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# “Sex and the Single Girl” in Postfeminism

## The *F* Word on Television

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### Introduction: Defining Postfeminism in Televisual Discourse

An exploration of sex in the nineties as represented in popular cultural texts marks the changing face of feminism in televisual discourse.<sup>1</sup> The questions of women's desire, from whose perspective this desire is put on display, and for whom arise in a range of recent television programs, including *Ally McBeal* (Fox 1997-present), *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998-present), and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-present).<sup>2</sup> How is feminism defined and represented in current U.S. television? How is a feminist discourse directed (literally and metaphorically) in television shows with decidedly strong and independent women protagonists? And how does a consideration of postfeminism—which involves questions of sexuality, subjectivity, and identity—demonstrate that a program can be at once prowoman but antifeminist?

*Ally McBeal* feminism is made popular in a postfeminist discourse in which it is acceptable to be prowoman but not to be feminist. That is, education, career, being single, and having a great wardrobe are granted to women on television; moreover, their (hetero)sexuality is celebrated. However, their liberated status is constituted and constructed by male authors (producers and writers and also male television critics) and represented within the context of a cultural epoch in which feminism has become the *f* word. Furthermore, such a glorified single status is ultimately put into question as a burden. “What’s a girl to do?” is the dilemma facing our heroines of the nineties and the new millennium: too many choices, too much freedom, and too much desire has led to never-ending searching and even to depression and dysfunction. Just how far have we (not) come?

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bell hooks and Susan Faludi, among others, theorize a backlash to feminism. That is, the most effective social movement in the United States has taken a great fall in the hands of the popular. As Faludi (1991) convincingly described,

The press, carried by tides it rarely fathomed, acted as a force that swept the general public, powerfully shaping the way people would think and talk about the feminist legacy and the ailments it supposedly inflicted on women. It coined the terms that everyone used: "the man shortage," "the biological clock," "the mommy track," and "postfeminism." Most important, the press was the first to set forth and solve for a mainstream audience the paradox in women's lives, the paradox that would become so central to the backlash: women have achieved so much yet feel so dissatisfied; it must be feminism's achievements, not society's resistance to these partial achievements, that is causing women all this pain. (P. 77)

Making feminism popular or, more accurately, rendering feminism acceptable in a new postfeminist era has required a transformation—a makeover, if you will—of feminism into postfeminism, of Murphy Brown into Ally McBeal. The portrayal and concept of independent women who are challenged by their independence (like Murphy Brown) has been replaced by the depiction of independent women who are shown as unhappy because of this independence (like Ally McBeal): "Now, under the reverse logic of the backlash, the press airbrushed a frown into its picture of the successful woman and announced, 'See, she's miserable. That must be because women are too liberated'" (Faludi 1991, 77). Such postfeminist discourse can be used to condemn feminism's achievements and to suggest a halt to continuing feminist struggle.

One way to gauge how far society has come in terms of the status of women is to examine the ways in which female desire and female pleasure are regulated and controlled (as much through legal and economic mechanisms as through cultural mechanisms such as popular representation). In this article, women's desire and pleasure (postfeminist sex) will be approached through three levels: institutional, textual, and receptional.<sup>3</sup> The key thesis is that the representation of the independent woman in U.S. network television at the turn of the millennium is problematically postfeminist/antifeminist as seen in such programs as *Ally McBeal*. But counter to this program, which offers what I consider a false feminism, a program such as *Sex and the City*, which airs on cable television, offers more complex, innovative, and "destabilizing" representations of women through the politics of sexuality.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, television and the cultural space it creates serve as sites for struggle and are "sites for constant negotiation" (Brooks 1997, 185). While postfeminist discourse delimits the repre-

sentation and subjectivity of women, there remains an openness and inconclusiveness in the never-ending narrative nature of television itself. In this way, the era of postfeminism does not necessarily signify the death of feminism.

It is important to set up a definition of *postfeminism*, a term that has been bandied about quite a lot recently. There seem to be three general approaches to defining the term *postfeminism*. First, it refers to the era after second-wave feminism: that is, the 1980s and particularly the 1990s—in other words, our present context. Second, as some writers and feminists have observed, postfeminism signifies the backlash against feminism. In fact, it is the fulfillment of the backlash of the 1980s and 1990s such that we are now in a place where people—women, and young women in particular—declare that there is no more need for feminism because they believe equality (equal rights) has been achieved. Third, there are some writers, for example, Ann Brooks (1997, 1), who would like to claim the term more positively “as a useful conceptual frame of reference encompassing the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism.” Brooks argued that just as postmodernism and postcolonialism do not mark that modernism and imperialism have been replaced or superceded, postfeminism does not mean that patriarchy has been overcome. Rather, postfeminism engages with the discourse of feminism’s fight against patriarchy while also challenging the hegemonic assumptions that oppression is universal among women, race, and class. In this article, it is the second definition that will be foregrounded, that of postfeminism as cultural material backlash and as represented and reproduced through (mainstream U.S.) televisual discourse.

The question to ask about the television program *Ally McBeal*, for example, is not so much the hyped-up one about whether it is feminist or anti-feminist; rather, the program enables an examination of the question of female desire in the age of postmodernity (which is, in other words, the era of postfeminism) and as embodied in a character like Ally McBeal. More specifically, female desire and its corollary, pleasure—both in the female character(s) and as offered to the female spectator(s)—are held in a state of pseudoliberation and functions in correspondence with the backlash of postfeminism. Similarly, female subjectivity is suspended in the relativism of postmodernity, such that whether women have moved from the position of being the object of desire to the subject position remains open for debate.

### Postfeminism in Television: False Feminism

Strong female characters—if not necessarily the figure of a strong woman—have been on American television since its beginning. Since the

matriarchal figures in ethnic comedies in early television such as *The Goldbergs* (1949-1954) and *I Remember Mama* (1949-1956), or Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* (1951-1961), female characters have long been negotiating, and thus marking, the boundaries between private and public spheres. A medium constructed and structured for the female consumer, strong female characters—as in major female characters—have existed on television for more than 50 years.

I have written elsewhere about a popular television trend to temper, contain, and normalize the dramatic—and for some, traumatic—changes that were taking place in the 1960s in terms of the women's movement, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War.<sup>5</sup> For example, the figure of the liberated woman was treated in television, for the most part, by negation. Often, the mother figure in a family was conveniently missing (i.e., dead) in such programs as *Bachelor Father* (1957-1962), *My Three Sons* (1960-1972), *Family Affair* (1966-1971), and *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (1969-1972), which not only effectively erased the woman and women's issues from the home but also ultimately commented on the changing woman's role without allowing her to speak on her own behalf. By the time the postfeminist era was drifting in, there had been a number of television programs with strong, working, often single women characters, including such 1980s programs as *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS 1982-1988), *Kate & Allie* (CBS 1984-1989), *Designing Women* (CBS 1986-1993), *Murphy Brown* (CBS 1988-1998), and even *Who's the Boss?* (ABC 1984-1992), whose very title raised the important question of the day. Of course, daytime dramas (soap operas) have always focused on women's perspectives and experiences as well as on women as audiences, and many feminist television scholars have written extensively about such "women's programming."

Tania Modleski (1982), in her book *Loving with a Vengeance*, talked about what she calls feminine texts: Gothic novels, Harlequin romances, and soap operas. Her argument is that as feminine texts—texts about and for women—they are devalued. Television and television studies have also been undervalued because of television's connection to the feminine.<sup>6</sup> On one hand, we ought not underestimate or underappreciate the strong representation of women on television (meaning plentiful and/or interesting); on the other, we need to recognize that there is a difference between a feminist discourse and a feminine discourse. And likewise, there is a distinction between feminist and nonfeminist reading/pleasure in television viewing, depending particularly on the level of awareness a viewer has of the performance of femininity or womanhood. As Brooks (1997, 187) reiterated in her book *Postfeminisms*,

different audiences bring "different frameworks of understandings" to their readings. . . . The concept of "pleasures" and "resisting pleasures" is an im-

portant one in media theory, highlighting the significance of the differentiated audience. In addition, media forms are recognised as “sites of struggles” around which constant “negotiation” takes place, these negotiations occurring at institutional and textual levels and at the level of reception.

Women on television have long been points of identification for women in living rooms.<sup>7</sup> What makes them interesting or engaging to women viewers is that what their characters deal with are things that women can find important—surface stories about family, husbands, and the laundry and subtextual frustrations about family, husbands, and the laundry. But even if television provides a place for feminine interests, a space for the expression of frustrations, and a site for negotiating oppositional values, television (at least U.S. network television) ultimately contains or repackages feminist discourses into feminine ones.

Having and seeing a strong woman character on television is not necessarily feminist in that, in line with the ideological work of cinema, such strong women are, if not punished, carefully managed. Even arguably feminist programs, beginning with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS 1970-1977) in the 1970s and *Kate & Allie* and *Designing Women* (produced by a woman) in the 1980s, can be seen through close analysis as limited. *Roseanne* (ABC 1988-1997) (also produced by women) provides an important and full case study (taken up by other authors such as Kathleen Rowe) as a program that focuses on the woman in domesticity. *Roseanne* became the “domestic goddess,” transforming a space of oppression to a queendom in which she ruled; it did not focus on the figure of the single, working woman. Those programs that must deal with the so-called working girl (or single girl in the city) seem to proffer a feminist tone or objective, but it ultimately seems to be a false feminism.

A woman declaring what she wants, and being represented as pursuing it, sort of, is the kind of falsely empowered image of the woman that we get in a character such as Ally McBeal. Yes, in television, a woman has the license to glance—she looks, she sees, and moreover, her glance signifies desire. Ally and her colleagues/coterie in the law firm are shown as having desires—although sexual desires more than professional ones—and Ally is offered up as a falsely desiring subject. Have television programs such as *Ally McBeal* or *Sex and the City* succeeded in moving woman from being the object of desire to the subject of desire? Are the women both objects and subjects, in the same moment? Is Ally thus empowered and liberated and, therefore, does this represent that there is no more need for feminism?

Cable television stations such as Home Box Office (HBO) and the Lifetime Channel (“television for women”) can offer alternative pleasures, which in turn, provide alternatives to or in postfeminist discourses. HBO’s *Sex and the City*, for example, displays (gloriously) and debates (complexly)

women's desire—for men, for work, for satisfaction. Although at moments the show's Samantha and her incredible sexual antics might be considered even more outrageous than Ally's fantastic imagination, that's just it: the women in *Sex and the City* don't just fantasize in a surreal world. They don't just talk, they do; and they don't just think, they act. They also make mistakes and learn and move on and continue to make choices. All the women in *Sex and the City*, Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha, are on display: their professional choices, their choices in lovers, their clothes, and their bodies. The question is, Is the pleasure that such a display elicits exclusively for the male gaze, is it an example of the masochistic female viewer, or is it something else?

### Active Appearing: Masquerade and False Consciousness

Moving from passive object of the male gaze to self-objectification does not necessarily achieve subjectivity, and it can be a false freedom. Self-objectification could be defined as the conscious effort to gain attention through one's feminine traits—again, sexual attention, not professional attention. (Moreover, it is performed by women, rarely men.) The argument is twofold. First, this promotes the myth turned practice that a woman's greatest tool is her sex: woman equals sex, still, on this representational plane. Second, this is not a new strategy but a very old one called the masquerade: the performance of femininity. But instead of doing so with irony, Ally McBeal does so with blind revelry. Her gaze is blind.

The women of *Sex and the City*, on the other hand, possess a stronger gaze of others as well as of themselves. They are certainly pleasurable to look at, but their characters possess more motivation, purpose, and depth than to solely elicit a gaze. While offering a watershed in feminist criticism by addressing women's "to-be-looked-at-ness," Laura Mulvey did not theorize female pleasure in her inaugurative work; in Mary Ann Doane's equally influential work, she claimed that female voyeurism and "the reversal of the gaze" is impossible. As Brooks (1997, 171) described,

Doane goes further than Mulvey, in maintaining that the female gaze can gain control of the image by two means. She contends that a distance can be established by the female spectator by adopting the male spectatorial position, which Doane calls "transvestism," or by using femininity as a mask.

While Ally might not be aware of her mask (of femininity? of strength? of independence?), I am not so sure that the women in *Sex and the City* are simply masquerading as strong, independent, and attractive women; they are doing more than just flaunting the femininity as a kind of reaction formation, as Doane described. Television is about the glance rather than the

gaze, as television scholars before us have established. Such a deflected look, if you will, provides the opportunity for alternative sights/sites of and for women.

A student in my class on feminism and film and television used the phrase "active appearing."<sup>8</sup> Ally might be active as opposed to passive, but the difference between appearing and being looked at is unclear. Ginia Bellafante (1998, 58) in her famous *Time* article called this kind of false consciousness a symptom of the "Camille Paglia syndrome," who "argue[s] that it is men who are the weaker sex because they have remained eternally powerless over their desire for the female body. It is female sexuality . . . that is humanity's greatest force." This is not lesbian goddess worship; this is postfeminist discourse. Postfeminism negotiates, restyles, and even apologizes for feminism and then offers up a new woman (but a different kind of new woman from the 1980s or even the 1920s) who is comfortable and confident in her sexuality and, more specifically, in sexual difference. But this notion of sexual difference is drawn from the sense of empowerment a woman feels by believing she has reclaimed her power over man, which is sex.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, this inimitable power that women have over men can only be recognized in (and by) the presence of heterosexual men. Although this expression of sexually aware women may seem to be a liberating idea, it is arguably quite old-fashioned: it is the idea that women get what they want by getting men through their feminine wiles. Just because they are conscious of it or are actively participating in it through actively appearing, they do not transcend the dynamic; they merely continue it.

The notion of the masquerade is about performing femininity as a strategy for surviving in patriarchy. Furthermore, it is about a kind of transformation, at least in consciousness on the part of the woman, but outwardly it acknowledges that the look of the woman remains the same. That is, a masquerade connotes a compromise: the woman acknowledges her performance (which is for the man), at least to herself, but she performs nonetheless. The postfeminist masquerade, on the other hand, seems blind to its own performance.

### Negotiating Feminism into Postfeminism in *Ally McBeal*

This article is not intended as a full case study of *Ally McBeal*. Rather, offers it up as an example of the negotiation of feminism in current television. The Fox series began in 1997 with a premiere episode in which Ally McBeal joins the law firm of Fish, Cage, and Associates because she was sexually harassed at her former job. This marks the first of many court cases (most, in fact) in the series having to do with issues about sex and, moreover, that take feminist issues and questions and convert them into humorous answers. The space of the courtroom is set up for backlash. The show



offers female protagonists in roles that are categorically strong: these women are Harvard Law School graduates, they work in an up-and-coming Boston law firm, they have great clothes and great fun, and they do not need men—they just want them. This all can be understood as prowoman rhetoric; what is fascinating to watch—and painful, actually—is to see how the strength of these women is ultimately deflated. There might be a feminine text, but it is far from a feminist one. In fact, this television text negotiates feminism into postfeminism through prowoman rhetoric. That is, they look like strong women; moreover, they believe and act as strong women; but the postfeminist discourse overwhelms them. In the episode that I analyze here, there are two parts: a courtroom scene with Ally fantasizing as she sits at the counsel's table, and Nelle Porter and Ling Woo talking about their careers as lawyers.<sup>10</sup>

First, we are given a man's narrative (testimony, actually, for he is being sued for "negative infliction of emotional distress" for taking his best friend's wife), and it is this man's story that becomes Ally's fantasy. Ally, as an attorney, is completely distracted and unprofessional. Led by the man's testimony (about falling in love) and also led by the songstress singing "Do You Wanna Dance," she sinks into the fantasy world.<sup>11</sup> Second, Ally's actions are impotent. She looks at men and smiles at them, but they do not return the smile; so neither her glance nor her coquettish smile has power—her feminine wiles fail her. Furthermore, Ally has no voice. She utters only one word in the courtroom: "Sorry," then she mumbles, looks down, and puts her fingers in her mouth. If we were to talk about being active or being passive, the only effective action that Ally engenders is her active imagination. Her fantasy is broken when private fantasy world and public space clash, that is, in the moment of her out-loud sigh/moan; she is publicly embarrassed, happy only in her private thoughts. This is characteristic of Ally throughout the series.

In the second part of this sequence, we have Nelle and Ling talking, in essence, about being working women. Ling is only concerned about how she looks. She is not doing it for the money or for the challenge or even for an interest in the law: "I only work so I can wear my outfits," she says. Although criticized by Nelle, their workplace with "Mutt and Jeff," the senior partners John Cage and Richard Fish, is characterized as fun by Ling. Nelle, who came on the show in its second season, is portrayed as the ice queen and, not coincidentally, as being the only one who is serious about her work. She wears glasses, not surprisingly, and wears her hair up in a tight bun until demonstrative and transformative moments when her long, blonde hair comes tumbling down and her glasses come off to reveal a "hot-tie" underneath all the ice. This episode in particular is startling in its verbal abuse of Nelle by her ex-boyfriend (whom she dumped) who calls her "a rich-bitch, cold-hearted, ice queen, elitist snob, vicious-witch on a good

day, and a tight-wad cheap-ass too because I paid for everything.” In the last weeks of the third season, which this episode is from, she is increasingly shrill (although in a different way than Ally’s hysteria). And one can see, especially in episodes 319 and 320, she is made to look like a clown, with her colorful suits and overly large fake flowers pinned to her chest. Moreover, after Ling talks about “how hard it is to make it as partner in the big firms”—“big firms” serving as a synonym for patriarchal institutions—Nelle’s confident line implies that through her looks and with the help of a sexual harassment lawsuit, she will make partner in a month. One might argue that it is Nelle’s character that real-life professional women can identify with and that Ally is a foil; however, Nelle is not upheld or privileged by the text and, in fact, like Ally, is defeated by it.

What starts out as potentially powerful—a woman’s desire for a man and another woman’s ambition for professional advancement—ends up as stutters and silence or as empty threats. (The episode following this one displays Nelle regretting her actions against the firm.) Representations of women that have come before *Ally McBeal* have been more progressive. For example, *Designing Women* does offer a feminist discourse, even if in its delivery it is managed or repackaged; *Ally McBeal*, on the other hand, offers a postfeminist (backlash) discourse. Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy*, although losing narratively, won performatively, as Patricia Mellenkamp (1986) analyzed. And as Janey Place (1980) argued about women in film noir, even if the femme fatale is punished in the end of the film, it is not her demise that we remember but the image and spectacle of her strength (think of Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce* or Gloria Swanson as Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*). In postfeminist television, however, we have women who lose both narratively and performatively. There is no power in their spectacle, even if they are presented as being the agents of their own spectacle.<sup>12</sup> For all of Ally’s slapstick pratfalls and near-psychotic fantasies, she does not win performatively because she is unable to rise above the (David Kelley’s) text.

### Postfeminist Pleasure in *Sex and the City*

The women in *Sex and the City* wield control textually as well as performatively, perhaps because they are not in pursuit of an elusive ideal. Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte, and Samantha have imperfect (albeit pretty glamorous) lives and are not seeking perfection. Instead, contrary to the postfeminist angst represented in larger culture, although sometimes troubled, in the end these postfeminist women are shown as satisfied with their lives and, more important, with their friendships.

Their perspectives and experiences are presented and debated within the framework of friendship. And it is within the network and support of

women that individual characters come to resolutions about their problems or questions. In a recent episode of the series that is in its fourth season, newly married Charlotte decides, tentatively at first, to quit her job. Her friends are honest in their reactions (unfavorable), but it is through their differing opinions that Charlotte comes to feel firm in her own. The episode begins with the four women meeting for a meal, a regular ritual, and with Charlotte making her announcement to a shocked and somewhat judgmental group. They are dubious of her choice, and Miranda retorts, "Trey [her husband] suggested it?!" Carrie says, "But you love your job." Charlotte replies, "I know. But there's so much more I could do with my life." To which Miranda asks cynically, "Like what?" Charlotte then relays all the possibilities: pregnancy, redecorating their Park Avenue apartment, Indian cooking classes, volunteering at Trey's hospital to help raise money for the pediatric AIDS wing, and perhaps even spending a "lovely afternoon glazing bowls" at Color Me Mine. Carrie's reply is, "Well the cooking and the pediatric AIDS stuff is great. But uh, Color Me Mine, sweetie, if I was walking by and saw you in there, well, I'd just keep on walking. . . . Are you sure you're not just having a bad work week?" Charlotte says, "No, that's not it. I'm quitting, th-that's what I want to do, yup." Samantha then quips, "Well, be damned sure before you get off the ferris wheel. Because the women wanting to get on are 22, perky, and ruthless."<sup>13</sup> Charlotte spends the episode becoming secure in her decision.

Carrie is the focus of the second story line, which is about her needing to be forgiven for cheating on her boyfriend. She realizes that she is being punished for "her Big mistake" (she cheated with her ex-boyfriend named Big, as in Mr. Big). After taking various forms of punishment—her boyfriend's coldness, meanness, resentment, flirting with other women, and her picking up after his dog—and after her friends ask/tell her "how much longer are you going to punish yourself?" Carrie confronts her boyfriend. She says he cannot keep punishing her and she cannot keep punishing herself and that she is sorry. She then beseeches (although not begs) for forgiveness. She repeats, "You have to forgive me" seven times as though a mantra as well as a demand. They embrace. She is not simply punished for her (sexual) excess as occurs in traditional Hollywood texts, but rather, she recognizes and names the fact that she is being punished—yes, for a moral mistake, but also for being a human being, a sexual woman. She forgives herself and then asks for forgiveness from others. This is a kind of agency that one could call postfeminist that is not set within the framework of backlash politics.

Miranda's character is the prototypical career woman, although she, too, is complicated. Still, she is the one most easily identifiable as the feminist: she is a lawyer and also "bitchy." It is she who Charlotte needs to win over to "get behind her decision" the most. Charlotte calls Miranda the next

morning: "You were so judgmental at the coffee shop yesterday. You think I'm one of those women. One of those women we hate who just works until she gets married." She continues on, striding from one lavish room being redecorated to another: "The women's movement is supposed to be about choice. If I choose to quit my job, that's my choice." Miranda musters, "The women's movement? Jesus Christ, I haven't even had coffee yet." Charlotte declares, "It's my life, and my choice. . . . Admit it, you're being judgmental!" Miranda then replies, "If you have a problem quitting your job, maybe you should take it up with your husband." Charlotte is offended (not really though, as this kind of venting is part of the process of her decision making). She states that she is quitting her job to make her life better and "do something worthwhile like have a baby and cure AIDS." Miranda, exasperated and getting ready for work, simply responds, "You get behind your choice." Charlotte exclaims, "I am behind my choice. I choose my choice." She needs her friends' support (perhaps more than her husband's) to make such important, feminist choices.

Samantha represents the sexual revolution—in its entirety. She is an over-the-top character, yet not a clown or merely a spectacle. She is a sexually free, sexually indulgent, smart, successful woman. She does often serve as comic relief; that is, the sex she has is put into a humorous light rather than an objectified spotlight. But her character is believable. More important, even if she is bragging, she represents woman's full and passionate desire, unleashed and unpunished. Her postfeminist pleasure is wild as well as sated.

Finally, it is significant to consider the space of pleasure that the women in *Sex and the City* occupy. They move through many different spaces: their apartments, restaurants, bars, art galleries, ball parks, the country/suburbs, and all over Manhattan. Unlike the women in *Ally McBeal*, who seem confined to the Boston law office, the bar on the first floor of the same building, and Ally's apartment (as well as her shrink's office), the women in *Sex and the City* go out and move throughout the space of the city. (It ought to be noted that the HBO program has a significantly higher budget than the network television show; still, Ally's pleasure and search for self exists primarily in an internal, psychic world rather than in the external "real world.") In her book on feminist geographies, Linda McDowell (1999, 150) wrote that she wants to blur the sharp associations of gender and space, "and suggest that there is a messier and more complicated set of relationships to be uncovered since so many activities transgress the clear associations between femininity and privacy on the one hand, and masculinity and public spaces on the other." The women in *Sex and the City* surely cross such boundaries. Moreover, McDowell (1999, 155) referenced Elizabeth Wilson's book, *The Sphinx in the City*, in which Wilson disagrees with Janet Wolff's contention that a female flaneur—a flaneuse—is an impossibility. These

women are not masquerading nor are they impersonating men; instead, they are experiencing urban space and participating in urban spectacle and taking (postfeminist) pleasure in it.

What marks *Sex and the City* out most clearly from *Ally McBeal* is the politics of the happy ending. There is a true sisterhood represented in the former, unlike the stereotypical cattiness often played up in the latter. Moreover, the women in *Sex and the City* represent a range of multifaceted characters, a range of different kinds of women, rather than simple tropes (e.g., the bitch, the slut, the good girl, the working woman); they can all be a little of each. And at the end of each episode, there is not the ironic and neat answer that independent women are confused and miserable, which is essentially the message in *Ally McBeal*, but the women are left fairly satisfied. In the episode analyzed here, for instance, Charlotte is finally happy quitting her job, Miranda finds joy in cooking and not working because of a neck injury, Carrie finds forgiveness, and Samantha finds yet another great bed partner. They, in their complicated and imperfect lives, are happy.

### Concluding Remarks: Television Criticism and Postfeminism

Television Studies since the beginning has been feminist: television criticism is feminist criticism because its goal is to understand television in its workings as a site for stories for and about women but within patriarchy. It has been studied as a piece of domestic furniture as well as a cultural medium. From very early on, although similar to film in its adherence to gender ideology, television studies delineated the ways in which television was very different from the cinematic experience. The major differences are twofold: (1) the patriarchal gaze of cinema is the heterogeneous glance in television, and (2) film theory has had a difficult time accounting for the female spectator, whereas in television, the female consumer and thereby the female viewer is acknowledged and even targeted. (And furthermore, female spectatorial pleasure is different in television.) It is not a coincidence that so many television programs star female protagonists, which is still a rarity in American cinema. (Erin Brockovich is most recently offered up—cleavage and all—as our millennial heroine.)

To what degree a female-centered television supertext provides or allows for feminism to emerge remains a question. Elsbeth Probyn's (1997) idea of feminism as the other in television sets feminism in (subtextual) opposition to a show's real heroine. Furthermore, she argued that postfeminism in television came hand in hand with new traditionalism, as she quotes from Leslie Savan:

"It was never an issue except among feminists who felt that we were telling women to stay home and have babies. We're saying that's okay. But that's not all we're saying. We're saying they have a choice." As Leslie Savan has pointed out, new traditionalism has become synonymous with a new age of "choiceoisie" and it is precisely this ideology of choice that articulates new traditionalism and post-feminism. (Probyn 1997, 130)

Television criticism has consistently accounted for and analyzed female characters and female viewers and the choices that they have. Emerging from the (second-wave) feminist movement, television criticism shares the goals of deconstructing systems of power and systems of representation. Now that we are, apparently, in a postfeminist era, I think a kind of postfeminist television criticism must also emerge.

Postfeminist television criticism would include a consideration of race as well as class. Neither *Ally McBeal* nor *Sex and the City* successfully addresses or includes women of color. Ling in *Ally McBeal*, in addition to being a problematic representation of an Asian American woman, is not fully integrated with the rest of the characters. As for the urban space in *Sex and the City*, one would think Manhattan is all white with the exception of "the Korean" Carrie gets her orange juice from and the Asian ladies who do their nails. Postfeminism, at least in these television programs, is racialized as white and upper middle class.

A postfeminist television criticism would include in its analysis of television an acknowledgement (however regretfully) that a feminist discourse has been overtaken by a backlash against feminism, which I refer to as postfeminist discourse. Thus, we need to see how prowoman values (which exist in the social world) have been converted into prowoman rhetoric (which is mediated through texts) and then set up in opposition to feminist objectives (also converted from actual values into stereotyped feminist rhetoric). That is, we have to see how the figure of the working woman on television displays and declares that she is liberated (i.e., postfeminist), because she is able to say as Ally would say, "I am a strong working woman whose life feels empty without a man." (Ally also said, "I am a sexual object for God's sake! He couldn't give me a little grope?") Joyce Millman (1997, 4) wrote that *Ally McBeal* suggests that women today are beyond feminism and that "it's strong to be self-diminishing, smart to be indecisive, brave to be a wimp." Postfeminist television criticism would take into account this turnaround in what is considered a strong woman, a turnaround that has engendered a televisual discourse that is prowoman but antifeminist.

One critic wrote that "Ally McBeal is the epitome of the post-modern lawyer who exists in a world where there is little distinction, if any, between private conduct and public image. . . . For Ally, the law and lawyering is an

outlet for her emotional turmoil and her sexual fantasy" (Epstein, 1999, 38). Another critic declared, "But I don't want to mislead you into thinking 'Ally McBeal' is a show about the law. Hey, this is Fox! 'Ally McBeal' is a show about a girl and her love life" (Millman, 1997, 3). More seriously, however, Millman (1997, 2) argued,

"Ally McBeal" and its high strung, feisty heroine are glossy, commercial appeals to the sisterly feeling of female consumers. But what they're really pitching is a male wish-list kind of feminism where women are independent and strong—within reason, of course—and looking foxy counts for 75 percent of the total grade.

This "brainy babe" displays a "do-me feminism," as Ruth Shalit (1998, 28) described. She wrote that such representations of do-me feminism on television serves to "pander to politically correct sensibilities while attracting male viewers in droves." *Ally McBeal* is a television text that offers freedom through a masquerade that "is not one." The women characters on the program are represented as strong women who express their desires and acknowledge the heterosexual world; but their main strategy for survival and success—and happiness—is through their sexuality. If this is post-feminist, what was prefeminist?

In the move from modernity to postmodernity, from the centered self to the decentered subject, women (real and represented) did not get our turn. Just because postfeminism and postmodernism declare the feminist revolution complete and call for pluralism in subjecthood does not mean that we need—or ought—to accept a self-objectifying, schizophrenic woman (i.e., Ally) as our heroine. In fact, we need to actively resist being offered the (s)crap(s) we have been thrown: a posthero as our heroine.

## Notes

1. I realize that we have now moved to "sex in the millennium," which takes us to the open possibilities of the internet and cyber sex. Discussions are arising on how gender can be transcended on the internet because gender is disembodied. But I am talking about embodied sex—call me old-fashioned.

2. The syndicated *V.I.P.* (1998-present) is arguably another postfeminist program. It is a television show, about women bodyguards no less, starring Pamela Anderson as Vallery Irons. In April 2000, Anderson split with ex-husband Tommy Lee, again, and as of June 2000, Anderson's representatives have confirmed that she has dropped the Lee from her last name.

3. This methodology is taken by L. Star and referenced by Ann Brooks (1997).

4. *Xena: Warrior Princess*, which is syndicated, is deserving of a separate and full study. The program achieves on many levels: in offering a woman action hero who

is not simply a woman in drag or a woman who becomes a man to become a hero. More particularly, the program challenges narrative and normative heterosexuality and patriarchy in featuring a female buddy (love) story and upholding Amazon women communities and philosophies.

5. See the discussion of women in 1960s television in my forthcoming article, "'Serving' Orientalism: Negotiating Identity Through the Television Text."

6. Andreas Huyssen (1986) wrote in the well-known essay "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other" that there is a gendering of inferior mass culture as feminine.

7. Television viewing has moved beyond the living room. See Anna McCarthy's (2001) new book, *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*.

8. I thank Hailey Eber and other members of our class, "Feminism and Film & Television at Northwestern University," in spring 2000.

9. I call this *Ally McBeal* feminism as well as Victoria's Secret feminism, often the show's sponsor, along with Herbal Essence, whose commercials contain women's orgasmic cries of delight at their soft and shiny hair and even including one commercial with a lawyer having her hair washed by three buff bailiffs.

10. This is episode 319, "Do You Wanna Dance," which first aired May 8, 2000, on CBS. There are two main major story lines: first, a court case against a man who has had an affair with his best friend's wife, and the other is about Ally's meeting someone on the internet, having internet sex with him, then finding out he is 16 and she is getting arrested for statutory rape (she is found not guilty).

11. The soundtrack to *Ally McBeal* is very popular, and there are several *Ally McBeal* soundtrack CDs by Vonda Shephard, who is even featured in the opening credit sequence.

12. Although arguably it is the writer of the show more than the actress who is the agent of this spectacle.

13. Amanda Fazzone criticized the National Organization for Women's choices of female role models on television in an essay in the 30 July issue of *The New Republic*. She argued that the choice of shows starring twenty-somethings such as *Felicity*, *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, *Charmed*, and *7th Heaven* are not feminist by writing: "It's clear that these female leads are marketed outside their time slots not for their smarts and self-confidence but for their sex appeal" (as quoted in the *New York Times*, 30 July, 2001, C1).

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