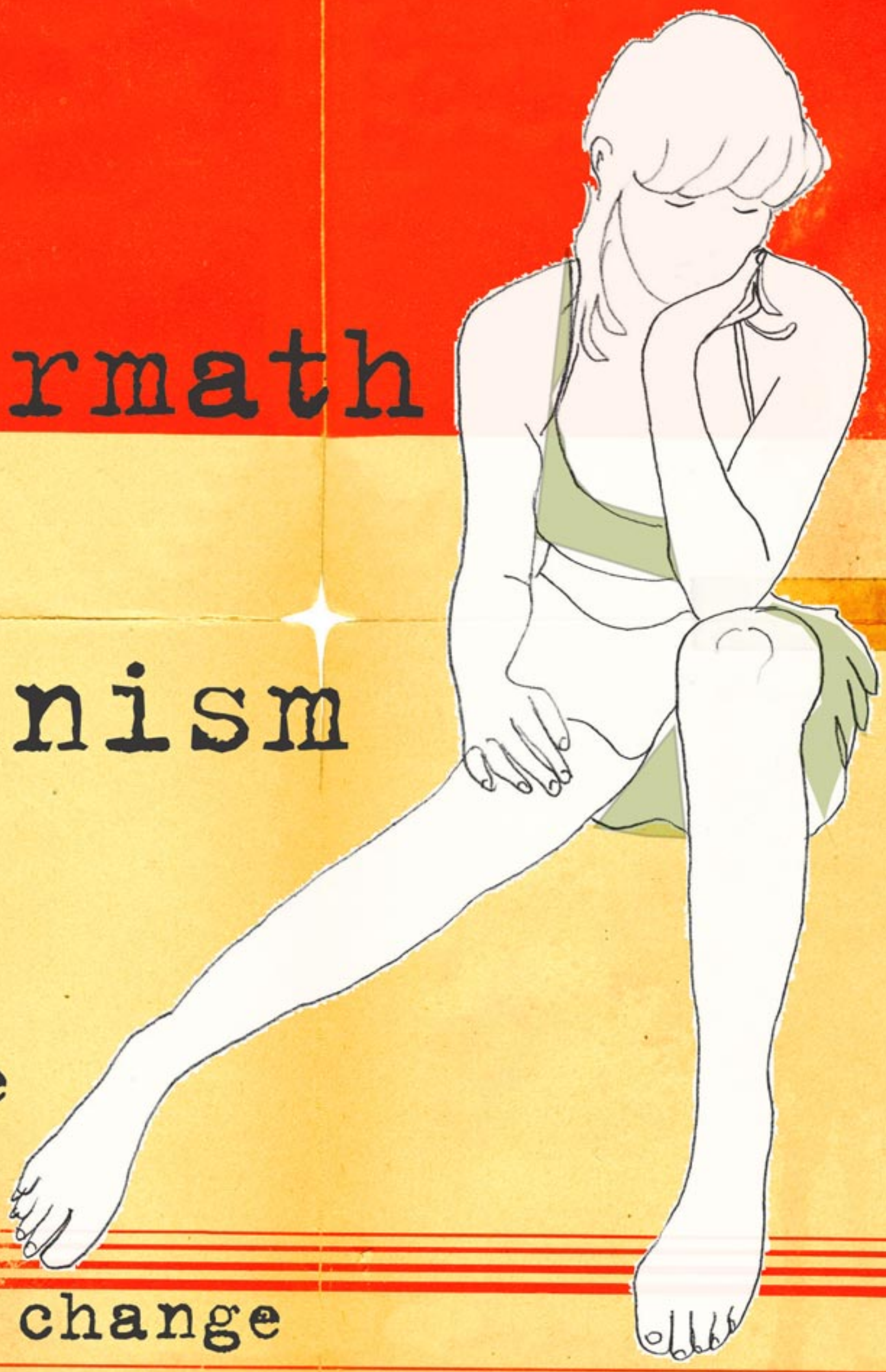
angela mcrobbie

the aftermath of feminism

gender, culture and social change



The Aftermath of Feminism

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Gender, Culture and Social Change

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INTRODUCTION: IN EXCHANGE FOR FEMINISM

This book examines a social and cultural landscape which could be called post-feminist if, by that term, one means a situation which is marked by a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment which is different from simply being a question of backlash against the seeming gains made by feminist activities and campaigns in an earlier period, i.e. the 1970s and 1980s. I argue that something quite unexpected has happened. Elements of feminism have been taken into account, and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life. Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like 'empowerment' and 'choice', these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism. These new and seemingly 'modern' ideas about women and especially young women are then disseminated more aggressively, so as to ensure that a new women's movement will not re-emerge. 'Feminism' is instrumentalised, it is brought forward and claimed by Western governments, as a signal to the rest of the world that this is a key part of what freedom now means. Freedom is revitalised and brought up-to-date with this *faux*-feminism. The boundaries between the West and the rest can, as a result, be more specifically coded in terms of gender, and the granting of sexual freedoms. If this sounds like a conspiracy thesis, then one of the tasks I must set myself in this book is to demonstrate how this takes place at ground level, and how the consent and participation of young women is sought, and seemingly secured, in a multiplicity of ways that defy the notion of a centralised power in charge of the demise of feminism, in such a way that it will never again rise from the ashes. Granted, at one level, this is done through active vilification and negation conducted mostly at the cultural level, which makes feminism quite unpalatable to younger women (the words repulsive or disgusting are often used). A kind of hideous spectre of what feminism once was is conjured up, a monstrous ugliness which would send shudders of horror down the spines of young women today, as a kind of deterrent. But this is only one side of the

equation, and the abandonment of feminism, for the sake of what Judith Butler would call intelligibility as a woman, is amply rewarded with the promise of freedom and independence, most apparent through wage-earning capacity, which also functions symbolically, as a mark of respectability, citizenship and entitlement. There is a kind of exchange, and also a process of displacement and substitution going on here. The young woman is offered a notional form of equality, concretised in education and employment, and through participation in consumer culture and civil society, in place of what a reinvented feminist politics might have to offer. If this seems fanciful, or even excessively vague, it is clearly my task in this book to make a coherent case for this as a kind of settlement, as Stuart Hall might call it, or as a new form of sexual contract. Another simple way of putting this is to say that women constitute half of the world's population and their subordination and experience of inequality, though changed, remains unequivocal and substantial. The idea of a global, through highly differentiated feminist politics would indeed be a considerable challenge to the current global and still patriarchal system of economic power and domination. Self-declared feminists have always been small in number, but their principles and ideas and beliefs and commitments have flowed out into and across the everyday world of women and girls in different countries across the world. It has been clear that this is, or was, a self-organised politics, taking place from the ground up, a kind of disputatious and contentious force, especially in matters of sexuality and family life, and this small force for change nevertheless has had enormous potential to create disruption and to bring about change. At the same time what feminism actually means varies, literally, from one self-declared feminist to the next, but this does not reduce its field of potential influence, quite the opposite. So it is this potential which I argue is the source of anxiety, concern and pre-emptive action, on the part of those bodies and institutions and organisations which do not wish to see established power and gender hierarchies undermined. I argue in this book that for this potential to be re-awakened and realised, we must understand fully the forces which are opposed to such a realisation, especially since they now take the guise of modern and enlightened 'gender aware' forms of governmentality.

This book also marks some changes in my own writing, and there is an element of self-critique. Some years ago I subscribed to a way of thinking which was influenced by the work of de Certeau, which sought to give value and meaning to the subversive strategies, the ways of 'making do' which ordinary, often seriously disadvantaged people took part in, and which became, as a result, vernacular features of resistance and opposition, visible within and across the landscapes of everyday life (de Certeau 1984). However, when it transpired that this kind of argument could so easily be rolled out, in a 'cultural populist' vein, and end up being a defence of women's capacities to turn around or subvert the world of consumer culture in which they were

invested, for possibly subversive purposes, many alarm bells began to ring. When feminist cultural studies pursued this pathway, a concern to understand dynamics of power and constraint gave way to celebratory connections with the ordinary women, or indeed girls, who created their own, now seemingly autonomous pleasures and rituals of enjoyable femininity from the goods made available by consumer culture (e.g. television programmes like *Sex and the City*). If this could be done with what capitalism made available, then there seemed to be no real reason to challenge the principles upon which capitalism was based. Just how oppositional were these seemingly subversive practices? How far did they reach? What value did they deliver to women in the context of the relations of power and powerlessness within which they still found themselves inscribed? How did they articulate with other activities beyond the interface with popular culture? My rising discomfort encompassed a number of issues. Does capitalism actually give women more or less what they want, if indeed it provides them with such cheap and available narrative pleasures, in the form of popular entertainment, which also now incorporate something like a feminist agenda in their plots and story lines? What need might there be for a feminist politics at all, if women could simply subvert the meanings of the goods and the values of the dominant cultural world around them? Would this mean a suspension of the critique of capitalism, that has always been such a defining feature of the tradition of socialist–feminist scholarship? This work in media and cultural studies was also far removed from the earlier feminist psychoanalytically-inspired work, like that of Cora Kaplan which, for example, examined in depth the complexity of being a feminist reader troubled and intrigued by the fact that she found great pleasure in a conservative genre of popular romances, such as *The Thorn Birds* (Kaplan 1986). By the turn of the century some of the strands in feminist media and cultural studies which were optimistic about the power of popular feminism ran into difficulties when this gave way, to something more aggressive, the mainstreaming of pornography, for example. While many feminists, including myself, were never part of the pro-censorship and anti-pornography campaigning back in the 1970s and 1980s, there was nevertheless disquiet on my own part when confronted with new issues such as the trend for pole-dancing being promoted as yet another form of women's empowerment. It is not as though some puritanical streak buried inside myself surfaces in reaction to this kind of phenomenon, it is simply noticeable how little serious scholarly debate there is about what widespread participation in sex entertainment by women means for the now out-of-date feminist perspectives on pornography and the sex industry (McRobbie 2008).

Through the 1990s there seemed to be no longer a theory of sexual power in contemporary feminist media and cultural studies. Little attention was

being paid to the complex ways in which women were being increasingly invited, by the forces of consumer culture that were now thoroughly tuned into, and able to adopt a feminist voice, to pursue new freedoms including sexual pleasure, as a kind of entitlement that was now being granted. Was it the case that some sort of rapprochement with capitalism had taken place, with the demise of socialism, and with the development of what was called for a short time, 'third way' politics? Or had the appetite for critique somehow faded? I did not find a rehearsal of such a political shift inside feminist media and cultural studies from the early 1990s onwards. And if a conversation was taking place about how to align a new left-feminist social democratic politics in relation to changes in global political culture, it was not happening, as far as I could see, within this particular feminist academic field. For more forceful and socially engaged critique, one increasingly had to look to debates about feminism and the micropolitics of becoming, in the work of feminist philosophers like Rosi Braidotti and Claire Colebrook, or to post-colonial feminist theory (Spivak and Ahmed) or to the psycho-social examination of gender and power found in Butler's writing. Meanwhile queer theory, of course, pushed ahead during this time, producing marvellously rich work, as did the new Deleuzian-influenced sociology of the body. (But in some ways, with the exception of writers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Judith Butler and Wendy Brown, whose work I draw on in this book, the whole question of leftwing politics and the impact its current state of crisis, or indeed its demise, has had for feminism, was left to the side.) Feminist media studies had never fully engaged with psychoanalysis and this remained, in my mind, a deficit. It had promised however, by means of the interest in audiences and reception, to develop a full-blown cultural and media anthropology of how women participated in everyday life, but somehow the energy for this as an undertaking seemed to dissipate. Instead attention to everyday life was replaced by a proliferation of fan-based studies. In the light of what seemed like a fading away of feminist cultural studies, several feminist scholars took flight and de-camped to the fields of television and film studies, often embarking on important historical work in what was then to become a thriving area of new scholarship. It is only very recently that there has been a more forceful and critical engagement with the world of women's media and feminine genres, connecting anti-feminist elements with the resurgent values of neo-liberal political culture (see the work of Gill 2006).

Perhaps at this point I need to write myself into this narrative, since so much of the contents of this current book marks a revision of some of my own old ways, and points in the direction of an analysis of new constellations of gender power. I should address some of my misjudgements, for example, writing about women's and girls' magazines in the 1990s, I attributed too much hope in the capacity of the world of women's

magazines, to take up and maintain a commitment to feminist issues, encapsulating a kind of popular feminism. I was over-enthusiastic about the impact the recruitment of feminist-influenced graduates might have on the editorial policies of young women's magazines, and I did not fully engage with the way in which the battle for circulation figures could see an editor sacked for displeasing a company with a lucrative advertising contract. Nor did I take into account the need for magazines to be constantly re-inventing themselves, which of course means that a strong feminist voice might well only last for as long as a couple of fashion seasons and then be discarded in favour of a new counter-trend. I found myself acknowledging, rather than confronting, the generic features of the magazine format, which seemed to be set in stone, the centrality of the fashion-and-beauty complex, for example, the dominant heterosexuality, the hermetically sealed world of feminine escapist pleasures, and in this respect I was perhaps myself complicit, without abandoning a feminist perspective, in accommodating to the genre itself, and reducing the level and intensity of critique, in favour of a kind of compromise position which aimed at having the staple contents co-exist with a strong but nevertheless popular feminist voice. (Doubtless this position on my own part was connected with my encouragement to students who were keen to find work in this world. Now I can see that this interface with the magazine industry and these forms of feminist 'knowledge transfer' need to be better understood, and subjected to scholarly scrutiny within a critical culture industry perspective). In actuality the idea of feminist content disappeared and was replaced by aggressive individualism, by a hedonistic female phallicism in the field of sexuality, and by obsession with consumer culture which in this current book I see as playing a vital role in the undoing of feminism. It is arguably the case that the self-definition as decisively post-feminist gave to the world of young women's magazines a new lease of life, as though they became unburdened through this transition.

It is perhaps relevant to note at this point also, that I was also over-optimistic about the election of the New Labour government in 1997, and in my assumption that Tony Blair would support women's issues and would engage with feminists involved in policy issues and in campaigning. In the early days of the New Labour government I even briefly held out some hope for the so-called third way agenda, never imagining that this government would prove to be hostile to feminists, and that it would in effect seek to reverse, or undo feminism, substituting for it the promise of seemingly more modern freedoms, along with ideas like the work-life balance, while at the same time introducing a kind of swaggering, resurgent patriarchalism, the political equivalent of the world of the lads' mags, where women had little choice but to fall into line, or risk the Siberia of feminism (McRobbie 2000a).

Feminist retrieval and renewal

There is some work of retrieval in the chapters that follow. In particular I look back to the feminist psychoanalytical writing on film and on the fashion image of the 1980s and I seek to reinstate its importance in understanding the mechanisms of identification and desire which come into play in the processes of consuming images. This body of work seems to have been lost from current discussion, and its absence marks a weakness in some of the most interesting work about how, for example, young girls look at images of themselves and of models and celebrities in magazines. Recent Deleuzian work rejects the rigidities of desire formulated within Freudian psychoanalysis, but just by referring back to the writing of, for example, Leslie Rabine or Diana Fuss, we can see how invaluable it was for understanding the technologies at play in the composition of images which sought to mobilise both the unleashing and the containment of female desire (Fuss 1994, Rabine 1994).

The chapters that follow introduce a number of concepts which are developed in the course of the analysis which combines elements of feminist sociology with cultural studies in an attempt to map out the field of post-feminist popular and political culture, primarily but not exclusively within a UK framework. These chapters are presented as suggestive in relation to the terrain they examine, they are not based on specific fieldwork undertaken, they are neither empirical nor ethnographic. Instead they survey changes in film, television, popular culture and the world of women's magazines. They also engage with recent writing by various scholars working in this area, and in particular they draw on Judith Butler's books and essays, translating them into a sociological vocabulary that in turn can be applied to concrete social and cultural phenomena. In an earlier response to Butler's short book *Antigone's Claim* (2000a) I presented some reflections on a 'double entanglement' which referred to the way in which there was in regard to sexuality and family life, both a liberalisation on the part of the state through the granting of specific family and kinship rights and entitlements to gays and lesbians, and also a neo-liberalisation in this same terrain of sexuality, with a more punitive response being shown to those who live outside the economic unit of the two parent family (McRobbie 2003). Likewise there was the way in which feminism had achieved the status of common sense, while it was also reviled, almost hated. In this book I continue to develop these ideas, and introduce concepts designed to provide a 'complexification of backlash' through this idea of 'double entanglement'. These concepts include the 'spaces of attention' which I use to examine the spotlight effect of power, or in Deleuzian parlance the luminosities which bring young women forward, as individualised subjects, and which attribute to these young women, a range of capacities such that they can be understood as agents of change. This also

marks the field of 'feminism undone'. There is a re-drafting of gender hierarchies, I claim, which has repercussions for questions of social class and race and ethnicity. The coming forward of young black or Asian women, along these individualised pathways, entails the granting of unusual, if not exceptional, and exemplary status, while elsewhere within the field of luminosities, where anti-racism is also undone, there is also a kind of 'nostalgia for whiteness' and indeed a process of cultural re-colonisation. White women in the UK increasingly live out their class positions, to re-phrase Stuart Hall, through the modality of gender and femininity. They have also become more autonomously feminised (and glamourised) in their class identity, no longer taking this status or adhering to it, from their position as wives of men, or as daughters of fathers. Black and Asian women also find themselves caught up and inscribed within this re-drafting process. They live their class identity through the modality of race as Hall argued, but their femininity also increasingly comes forward as a key factor in the more meritocratic society, such that the intersection of gender and ethnicity finds new social meaning and significance. I also refer, not to a new women's movement, but to the opposite, to a 'movement of women'. This is a key aspect of the new forms of gender power that have emerged and that seek to manage the requirements of the new global economy and the availability of a femininised workforce through producing and overseeing changes for women, young women in particular.

In Chapter 3 I provide a number of concepts for understanding post-feminist femininity, what in Foucauldian language we might refer to as technologies, each of which are made available to young women as part of a process of substitution and displacement, and each of which also appears to offer possibilities of freedom and change in the status and identity of young women today. These are first, the 'post-feminist masquerade', second, the figuration of the 'working girl', third, the 'phallic girl' and fourth, the 'global girl'. I argue these emerge as new constraining forms of gender power which operate through the granting of capacity to young women. Later in the book I draw on Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence to examine the changing dynamics of class, race and gender which are played out through the genre of make-over television programmes, arguing that here too there is an enforced 'movement of women' for the sake of recognition and cultural citizenship. In the final chapter I continue to reflect on the movement of women through processes of educational migration, as young women from across the world flow to cities like London and to institutions of higher education to increase their qualifications. So diverse are these globalised biographies that they refute the possibility of immediate sociological understanding, while also raising a whole series of new questions about female individualisation, the new international division of labour, the role of well-educated young women and the economic rationale which underpins this form of female migration

(Beck and Beck-Gernscheim 2001). Spivak, for example, would surely see this as a capitalist mobilisation of 'global girls' in the service of the now multicultural corporations, and at the expense of the impoverished people who remain at the point of departure, who also lose a class of possible radical teachers, educators, doctors and others, who are lured into a kind of migration-trap (Spivak 2002). We can see then a re-configuration of young womanhood emerging through these different assemblages, indeed we might think of them as sharing a kind of kinship or sisterhood, they are part of the same extended family, all four figures interconnect with each other, the immaculately groomed young woman in masquerade, the sexy adventurous phallic girl, the (hard) working girl and her 'pleasing' global counterpart.

The chapters in this book examine what we might mean by 'complexification of backlash'. In Chapter 1 I trace a double movement which was taking place concurrently in the early 1990s, both inside the feminist academy and outside in the world of popular culture. In the academy, for good theoretical reasons, feminism dismantles itself, by asking questions about foundationalism and universalism, and about representational claims. It queries for example the processes by which feminists speak on behalf of other women. Who are these other women who are the subjects of such representational claims? What hierarchies underpin certain feminist agendas? At the same time in popular culture there is also an undoing or dismantling of feminism, not in favour of re-traditionalisation, women are not being pushed back into the home, but instead there is a process which says feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such it is something young women can do without. I use the film *Bridget Jones's Diary* to develop the argument about feminism taken into account. Feminism has a ghostly existence in the film, Bridget has it to thank for, it has given her, to paraphrase Ulrich Beck, 'a life of her own', yet she is not sure that this is what she wants, i.e. to be single and childless in her early thirties, even though she pokes fun at the narrow world of the 'smug marrieds'. The prominence of wedding culture, apart from contributing to the expansion of consumer culture, rides on this tidal wave of celebratory post-feminism, as though to say, 'thank goodness, girls can be girls again, that time of dourness and censoriousness is over, and who can really object to something as light-hearted and innocuous as a 'hen party'? Who would dare to challenge the consensus that prevails in relation to the empowerment of women manifest in the ladies' night at the local pub featuring male strippers performing the 'full monty'? And since gay men and lesbians are also now invited to take part in wedding culture, there is, it seems, even less reason to inquire as to what might also be entailed in these rituals of enjoyment.

In Chapter 2 I trace a line of connection between the forces of the new right which from the start of the 1970s, mobilised against the women's movement through various actions and strategies, many of which were

documented by feminists including Judith Stacey and Susan Faludi in the US and Bea Campbell in the UK, and the more recent practices which operate through incorporation and instrumentalisation. I make use of Hall's theory of articulation but put this into reverse gear, and through the idea of disarticulation I show how cross-border solidarities, for example, between black and white feminist and anti-racist struggles, between single mothers and lesbians and gay men also living outside the fold of the nuclear family, are eroded, and how feminism's 'chains of equivalence' are broken down. Disarticulation is a defining feature of the process of undoing. Feminism's wider intersections with anti-racism, with gay and lesbian politics, are written out of the kind of history which surfaces even in serious journalism, and the feminism which is then vilified and thrown backwards into a previous era, is a truncated and sclerotic anti-male and censorious version of a movement which was much more diverse and open-minded. I argue that this denigration is also increasingly directed to anti-racist and multi-cultural politics of the same period, they too are reduced to cliches of 'political correctness' and their demise is seen to usher in a new period of more enlightened and modern community politics, where righteous anger and self-organisation are replaced by a politics of role models or mentoring or assimilation and integration or through cultural leadership programmes. Black politics *per se* fades and new racialising pathologies become visible, including a 'nostalgia for whiteness'.

In Chapter 3 I disentangle some of the new technologies of young womanhood, emphasising a movement of coming forward while feminism fades away. I also stress the spectacular dimension of this visibility, or luminosity, as government and its willing helpers, the fashion-and-beauty complex take young women by the hand, and lead them towards a modern kind of freedom. There is a great deal of drama in this process of coming forward, young women are endowed with capacity and are as a result expected to pursue specific life pathways which require participation in the workforce, which in turn permits full immersion in consumer culture. This new sexual contract rests on economic and cultural activity, and consumer citizenship at the expense of a newly defined feminist politics.

In Chapter 4 I focus more directly on feminine pathology and on its prominence, indeed its normalisation, in contemporary culture. Young woman are increasingly 'made up' in accordance with a horizon of expectation within which various disorders become naturalised, and even seen as the high price of freedom. I argue that these illegible rages and pathologies come close to confronting the limits of Butler's heterosexual matrix, but they are acted upon and constrained within this grid of sexual normativity. Better to be still recognisably positioned as an, albeit, ill anorexic girl within a properly oedipal family, than to be interrogating and breaking out of such psycho-social arrangements. In Chapter Five I examine the 'movement of women' which is undertaken within

the genre of make-over television programmes. What I argue is that there is a specific entanglement of class and gender relations underpinning these programmes, the desirable outcome of which is a more glamourised and individualised feminine subjectivity. The woman who is made-over embodies the values of the new, aspirational lower middle-class, in which she has a more autonomously feminine identity.

In the final chapter I engage critically with some of those strands in contemporary feminism which are affirmative and optimistic about the progress that has been made. These include 'gender mainstreaming', third wave feminism, and I also find some sociological grounds for being cautious in regard to Rosi Braidotti's philosophy of feminist affirmation. I end the book by reflecting on my own feminist classroom, a space where one might imagine a strong case for feminist affirmation could be made. But reality is always more unpredictable. It is a challenge and also a privilege to be teaching in an environment which is now populated by young women (and young men) from literally all over the world. This process of what appears to be educational migration, since so many of these young women hope to find jobs in London or else in some other global city, raises many questions about young women's role in the new international division of labour, and about what is entailed in this movement, about the strains on family and kinship, on the seeming postponement of marriage, and the postponement of having children. These young women also engage with the kinds of feminist issues that are the subject of this book, directly and indirectly. They are both inside and outside of them. And it is as though the forces which propel them to find a way of moving from, let us say, Korea, or Taiwan or Albania or Indonesia to London, and in so doing avoid or put on hold, some of the expectations and constraints otherwise imposed on them, produces an openness to debates about power and sexuality, gender and desire. Lastly I should emphasise that despite the many references to films and television, magazines and popular culture, this book is fundamentally sociological. It is concerned to dissect the management of social change and the forms of gender power which operate within an illusion of positivity and progress while locking young women into 'new–old' dependences and anxieties.

1

POST-FEMINISM AND POPULAR CULTURE: BRIDGET JONES AND THE NEW GENDER REGIME

Introduction: complexification of backlash?

This chapter presents a series of possible conceptual frames for engaging with what, in this book, I refer to as post-feminism. Broadly I envisage this as a process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined. (What exactly is meant by the words 'feminist gains' is examined throughout the book.) I propose that through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism. I then propose that this undoing, which can be perceived in the broad cultural field, is compounded, unexpectedly perhaps, in those sociological theories, including the work of Giddens and Beck, which address themselves to aspects of gender and social change, but as though feminist thought and years of women's struggles had no role to play in these transformations (and this is returned to in Chapter 2 and briefly in Chapter 3). It is also suggested in the pages that follow, that by means of the tropes of freedom and choice which are now inextricably connected with the category of young women, feminism is decisively aged and made to seem redundant. Feminism is cast into the shadows, where at best it can expect to have some afterlife, where it might be regarded ambivalently by those young women who must, in more public venues, stake a distance from it, for the sake of social and sexual recognition. I propose here a complexification of the backlash thesis (which, again, will be examined in more detail in the chapter that follows).

Faludi refers to a concerted, conservative response to challenge the achievements of feminism (Faludi 1992). Her work is important because, like that of Stacey and others, it charts anti-feminist interventions that are coterminous with feminism more or less as it happens (Stacey 1985/1986).

My argument is rather different, which is that post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force. This was very apparent in the (UK) *Independent* newspaper column *Bridget Jones's Diary,*[1] then in the fantastically successful book and the films which followed. The infectious girlishness of Bridget Jones produces a generational logic which is distinctly post-feminist. Despite feminism, Bridget wants to pursue dreams of romance, find a suitable husband, get married and have children. What she fears most is ending up as a 'spinster'. Bridget is a girl who is 'once again' reassuringly feminine. She is not particularly career-minded, even though she knows she should be. She makes schoolgirl errors in her publishing house, not knowing that the literary critic F. R. Leavis is long dead. She delivers an incoherent speech at a book launch, her head seems to be full of frivolous thoughts, though she is clever and witty in her own feminine way. But most of all she is desperate to find the right man. The film celebrates a kind of scatterbrain and endearing femininity, as though it is something that has been lost. Thank goodness, the film seems to be saying, that old-fashioned femininity can be retrieved. Post-feminism in this context seems to mean gently chiding the feminist past, while also retrieving and reinstating some palatable elements, in this case sexual freedom, the right to drink, smoke, have fun in the city, and be economically independent.[2]

Broadly I am arguing that for feminism to be 'taken into account' it has to be understood as having already passed away. The pushing away which underpins the passing away is very much the subject of this book. This is a movement detectable across popular culture, a site where 'power … is remade at various junctures within everyday life, (constituting) our tenuous sense of common sense' (Butler, Laclau and Zizek 2000: 14). Some fleeting comments in Judith Butler's short book *Antigone's Claim* suggest to me that post-feminism can be explored through what I would describe as a 'double entanglement' (Butler 2000a). This comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life (for example George Bush supporting the campaign to encourage chastity among young people, and in March 2004 declaring that civilisation itself depends on traditional marriage), with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations (for example gay couples now able to adopt, foster or have their own children by whatever means, and in the UK at least, full rights to civil partnerships). It also encompasses the existence of feminism as at some level transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, while also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated (McRobbie 2003). The 'taken into accountness' permits all the more thorough dismantling of feminist politics and the discrediting of the occasionally voiced need for its renewal.

Feminism dismantling itself

The impact of this double entanglement which is manifest in popular and political culture, coincides however, with feminism in the academy finding it necessary to dismantle itself. For the sake of periodisation we could say that 1990 marks a turning point, the moment of definitive self-critique in feminist theory. At this time the representational claims of second wave feminism come to be fully interrogated by post-colonialist feminists like Spivak, Trinh and Mohanty among others, and by feminist theorists like Butler and Haraway who inaugurate the radical de-naturalising of the post-feminist body (Mohanty 1988, Spivak 1988, Trinh 1989, Butler 1990, Haraway 1991). Under the prevailing influence of Foucault, there is a shift away from feminist interest in centralised power blocks, eg the State, patriarchy, law, to more dispersed sites, events and instances of power conceptualised as flows and specific convergences and consolidations of talk, discourse, attentions. The body and also the subject come to represent a focal point for feminist interest, nowhere more so than in the work of Butler. The concept of subjectivity and the means by which cultural forms and interpellations (or dominant social processes) call women into being, produce them as subjects while ostensibly merely describing them as such, inevitably means that it is a problematic 'she', rather than an unproblematic 'we', which is indicative of a turn to what we might describe as the new feminist politics of the body (Butler 1990, 1993). In feminist cultural studies the early 1990s also marks a moment of feminist reflexivity. In her article 'Pedagogies of the Feminine' Brunsdon queried the (hitherto assumed) use value to feminist media scholarship of the binary opposition between femininity and feminism, or as she put it, the extent to which the 'housewife' or 'ordinary woman' was conceived of as the assumed subject of attention for feminism (Brunsdon 1991). Looking back we can see how heavily utilised this dualism was, and also how particular it was to gender arrangements for largely white and relatively affluent (i.e. housewifely) heterosexual women. While at the time both categories had a kind of transparency, by the late 1980s these came under scrutiny. Not only was there a homogenising force on both sides of the equation, but it also became apparent that this binary permitted a certain kind of useful, feminist, self-definition to emerge, particularly in media and cultural studies where there was an interest in the intersections of media with everyday life, through conceptualisations of the audience. In this case the audience was understood to comprise housewives who would be studied empathetically by feminists. The concept of the housewife in effect facilitated a certain mode of feminist inquiry, but we were at the time inattentive to the partial and exclusive nature of this couplet.

The year 1990 also marked the moment at which the concept of popular feminism found expression. Andrea Stuart considered the wider circulation of feminist values across the landscape of popular culture, in particular magazines