

MODELING PROFESSIONAL FEMININITY THROUGH U.S. MEDIA CULTURE,  
1963-2015

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## ABSTRACT

Erin Marie Arizzi: Modeling Professional Femininity Through U.S. Media Culture, 1963-2015.  
(Under the direction of Richard Cante)

From 1963 to 2015, the introduction of women into the U.S. workplace has dramatically altered cultures of work. In this dissertation, I explore the relationship between women and work not through “work life balance,” but through an analysis of various models of professional femininity through U.S. media culture. I track these figures in terms of what I call, “the professionalization of femininity,” considering forms of the professionalization of domesticity in entrepreneurial homemaking and home economics, and the professionalization of feminism in the form of the feminist professor, the feminist activist, and the career woman. I am interested in exploring degraded sites of feminist theory (the heterosexual cis-gender white woman, the domestic, the mainstream, etc.) precisely because these sites offer insight into liberal feminism’s internal contradictions. This is then, both a study of the contradictions implicit within femininity (between domesticity and feminism), and a study of historical change.

My archive includes various materials from the women's liberation movement as well as the work and lives of three particular women, each of whom has a particular relation to professional femininity through U.S. media culture. Considering professional femininity since the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* and working across rhetoric, media studies, history, and feminist/gender studies, this project considers the figures under discussion as models and also as modeling forms of professional femininity at multiple levels and in relation to various scenes (of knowledge production, genre, media culture, etc). Individual chapters discuss Joan

Didion's literary and journalistic work in relation to the 1960s, Ree Drummond's work as a blogger in relation to the invention of the internet and the emergence of new forms of domesticity, and Kelly Reichardt's filmmaking in relation to realist aesthetics. The story I tell traces these contradictions, as I move from Joan Didion's depictions of professional femininity in relation to women's liberation, to Ree Drummond's affirmatively positive professionalized domesticity in relation to the history of home economics, and finally, to Kelly Reichardt's America, where a crisis involving professional femininity is being represented through a kind of cinematic realism that has echoes in early (and forgotten) feminist film theory.

For Frances Dlouhy, Bernice Panzner, and Betty Jane Arizzi.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Every act of writing is an act of collaboration, and nothing I have ever written has been as collaborative as this dissertation. This project emerged from conversations with professors, friends, and family over the course of many years, some of which took place in graduate seminars, and others, in living rooms and kitchen tables over home-cooked meals. I am grateful to the many people whose influence has helped shaped my ideas, my interests, and my writing.

Over the years, many teachers have helped shape me as a writer and a thinker. At Villanova University, I became enamored with the humanities in classes taught by expert professors like Paul Danove, John Immerwahr, Catherine Kerrison, Heidi Rose, Paul Steege, and especially Bryan Crable. In their classes, I was exposed to literatures and methodologies that continue to influence the way I read, write, and think. After college, at UNC and Duke, I found mentors in Ken Hillis, Sarah Sharma, Emily Burrell, and Liz Grosz, all of whom helped me connect the strands that eventually became this dissertation project.

My committee has been a model of intellectual support, and has also given me the space I needed to write my own way through the problems I encountered in my research. As I wrote this dissertation, I heard each of their voices in my ears. Carole Blair challenged me to define my terms and to address history head on. Kimberly Lamm encouraged me to think about femininity in terms of both philosophy and genre. Mike Palm reminded me to think about labor and economics, which I sometimes forgot I was interested in. Robyn Wiegman helped me find the right words to deal with the stickiest problems in this project, and helped me struggle through the work of writing (both figuratively and literally). Finally, Rich Cante, whose influence is most

prevalent and most obscure, has been an extremely honest guide throughout the entire process of graduate school, and especially, the work of writing a dissertation. At the level of my thinking, Rich encouraged me to keep pursuing the questions I was interested in— often helping me articulate connections I didn't realize I was making. At the level of writing, he challenged me to always say precisely what I meant, and to eliminate all weak, vague, or meaningless language. It has not been easy! But Rich has never pretended that any of this is easy.

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I am especially grateful to my oldest friends, the ones that are really like family—Jen Ellis, Mary Wagner, Mike Wagner, Sarah Koller, and Tom Falconer—for being there at every stage of this long writing process, and especially, for reminding me not to take myself too seriously. My family has never doubted my ability to complete this dissertation, even in the moments and years when I most doubted myself. Mom, Dad, Sara, and Joe—I am forever grateful for your unshakable faith in me.

It is very hard to live with someone who is writing a dissertation, so finally, I must acknowledge the person who has lived almost as close to this project as I have. Chris, thank you

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## PREFACE

When I was 11 years old, my mother's sister's husband (my Uncle) had a massive heart attack and died. My aunt was left with two small children and no income. I don't remember the funeral or the wake, but I vividly remember my mother's admonition that I should take note of what had happened to my Aunt and make sure that when I grew up, the same didn't happen to me. Husbands may die, she said, they also might leave you. She sang the same refrain again, years later, when another Uncle fell ill with ALS. His wife, another Aunt, had been a nurse, but she had stayed home with the kids and let her certification expire. The story for my mother was the same: never allow yourself to believe that someone else will take care of you, you must be able to take care of yourself. When my father was laid off from his job, both of my parents acknowledged that my mother's career was a saving grace. Work, for my mother, is not about wish fulfillment; it is about having the resources to put food on the table, to make life livable. My mother, a white woman born with privilege and opportunity, sees economic independence as a good in and of itself. She enjoys her work, but it does not define her. In articles about working women published in and outside of the academy, I don't see many stories like my mother's represented. This dissertation is an attempt to bridge this gap.

Within the family, we refer to my paternal grandfather as a hustler. He always had a job, but never anything steady or secure. To make ends meet, my grandmother worked as an administrator at a small real estate firm, and on Saturday nights, as a cocktail waitress at a club in New York City. My father and his sister were looked after by other mothers in their close-knit Jewish/Italian neighborhood in the Bronx. My maternal grandmother never worked; her

husband, my other grandfather, was an electrician. His union membership ensured that he made a good salary, and his insistence on moonlighting always kept their large family afloat.

Recently, my mother lent her parents season one of *Mad Men*. She thought they would like seeing the 1960s on screen. My grandparents enjoyed the show, but were quick to point out that it did not reflect their experience. "Your father," my grandmother said to my mother, "never worked in the city, and we never had a nanny!" She said that last part, about the nanny, with an eye raise and a curl of the lip, to remind us that she was not the Betty Draper kind of 1960s housewife. When I ask my grandmother how she managed four children in diapers and three others in middle and high school she looks at me like I have asked a very silly question. She says, "Look at your mother, she had three kids and she worked full-time! You do what you have to do." This is the ethos of my maternal grandmother; she has little tolerance for laziness or excuses. My other grandmother has regrets. She worked her whole life and is less than impressed with what she has to show for it. Perhaps this is a personality distinction—they are very different sorts of women—but maybe such personalities are the result of different life experiences. In either case, I find these conversations fascinating precisely because they have so little in common with my archival research.

When I read about women who describe a domestic pull that draws them away from wage labor and into the home, "Husbands and partners sometimes die" is the refrain I hear in my head. The subtext of course, is that sometimes husbands (or partners) leave. There is a history of this predicament in my own family, perhaps part of the mantra. In the family, most of my great grandfathers are referred to as "bums." One of them was supposedly "taken out" by the Italian mob because of his gambling debts. His wife and children were spared, according to the story, because he didn't squeal on his perpetrators when the police made a visit to his hospital bed.

Another great grandfather ran off, leaving his young wife to support two small children on her own. Another was an army deserter; he fled his training camp in Texas and later used the birth certificate of his oldest son (who had died as a baby) to claim citizenship. The only time he didn't spend his paycheck on booze was when he was serving in the Second World War, and his checks were mailed straight home to his wife. These stories produced women who expected to carry the economic burden; they worked not because of professional aspirations, but because they were not willing to depend on the men in their lives. Knowledgeable of this heritage, my mother was always adamant that each of her children (daughters as well as sons) should have a career. Her position in the so-called mommy-wars was not political, it was pragmatic. She didn't want us to find ourselves beholden to absent or unworthy men.

My grandmothers were both born in the early 1930s, contemporaries of Betty Friedan and Joan Didion (two of the key figures to this dissertation). Though the women in my family were of the same generation as Friedan and Didion, their lives followed completely different trajectories.<sup>1</sup> After high school, Didion and Friedan went on to college. My grandmothers got married. Friedan's diagnosis of 'the problem that has no name' in American housewives was a solidly middle class phenomenon. The subjects of her interviews were Smith alumni, women who had graduated from an elite women's college. They were married to men working in big office buildings or hospitals, who could afford to employ household help, who had the time to

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<sup>1</sup>Importantly, Didion and Friedan were not of the same class background. Didion can trace her family back to some of Northern California's first white settlers. She is a blue-blooded WASP. In one of the first, and best profiles of Didion-- by Michiko Kakutani in 1979-- a scene is recounted in which Didion's mother, introducing herself to her new son-in-law, John Gregory Donne, on Didion's wedding day, "You know those little old ladies in tennis shoes you've heard about? Well, I'm one of them" (Kakutani, "Joan Didion: Staking Out California"). Friedan, on the other hand, was the child of Russian Jewish immigrants. Her father owned a Jewelry store in Peoria, Illinois. Her mother was a homemaker. Friedan was born of an upwardly mobile middle class family; Didion was born into old money.

ponder their own existence and their hopes and dreams. In today's "mommy wars," middle class women debate about work and life in a similar vein.

More often than not, the story told about white heterosexual women today is either the Betty Friedan story or the Opt-Out narrative. The Betty Friedan story is that women stuck at home with the children suffer from a problem that has no name—these women need the intellectual stimulation, the challenge of a job—they need feminism to save them from the drudgery of domesticity. The other story, the domestic tug story, has many forms, but always inevitably involves women choosing to leave their careers to be there for small children. Most recently, this has been called "the new domesticity," and is illustrated by images of women's studies majors who have fled corporate culture to raise their children on freshly baked bread and backyard chickens. Rather than talking about the fact that women need to work to pay the bills, there is a kind of cultural amnesia at play that assumes white heterosexual women are working because they want to, or staying home because they hate work. In such narratives, work is either a place of intellectual fulfillment or a place of anguish. This story erases the many distinctions that exist among white heterosexual women, especially those of class and geographic origin. I want to attend to the nuances of the overwrought 'work life balance' discussion and also, to think about how actual solutions to this problem might be found.

I found my way into these nuances when I found Ellen Swallows Richards. In the story of Ellen Swallows Richards—the would-be chemist who made herself into a domestic scientist so that she could work in the University—I found a beating heart to animate this project. Richards was born in 1842, and over the course of her life, she saw opportunities for women expand in part through the new discipline, home economics, which she helped found. In the history of U.S. home economics, which I discuss at length in chapter two, I found a historical moment to ground

my sense that there were multiple contradictions at work in notions of white femininity that had been under-explored.<sup>2</sup> Home economics was a disciplinary formation always beleaguered by these contradictions. At the turn of the twentieth century, the founders of Home Economics sought a refuge for women who wished to pursue careers in higher education. They tacitly understood that in order to do the scientific and policy work they wanted to do they would have to make appeals to their own femininity. Through their position as women and their scientific backgrounds they established their credibility as practitioners of the home and family, but their personal lives did not necessarily mirror these professional commitments. Many of the leading professors and practitioners within the field never married or had children. Some spent their adult lives living with other women; others had modern companionate marriages where work was prioritized over child rearing.

Home Economists in the United States struggled with the limitations of their time both in their work and in their personal lives. They applied hard science backgrounds in chemistry or physics to household sanitation and nutrition because they would not have been welcome in the 'real' chemistry lab. They lived in alternative households while teaching students traditional gender roles. In spite of the many contradictions that characterized the discipline of Home Economics, at its height, it was an extremely powerful and influential discipline. From 1923 through 1960, within the Department of Agriculture, there was a Federal Bureau of Home Economics. This Bureau was led by Louis Stanley, a home economist trained in biochemistry. From the 1920s through the 1980s, every high school in America, and most land grant colleges,

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<sup>2</sup>In the mid-1990s, with the publication of the important collection *Rethinking Home Economics* (Stage and Vincenti 1997), scholars began to reconsider the role home economists had played in social reform throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. See works by Rossiter (1995), Nerad (1999), Leavitt (2002), Elias (2008), Gordan (2009), Goldstein (2012). Much of this work has been facilitated by projects that archive departments of Home Economics, such as the Hearth project at Cornell.

offered a curriculum in Home Economics. The field had a direct connection to young women, and many students of home economics went on to have successful careers in public policy, private industry, and higher education. While Home Economics was an easy target for second wave feminist critiques—as the science of the traditional patriarchal household—it was a field that offered the possibility of higher education and a profession to young girls all over the country at a time when such prospects were limited.

The most fascinating thing I learned in my research was how much political power home economists wielded in the early to mid-twentieth century. The two pieces of legislation that expanded funds to land grant universities, passed in 1914 and 1917, made allowances for agricultural colleges to expand "agricultural extension work." Included in the language of each law, next to subjects like "agriculture" and "trade education," was "home economics." When I stumbled upon this history I felt myself longing for a time when the concerns of the home were given thoughtful consideration by powerful political players. From the 1960s on, home economics departments at land grant universities around the U.S. were reorganized and restructured, the faculty that had made their home in home economics were moved to other departments—public health, human relations, nutrition, social work—and unsurprisingly, these new departments were led by men rather than women.

Reading about this history, I was overcome with nostalgia for something that has not existed in my lifetime—for the kind of political culture in which big government is able to enact policies on behalf of all Americans, the new deal is only the most famous of these policies, but there were many such federal programs. I wish for a nation where we invest in infrastructure and expertise to solve the pressing problems of our day, where much needed health care reform could be comprehensive, and accepted gratefully, rather than challenged in the Supreme Court. Home

Economists were interested in some of the problems that still haunt our political culture—they advocated for affordable and high quality day care, better food standards, sanitary and high quality public housing. In a time of increasing inequality, where single mother supported households are on the rise, structures that support women, men, and children are desperately needed. Home Economists were also willing to embrace the desire to make a home. They thought of home making as important work that had value that could not be measured in mere dollars and cents. They did not see this as a natural extension of femininity so much as a moral good.

Over the course of my graduate education, I have had countless discussions and read hundreds of articles about work-life balance, but in all of that reading, I never came across any discussion that took home economics seriously. Once I found such discussions, in the midst of dissertation writing, the ideas in this dissertation began to take shape. What I try to explore in this dissertation is the history of the now omnipresent expression 'work-life balance.' I examine this relationship not through the history of women's work per se, but through a history of various women-authored representations of women's work, and through an analysis of those women's lives (I call these women models of professional femininity). This work has been inspired by the women in my family, women who are both fiercely independent—who have careers, retirement accounts, and independent desires—and also extremely domestic and committed to home-making. They taught me—intuitively—that the division between domesticity and feminism is false. This dissertation is my attempt to prove through research and analysis that my intuition is right.

Writing this dissertation has also, of course, been my job. This piece of writing is the culmination of years of coursework, exams, and time spent in pursuit of a degree that signifies

the highest level of educational attainment in the humanities. Like the subjects of my dissertation, I have put my own relationship to femininity into the service of my profession. In attempting to untangle and make visible particular forms of white heterosexual femininity, I have been revisiting scenes in U.S. History that made women like my grandmother, my mother and her sisters, and me, too, possible. When I began this project, I thought I was writing about them, about other women. But it turns out, all along I have been writing about myself.



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## INTRODUCTION

In December of 2014, Tamara Straus wrote a widely shared article for UCal Berkeley's alumni magazine titled "What Stalled the Gender Revolution? Child Care that Costs More than College Tuition" (Straus). As her title suggests, Straus's piece claims that the key issue blocking gender equality in the U.S. is a lack of institutional structures that support working mothers. She writes that her mother's generation, what she calls "the Gloria Steinem generation of equal opportunity feminists," "fought and failed to create" such a system (Straus "What Stalled"). Instead of affordable day care, preschool and aftercare for children of all ages, working women today must settle for "three months of maternity leave, 16 days of vacation, and a hodgepodge of 'choices' that depend on whether we have a man, money, or family to help us along" (Straus "What Stalled").

In a strange historical twist, self-described feminists like Straus now commonly hold an entire generation of 1970s feminists responsible for the pressing problems facing contemporary women. According to this kind of narrative, though they fought, feminists of yesteryear ultimately failed to achieve adequate solutions to the problems of working mothers. By emphasizing feminism's failures, such discussions not only discount feminism's successes, they fail to consider the historical context in which such political battles were waged. This discourse is a recent form of what Susan Faludi, in 1981, famously coined as "backlash." As she wrote then, "identifying feminism as women's enemy only furthers the ends of a backlash against women's equality, simultaneously deflecting attention from the backlash's central role and recruiting women to attack their own cause" (*Backlash* xviii). According to Faludi, a backlash "is

most powerful when it goes private, when it lodges inside a woman's mind and turns her vision inward, until she imagines the pressure is all in her head, until she begins to enforce the backlash, too-- on herself" (xxii). The ultimate danger of narratives which claim feminism has failed contemporary women is that such stories chip away at the inner world of individual women. In so much as they "push women back into their 'acceptable' roles," they may even lead women to question their belief in feminism (xxii).

Backlash continues to shape the view the popular press (and sometimes academic feminism) takes toward the 1970s. This most often occurs as an oversimplification of the various positions that were present in what is frequently called second wave feminism.<sup>3</sup> The radical feminist Robin Morgan—who I discuss in chapter two of this dissertation—is, for example, representative of a strand of feminist thought which wanted to eliminate the nuclear family. When Morgan told the American Home Economics Association in 1971 that the system was crumbling, she was not being facetious. She (along with other radical feminists) believed that the nuclear family was breaking down and would be replaced in time by a different form of social organization. Shulamith Firestone went so far as to predict a future where children would be produced entirely outside of the female body (through advanced reproductive technologies) and raised in non-familial communities (Firestone, *The Dialectic*). This was a rejection of the family, and also, of the traditional role women had played (especially white women) in social reproduction. It is not quite accurate to say that such feminists "fought and failed" to create better systems for working mothers. What radical feminists were doing was fighting for entirely new systems, for a revolutionary transformation of the social order. Morgan and Firestone did in fact

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<sup>3</sup>Recent work in women's history has troubled the wave metaphor, for an overview of this work, see the important collection *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, edited by Nancy A. Hewitt, and especially Becky Thompson's essay "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism."

fail to bring about the new world they imagined, but it matters that they were fighting for something radically different than anything being articulated in the current political landscape in the U.S. Radical feminists like Morgan and Firestone envisioned feminist revolution, not reform. Liberal feminists like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem who fought to reform the system that already existed are also misunderstood by the simple claim of "failure." Some of the most important legal battles that mainstream feminism took up—for example, the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971, the best hope the U.S. has ever had for something like universal child care for all children—did not in fact pass. But is feminism to blame? That particular bill passed through both legislative bodies, but was vetoed when it reached President Nixon's desk because opponents of the bill saw universal childcare as expressive of communist ideology (Dinner "The Universal Childcare Debate").

Instead of talking about the history of failed legislation, political pundits and journalists alike tend to talk about the problem of "work life balance," the difficulty women face in managing their roles as workers and mothers. Usually, the manifestation of this problem occurs, at least on the pages of popular magazines and newspapers, as an ongoing and never-ending debate about whether or not women can "have it all;" can have both successful careers and meaningful personal lives (including companionship and/or marriage and motherhood). My contribution to this long-winded discussion of work-life balance, this dissertation, considers professional femininity through media culture from 1963 to the present, as understood through three particular case studies. It offers an analysis of representations of femininity and feminism that has much to bear on contemporary debates about the way men and women live and work in the U.S.

To consider the problems of the present, my dissertation returns to the past, and in particular, to scenes from the 1960s and 1970s. My archive includes various materials from the women's liberation movement as well as the work and lives of three particular women whose work has—at particular moments—helped define what professional femininity means in U.S. culture. Alongside my analysis of the life and works of writer Joan Didion, blogger Ree Drummond, and filmmaker Kelly Reichardt, I consider the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, Robin Morgan's address to the American Association of Home Economics in 1971, the International Wages for Housework Campaign (founded in 1972) and the archive of a short lived Feminist Film Magazine called *Women & Film*, published from 1972 to 1975. This is both a study of the contradictions implicit within white femininity and white feminisms, and a study of historical change. Throughout the project, I trace the figures of "the feminist" and "the housewife" through these three historical scenes in order to reframe the relationship between feminism, femininity, and work-life balance. My goal is not evaluation, but description. My hope is that this work might shine a different light on one of the most important obstacles facing feminism today: the making of home in a time of endless work.

It is worth saying, at this point, that this dissertation explores a series of issues and objects that are best characterized as “degraded” within contemporary feminist theory. This is a project about white, middle-class, heterosexual cis-gender women who have had mainstream critical success within popular media culture. Throughout, I pay close attention to degraded theories, institutions, and objects. I am interested in liberal feminism, national cultures, domesticity, cinematic realism, and the theoretical positions of anti-capitalist feminists from the 1970s. My analysis is not intersectional, transnational, or queer. It is not a critique of capitalism. It does not attend to Avant-garde artists, postmodern writers, or experimental filmmakers. I

understand that this approach may seem out-of-touch, and may in fact even be seen as an ‘overcorrection’ in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, I think that this overcorrection could possibly yield something useful at this particular moment, as the normative subject of my dissertation, mainstream femininity, continues to have an extraordinary influence on the everyday lives of human beings, no matter their gender identity or performance.

This project is part of a growing body of academic work that seeks to occupy degraded sites of western feminism in order to understand feminist activists of the 1970s in their own context. Rather than simply describing the limitations of their analysis, this new literature seeks to consider how these activists and theorists negotiated their privilege in their work. Victoria Hesford’s *Feeling Women’s Liberation* (2013) makes the argument that the white women who became attached to the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s were activated by a radical dis-identification with proper femininity. Leah Claire Allen’s dissertation, “Facts and Fictions: Feminist Literary Criticism and Cultural Critique, 1968-2012” revisits and reconsiders “often-repeated narratives about the critical naivety of feminist literary criticism in its initial articulation” (Allen iv). And Shilyh Warren’s 2010 dissertation “Real Politics and Feminist Documentaries: Re-Visioning Seventies Film Feminisms,” reconsiders and rehabilitates the place of feminist documentary in feminist film theory.

These works, considered in relation to other recent titles, especially Jane Gerhard’s 2012 *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007*, Victoria Browne’s 2014 “The Persistence of Patriarchy: Operation Yewtree and the Return of 1970s Feminism,” Kara Mary Van Cleaf’s 2015 “Of Women Born to Mommy Blogged: The Journey from The Personal as Political to the Personal as Commodity,” Georgia Paige Welch’s 2015 “‘Up Against the Wall Miss America:’ Women’s Liberation and Miss Black America in Atlantic



City, 1968,” Lisa Adkins’ 2015 “What can money do? Feminist Theory in Austere Times,” and Claire Potter’s forthcoming book *Beyond Pornography: How Feminism Survived the Age of Reagan*, are part of a growing body of literature that seeks to approach women’s liberation with fresh eyes, and in good faith. Rather than reading classic works for what is missing, feminist academics are increasingly finding that these works contain rich insights into contemporary debates, especially in relation to Marxist feminism and wages for housework campaigns. This dissertation seeks to contribute to this ongoing conversation by exploring some of the internal contradictions of liberal feminism, as they are modeled through the key figures discussed here.

This dissertation is titled “Modeling Professional Femininity through U.S. Media Culture, 1963-2015.” To approach media culture in terms of ‘modeling’ may seem old-fashioned, but it seems to me to be especially necessary at this time. I understand “modeling” as an active process; each of my subjects (Didion, Drummond, and Reichardt) is representative of a particular model of professional femininity, and also, is modeling such forms through her creative works. Modeling, therefore, as a methodological framework, brings up complicated issues regarding history, genre, and the image. Each of my subjects is an image, and each is simultaneously engaged in the construction of images and narratives that relate to and inform how artistic genres like journalism, fiction, domestic advice, and film are historically understood and also, how femininity (as a genre) is constructed and maintained. This is both a historical issue, and also, an issue that has to do with the shifting nature of media culture. The overarching story I tell here has to do with professionalism because of (in part) the shifts that have occurred since 1963 relating to women’s workplace participation. These changes can be seen unfolding in my three case studies in a number of different ways. First, in the kind of images of women that are represented in the work of these three models (in print, online, and on film) and second, in the technological

changes that have occurred, which are manifested by and through changes in the media (in relation to the emergence of new journalism, of the internet, and of American independent cinema).

The primary models in my dissertation are Didion, Drummond, and Reichardt, but throughout, I make reference to a number of other models of professional femininity, including (but not limited to) Martha Rosler, Wendy Wasserstein, Betty Friedan, Silvia Federici, and Robin Morgan. I am also considering the figures of ‘the feminist,’ and ‘the housewife,’ as models of and through which professional femininity is constructed. Modeling, as a verb, has allowed me to consider all of these figures at multiple different levels (in relation to the historical scenes in which they emerge, and also in relation to the genres they are making/remaking in their works) and to highlight the fact that each of these figures is representative of broader phenomena both within her particular historical moment and since.

This is also a media studies project, which attempts to engage in what David Morley has called (2009) “materialist, non-media centric media studies.” Each of my three case studies attempts to depict an entire media environment, which involves not merely media objects, but social relations between people, media objects, and domestic space. As television historian Lynn Spigel puts it, “I am suggesting that we think of television as part of a feedback loop of activities and actions among humans and artifacts that help to produce social environments... media spaces are both human and non-human, places where we form relationships not just with people but also with things (interfaces, sensors, and voices like Siri’s)” (Spigel “TV and the Spaces of Everyday Life”). My analysis follows this kind of thinking, considering the ways in which the media environments in which my subjects worked have changed over time, and what the consequences of such changes may be.

*Part One: How Did We Get Here? The Feminist and the Housewife in Recent History*

Martha Rosler's classic 1975 performance piece "Semiotics of the Kitchen," begins with a close-up shot of her subject (herself) staring coldly into the camera, holding a chalkboard sign with a title card announcing the name of her film. She wears no makeup, with her wavy hair hanging long, parted in the middle. As she struggles to put on an apron over her simple black turtleneck, she says in the clear apathetic voice she uses throughout, "apron." As the piece goes on, Rosler identifies various objects within the kitchen by name and offers demonstrations. The scene in which Rosler's film unfolds is reminiscent of Julia Child's successful cooking show, "The French Chef," which aired from 1963-1973. But while Child's show was characterized by a hostess with a singsong voice and an authentic love of cooking, Rosler's film captures the darker side of domesticity. As Rosler picks up various kitchen tools, bowl, chopper, dish, eggbeater, etc., she mimes using them to cook. Her mimicry is both an effective demonstration of how one might use, for example, a ladle, and also, a mockery of these tools. She uses the label to imitate how one would scoop out a bowl of soup, and then, in the next breath, tosses some of the imaginary soup over her shoulder.

In each of her slow movements, Rosler demonstrates both the effort involved in the work of the kitchen (as when she uses her whole upper body to use a can opener), and the force she seems to feel about the relationship women have traditionally had to the kitchen (as when she bashes a tenderizer into the pan on her stove). The piece reaches a climax when Rosler gets to the letter U, at this point she stops using kitchen devices to represent letters, and begins using her body, culminating in the letter Z, which she draws out exuberantly with her left hand, holding a knife. At this point, Rosler crosses her arms for a moment, and finally, gives a shrug, as if to say,

"that is how I feel about your kitchen." Lurking behind Rosler's semiotics of the kitchen is the relationship between the feminist and the housewife.

This film would hardly have been possible without two key events that helped contextualize this over-determined relationship between feminism and housework. The first was the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. The second was the proliferation of feminist tracts demanding "wages for housework," which questioned the nature of domestic work in the social reproduction of the family. My claim in this section is that the relationship between the cultural figures of the feminist and the housewife changed in the late 1960s, which is to say that this relationship became newly antagonistic (at least in part) as a result of the women's liberation movement. This antagonism is what made Martha Rosler's performance piece both legible and successful as a feminist text in 1975. One of the arguments of this dissertation is that the relationship between the figures of the feminist and the housewife has changed once again. But before getting to the present, it is worth reconsidering the past.

### Feminists Against Housewives

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan painted a portrait of thousands of unsatisfied woman sitting in their immaculate kitchens across the U.S. Friedan famously described these housewives as suffering from a problem "that had no name" (Friedan, 15). These housewives were haunted by the suspicion that there was something more to life than cooking, cleaning, and caring for their children. Friedan surmised, "a baked potato is not as big as the world, and vacuuming the living room floor—with or without makeup—is not work that takes enough thought or energy to challenge any woman's full capacity" (67). The housewife, wrote Friedan, was suffering because she spent her days doing tasks that could easily be performed by an eight-

year-old. These women were suffering because "housework... can hardly use the abilities of a woman of average or normal human intelligence" (255). These words resonated with women all over the country, who made the book an instant best seller.

Friedan's voice crystalized a sentiment that had been brewing throughout the 1950s and 1960s in a postwar culture characterized by conformity and cold war conservatism. Friedan's book inspired thousands of women to consider the notion of gender oppression for the first time, and it argued that each individual woman should be the architect of her own fate. Feminist critic Sandra Dijkstra, writing in 1980, found Friedan's analysis more shallow than the theory offered by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*: "Friedan, in contrast [to Beauvoir], promised American women self-fulfillment within this society, without advocating transformation of its institutions" ("Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan" 300). Dijkstra continued her critique with a familiar charge, "to the extent that it gave women the illusion that equality within the system is possible, that education, a change in perception, a 'new life plan' and legal reform are adequate, the book reinforced the status quo and preached a feminism accessible only to middle-class women" (301). This is to say that *The Feminine Mystique* offered a form of feminism that would only work for those women of a certain socio-economic status.

In 2013, in her book about *TFM* on the occasion of its 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, marriage historian Stephanie Coontz reiterates:

*The Feminine Mystique* contained no call for women to band together to improve their legal and political rights. Instead, it urged women, as individuals, to reject the debilitating myth that their sole purpose and happiness in life came from being a wife and mother, and to develop a life plan that would give meaning to the years after their children left home (Coontz, *A Strange Stirring* 33).

Ultimately, what *The Feminine Mystique* represented was an individualistic approach to the idea of women's oppression. The theory was not about changing society, but changing one's self; hence, individual consciousness raising.

In the present, *The Feminine Mystique* is frequently cast as evidence of second wave feminism's most notorious failure, essentialism. In her analysis of treatments of the book by mass media, communications researcher Kathryn Cady (2009) writes, "by often conflating *The Feminine Mystique* with feminism, feminism also became publicly narrowed into a purely White, middle-class movement for professional gain" ("Labor and Women's Liberation," 351). As a result, in the context of U.S. Feminist history, feminist theorist Victoria Hesford (2013) writes, the book becomes "a totemic remainder of the second-wave movement's bourgeois preoccupations and assumptions" (*Feeling Women's Liberation* 112). Hesford and Cady point out that because Friedan's text is often (if incorrectly) cited as the origin of second wave feminism, it has been over-burdened with significance.

Recently, academics like Hesford and Cady (as well as Johnson and Lloyd, 2004, Gillis and Hollows, 2009, and Gill, 2013) have begun to re-visit the work in its own historical context. In Gill's words, because "critical attention has centered of late on the experience of women beyond Friedan's purview," there has been a tendency to "overlook the hidden diversities and dissensions within her original constituency" ("Quite the opposite of a feminist," 425). Recent readings, though careful to acknowledge the limits<sup>4</sup> of Friedan's analysis, are interested in considering what the book might have to say if read in context. Victoria Hesford claims that *The Feminine Mystique* "conjured up the problem of middle-class femininity as hetero-domesticity"

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<sup>4</sup>For an overview of these critiques see: Horowitz (1998) *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique*, Dijkstra (1980) "Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan: the Politics of Omission," Meyerowitz (1993) "Beyond the Feminist Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958," and Hooks (1984) *Feminist theory from margin to center*.

and in so doing, "incited postwar feminist imaginings" of a different kind of everyday life (*Feeling History* 111). According to Hesford, *The Feminine Mystique* presented feminism as an alternative to conventional forms of femininity; as a result, she claims that the book (in conjunction with other key texts) set the stage for radical identifications. Nevertheless, Friedan's account of U.S. femininity was, at best, partial. The caricature of the desperate housewife that Friedan presented was good for helping to construct political identifications out of women's personal lives, but it has resulted in an unfortunate legacy for feminism, wherein the identification 'feminist' is understood as antithetical to the identity 'housewife.'

Friedan did nothing to consider the question of who would do the housework if all the housewives she interviewed found work outside the home. For her audience, presumably, the answer was to be found in hired help. But there were many feminists who were interested in just this question, and whose answers proved more radical (and structural) than Friedan's. The International Campaign for Wages for Housework was founded in 1972, in a paper presented by Selma James at the National Women's Liberation Movement Conference in Manchester, UK (Bracke "Between the Transnational and the Local" 629). In her presentation, James argued that the waging of housework should become the overall goal of the women's liberation movement, along with five other demands. In the introduction to her anthology *Politics of Housework*, Ellen Malos reprints these demands:

1. We demand the right to work less.
2. We demand a guaranteed income for women and for men, working or not working, married or not... we demand wages for housework. All housekeepers are entitled to wages (men too).
3. It is in this context that we demand control of our bodies... We demand the right to have or not have children.
4. We demand equal pay for all.
5. We demand an end to price rises.
6. We demand free community-controlled nurseries and childcare.

(qtd. in Malos, 15)

Stella James's demand for 'wages for housework' was immediately provocative. As Bracke puts it:

the problems connected to the waging of housework, in a context where the vast majority of care duties in the family were still carried out by women, were obvious: not only was it likely to entrench women's roles in the household, there was a danger that it would provide an 'easy' solution to the sexual division of labor in the family and take that issue off the agenda of mixed political organisations [sic]" (Bracke 630).

In other words, if women were paid wages for the work they did in the home, wouldn't they become further tied to traditional gender roles? And wasn't this solution—money – far too simple to actually lead to dramatic change in society?

In addition to debating whether or not advocates actually wanted what they were asking for, feminists debated the specific character of housework as social reproduction. The question of what kind of value housewives produced (surplus value, use value, etc.) was hotly contested, as was the relationship between the work of the household and the work of the factory. Silvia Federici's 1975 essay "Wages for Housework," offers a sense of clarity—Federici writes "The difference with housework lies in the fact that not only has it been imposed on women, but it has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character" (Federici *Revolution at Point Zero* 16). For Federici, this naturalization of housework in the character of femininity is a direct result of capital. Later in the same essay, she writes,

In the same way as god created Eve to give pleasure to Adam, so did capital create the housewife to service the male worker physically, emotionally, and sexually, to raise his children, mend his socks, patch up his ego when it is crushed by the work and the social relations (which are relations of loneliness) that capital has reserved for him. It is precisely this peculiar combination of physical, emotional and sexual services that are involved in the role women must perform for capital that creates the specific character of



that servant which is the housewife, that makes her work so burdensome and at the same time so invisible (Federici 17).

Federici's words reflect the Marxist underpinnings of advocates for Wages for Housework. In her view, the housewife, like the factory worker before her, was ideologically bound to her position. The challenge of the feminist movement was to enable her to see that she was exploited both physically and emotionally. The wage would offer material compensation for her unpaid work, and also, a symbolic acknowledgment that her work was economically productive.

Leading figures in the International Campaign for Wages for Housework made it clear that their "demand" was about more than mere wages. As Della Costa wrote in her 1972 paper, "Women and the Subversion of Community," the demand for wages for housework "is a goal which is not only a thing but, like capital at any moment, essentially a stage of antagonism of a social relation," that is to say that the demand was for both a particular material object—wages – but also, a phase in a larger political struggle (Costa, N17, page 53). In Federici's words, wages for housework was not merely a request for money, it was a political perspective. In 1975, she wrote, "if we take wages for housework as a political perspective, we can see that struggling for it is going to produce a revolution in our lives and in our social power as women" (Federici *Revolution* 16). For these thinkers, the demand "wages for housework" brought into being a new way of thinking about the relationship between women, work, and the household. As such, it had the potential to produce revolutionary subjects. According to Kathi Weeks, writing in 2011, what these advocates were doing was performative as well as productive. Weeks writes, "What is often overlooked in assessments of the demand is its performative dimension: as a perspective, it functioned to produce the feminist knowledge and consciousness it appears to presuppose; as a provocation, it served also to elicit the subversive commitments, collective formations, and

political hopes that it appears only to reflect" (Weeks *The Problem* 131). The demand for wages for housework was itself an important step in bringing about feminist revolution.

Importantly, the Campaign for Wages for Housework saw communally controlled universal nurseries and childcare as necessary short-term solutions for the movement, but they did not see these programs as long-term goals. The ultimate goals were far more radical. Here is Federici again, in the 1975 essay "Wages Against Housework," "to say that we want wages for housework is the first step towards refusing to do it, because the demand for a wage makes our work visible, which is the most indispensable condition to begin to struggle against it, both in its immediate aspect as housework and its more insidious character as femininity" (*Revolution* 19). For Federici, refusing to do housework is a refusal of femininity itself.

In this line of thinking, femininity itself is work. According to Federici "we have cooked, smiled, fucked throughout the years not because it was easier for us than for anybody else, but because we did not have any other choice. Our faces have become distorted from so much smiling, our feelings have got lost from so much loving, our oversexualization has left us completely desexualized" (20). Federici's writings are related to Arlie Hochschild's theorization of emotional labor in *The Managed Heart* (1983), and also, recent feminist work on affect by Sara Ahmed (2010) and Melissa Gregg (2011). As Kathi Weeks rightly points out, "contemporary discussions of the concepts of immaterial and affective labor could be enriched by a better understanding of these [feminist] lineages" (Weeks "Life Within," 233). These lineages are not merely enriching, they are critical to understand in their own terms if one is to effectively evaluate the gains and losses of 1970s feminism. The Wages for Housework campaign may not have seen its demands answered, but it continues to be intellectually

productive because it raises difficult and often unresolvable questions about the relationship between femininity and work.

Mainstream feminist organizations like NOW or *Ms. Magazine* never took up the Wages For Housework position. In part, this was because the position of Wages for Housework was far more collective in nature than the kind of "anti-housework" sentiment evident in, for example, *The Feminine Mystique*. *The Feminine Mystique* encouraged individual women to find fulfilling work outside of home. Wages for Housework, even from the outset, was interested in questioning all forms of work—since all work was related to producing value for capital.

The relationship between the figure of the feminist and the figure of the housewife in contemporary U.S. Culture has been determined in part by the rich history I have just outlined. The intellectual discussions around the feminine mystique and wages for housework that were circulating in the 1960s and 1970s helped make possible Martha Rosler's "Semiotics of the Kitchen." But in 2015, Rosler's "Semiotics of the Kitchen" hits a different chord. In her recent book *Homeward Bound: Why Women are Embracing the New Domesticity* (discussed at length in Chapter Two), Emily Matchar identifies a contemporary obsession with domesticity (including do-it-yourself cooking, crafting, and parenting). Matchar's book illustrates how far the culture has moved from Rosler's "Semiotics of the Kitchen." Because the kitchen increasingly represents an escape from the toils and tribulations of work, it no longer makes cultural sense to seriously envision the kitchen as the site of women's oppression. And yet, the tension Rosler explored in her piece—between the housewife and the feminist—remains prescient. It is the contradiction operating behind conversations of work-life balance, the opt-out revolution, the new domesticity, and "having it all."

What if work is not liberation?: Considering the Professionalization of Femininity

"Work Life Balance" is one of the trendiest topics in contemporary media culture. Articles on the subject regularly go viral almost immediately upon publication, which helps sustain this never-ending conversation. This debate has been alive and well since at least the 1960s, but the most recent battle in what are often referred to as "the mommy wars" was crystalized in a 2003 essay by Lisa Belkin for *The New York Times Magazine*. Belkin's "The Opt-Out Revolution," defined a phenomenon whereby highly educated women left high-power careers in order to be stay-at-home moms. The article initiated a fierce debate in the mainstream media and inspired a plethora of academic articles and monographs aimed at thinking through the complex set of issues underlying Belkin's premise.<sup>5</sup>

In one of the best analyses of the "opt-out" storyline, law professor Joan Williams writes that the consistent appearance of opt-out stories in the mainstream media over the course of many years "provide reassurance that women are happily abandoning their professional/managerial positions, joyfully embracing their roles as stay-at-home moms, and cheerfully giving up the luxuries their paychecks used to cover... In short, nothing needs to change" (*Reshaping the Work-Family Debate* 14). The problem, as Williams and others have explained over and over again, is that the opt-out story is not true. By emphasizing the fact that an elite group of women are choosing to leave the workplace, media accounts like Belkin's misrepresent the situation that underlies such choices. Through in-depth interviews and comprehensive analysis of workplace participation data, researchers Stone and Hernandez find that "women's

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<sup>5</sup>For the immediate media response see Joan Walsh's piece "Clueless in Manhattan," Claudia Wallis's "The Case for Staying Home," and Cathy Young's "Opting Out." For the ten-year follow up piece published in the *New York Times Magazine*, see Judith Warner, "The Opt-Out Generation Wants Back In." For a good overview of the academic response, see Bernie D. Jones' anthology *Women Who Opt Out: The Debate over Working Mothers and Work-Family Balance* (2012).

'opting out' is a response to obstacles to the integration of work and family, not a 'choice' among viable options" ("The Rhetoric and Reality of 'Opting Out'" 50). The problem at the root of work-life balance is as much a result of "the culture and organization of work" as it is a result of gender and class hierarchies (51). This means that women are not the only ones struggling with work-life balance. As evidence by a growing literature<sup>6</sup> on stay-at-home-Dads, the challenge of negotiating one's role as a person (as parent, child, friend) in relation to one's role as a worker is now a problem faced by everyone laboring in the U.S.

This perhaps explains why articles discussing these issues are so widely shared online and in print. Recently, the publication of Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (2013), Hanna Rosin's *The End of Men* (2013), and Anne Marie Slaughter's *Unfinished Business: Women Men Work Family* (2015) have all entered the ring of public comment. While these articles and books regularly describe second wave feminism in broad strokes, discussing women's increased workplace participation and changes in the economy, they rarely discuss feminist thinking on how to deal with the problems brought about by women in the workplace. The absence of such discussions is related to the symbolic relationship between the figure of the housewife and the figure of the feminist. Through keystone texts like *The Feminine Mystique*, popular representations, and also, because of the direction mainstream feminism has moved in since the 1970s, a powerful sense remains that there is a cultural distinction between the feminist and the housewife. The consequence of this sense of disjuncture between feminism and domesticity is a political culture in which few real alternatives are presented for how work and life might be managed so that all people (of all ages) are able to prioritize life building.

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<sup>6</sup>See Paula McDonald and Emma Jeanes' *Men, Wage Work and Family* (2012), Gayle Kaufman's *Superdads: How Fathers Balance Work and Family in the 21st Century* (2013), and Jeremy Smith's *The Daddy Shift: How stay-at-home dads, breadwinner moms, and shared parenting are transforming the American Family* (2009).

This dissertation takes up the tension between the figures of the feminist and the figures of the housewife through the notion of work. During the historical period I discuss (1963-2015), the introduction of women into the U.S. workplace has dramatically altered the culture of work. The "professional woman" is no longer an anomaly to be explored on television or in movies—and yet she continues to be the subject of public discussion and controversy. Work-life balance is the name most often given to such discussions, but in this dissertation, I explore this tension under the rubric of professionalization. I connect "work life balance" to what I refer to as the professionalization of femininity. I discuss the professional femininity in two distinct ways, as the professionalization of domesticity (epitomized by entrepreneurial homemaking and home economics) and the professionalization of feminism (evidenced in the women's studies professor, the feminist film critic, the professional feminist activist). Ultimately, I bring this discussion of the professionalization of femininity to bear upon contemporary problems of work life balance in relation to the International Campaign for Wages for Housework and contemporary precarity.

My interest in the professionalization of femininity is in part informed by my subjects—Didion, Drummond and Reichardt have each mobilized their own performance of professional femininity in their work. Didion's writing is regularly referred to as "feminine" in part because of her attention to stylistic details often associated with femininity (the clothes her subjects wear, the kinds of curtains they hang in their homes, how they wear their hair, etc.), and also, because of her own insistence that being a woman marks one as different (discussed at length in Chapter One). Drummond's entire career (as a blogger, writer, and television show host) is organized around her relationship to femininity, and in particular, domesticity. Though she frequently acknowledges her own failure to adhere to proper femininity, she makes a living by writing about her role as a homemaker—even as she works outside the home. Reichardt, too, invokes a

particular form of femininity in her films. This is especially noticeable in *Meek's Cutoff*, a film that is shot from the perspective of a particular female gaze, structured as it is by what one would see if she (like the female characters on screen) wore a bonnet that severely restricted her view. But the third chapter reveals the limits of the professionalization of femininity as a framework, because there, the historical situation has radically shifted from one in which domesticity and feminism can be clearly distinguished from each other to one in which such distinctions no longer make sense (economically or culturally).

The notion of professional femininity is also useful because it enables me to consider the relationship between femininity and economics. Especially, it enables me to have language to discuss the professionalization of both the feminist (via feminism) and the housewife (via domesticity). This is to say, I wanted to point out how feminism itself has been professionalized, and is itself a form of work.<sup>7</sup> As work, both feminism and domesticity have the capacity to become tied to networks of global capitalism. While there has been a lively academic discussion about the incorporation of egalitarian feminism by capitalism (see for example, Angela McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism*, published in 2008), feminist academics rarely discuss their own scholarly contributions in relation to work.<sup>8</sup>

I draw parallels between these two senses of professional femininity because I wish to draw attention to how totalizing this notion of professionalization is—and how much a feminist movement against work (in all of its forms—including academic work) is needed. So long as the

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<sup>7</sup>This is related to academic work on “affective labor,” though the key distinction is that I am dealing with the ways that women like Didion, Friedan, and others understood affective labor before it was named as such. These ideas were there in the culture, in the same way that economic precarity was made visible first by Italian neorealist cinema, and only later articulated by theorists. My interest in affective labor is then about the ways that such understandings emerged in the culture before they were named as such by critics and theorists.

<sup>8</sup>For notable exception, see the recent essay, “For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University” by members of the Great Lakes Feminist Geography Collective.

domestic realm represents a space where one may work for herself and her own family—it becomes what Lauren Berlant has called (in a discussion of eating) "a form of ballast against wearing out" (*Cruel Optimism* 116). Home-work is increasingly a stabilizing force, a counter-balance to a culture of twenty-four seven work. I am purposely romanticizing domesticity because I think this attitude is necessary as a contrast to the romanticization of work (especially academic work) that saturates popular culture.

In *Revolution at Point Zero*, Silvia Federici reflects on these questions. In an essay called "Putting Feminism Back on its Feet," originally published in 1984, Federici makes the claim that the marginalization of the struggle for wages for housework in the mid 1970s weakened the entire feminist movement. In this essay, Federici addresses the charge lodged against wages for housework by some feminists, that the campaign was "economistic and institutionalized women in the home" (59). Federici eloquently points out that rather than isolating women in the home, wages for housework attempted to enlist all women to the cause of feminism, including those women who did not wish to work outside the home, either "because they work hard enough taking care of their families," or because they do not consider work "a liberating experience" (57).

Federici's claim is that feminism, in so much as it is a "movement that purports to struggle for liberation," should "have a broader perspective, particularly in a country like the United States, where the level of accumulated wealth and technological development make utopia a concrete possibility" (59). This broader perspective would allow for the possibility that "work is not liberation" because "work in a capitalist system is exploitation and there is no pleasure, pride, or creativity in being exploited" (59). According to Federici, "even the 'career' is an illusion as far as self-fulfillment is concerned" (59). In this piece, Federici identifies problems



in feminism that remain unresolved, and that have, frankly, only been exacerbated in recent years:

Certainly, there is now a widespread devotion to women's rights, and wisely so, since what they have in mind is our 'right to work,' for our cheap labor is a true cornucopia for the system. Meanwhile feminist heroines are no longer Emma Goldman or Mother Jones, but Sally Ride, the first woman in space, the ideal symbol of the self-reliant, highly skilled woman capable of conquering the most secluded male territories, and Mrs. Wilson, the head of the National Caucus who, despite her pregnancy, decided to run for a second term (62).

These words were penned in 1984, but they could have easily been written yesterday. Instead of Sally Ride and Mrs. Wilson, Federici might have mentioned Sheryl Sandberg, CFO of Facebook and author of *Lean In*, and Hilary Clinton, the likely 2016 Democratic Candidate for President. These women both call themselves feminists, but their brand of feminism is grounded in virtues of "self reliance" and individualism. Sandberg is the financial head of a global corporation that sells the personal information of its billions of users (who are not paid for their work) to advertisers. Clinton's campaign will likely be financed by Wall Street. Neither woman would ever question the sanctity of capitalism. They are each—in a perverse way—professional feminists. They have co-opted certain principles of liberal feminism for their own personal and professional gain.

Federici imagines a world in which "creativity is a mass condition and not a gift reserved to the happy few" (60). This is a world in which people have enough money and enough time to explore their own interests, not for professional gain, but in service of the larger community. This is a beautiful dream. But I am not as hopeful as Federici. Instead of imagining an entirely new world, I wish for a political culture that could seriously consider providing all people with the social services required to allow for the work of social reproduction (allowing for child and

elder care; healthy food; safe affordable housing; etc.). It is in the service of this wish that I explore the possibility and hope of home economics (discussed at length in chapter 2).

## *Part Two: Reviewing the Literature and Defining Key Terms*

### On Femininity

This dissertation makes generous use of the term "femininity." Femininity has been extensively written about by countless feminist academics and activists, and was, arguably, the subject of much of the key texts of second wave feminism. Simone de Beauvoir begins her classic work *The Second Sex*, first published in 1949, with a discussion on femininity, asking, "Is femininity secreted by the ovaries? It is enshrined in a Platonic heaven? Is a frilly petticoat enough to bring it down to earth? Although some women zealously strive to embody it, the model has never been patented" (de Beauvoir, 3). Femininity's power, Beauvoir ultimately determines, has been constituted by history, and also, by material practices through which girls become women. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, names a phenomenon, 'the feminine mystique' that describes "a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform" (Friedan II). The feminine mystique is the mistake women make when they build their entire lives around fulfilling the ideals set forth by normative femininity. It is not a coincidence that Beauvoir refers to femininity in terms of "model" and Friedan in terms of "the image"—femininity has always been something that is produced visually. Though femininity may be a cultural construction, its appearance in visual culture has consequences for women's actual lives.

Shulamith Firestone's radical position, put forth in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1971), was that it was the biological nature of their difference that kept both women and children in a state of subservience to men. Firestone's revolutionary demands require that women be freed from "the

tyranny of their reproductive biology," that both women and children receive "full self determination" and be fully integrated into all aspects of larger society, and finally, that they be free "to do whatever they wish to do sexually" (Firestone 206-209). Firestone's demand was nothing short of a total reorganization of society, whereby the family would be eliminated as the basic unit of social organization, and femininity would cease to have any relationship to motherhood and reproduction.

In each of these three key texts, femininity bears significant weight as a concept that defines the ideological substance of the meaning of 'woman.' All of these writers rely on femininity to help distinguish between the ideals associated with womanhood, and the lived experience of actual women. Classic academic works that emerged between 1975 and 1990 brought comprehensive analyses of the construction of femininity in literature (notably Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, 1970; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 1979; Elaine Showalter's edited collection *The New Feminist Criticism*, 1985; Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*, 1984) in history (especially Linda Gordon's *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, 1976 and Joan Scott and Louise Tilly's *Women, Work, and Family*, 1987) and on screen (exemplified by Claire Johnston's "Women's Cinema and Counter-Cinema," 1973, Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in 1975, Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape*, 1974, and Mary Ann Doane's "*Caught and Rebecca*: The Inscription of Femininity as Absence," 1981). In each of these instances, femininity, as the ideology that structured the lives of women, was the major subject of feminist inquiry. Even Judith Butler's monumental *Gender Trouble*, published in 1990, might be said to be about femininity (in so much as it is the manifestation of one kind of gender performance). But all of these works are wary (with good reason) of making claims about what femininity precisely is.

My own use of the term in this project is guided by articulations of femininity presented by Jacqueline Rose, Lauren Berlant and Raka Shome. Jacqueline Rose's classic essay, "Femininity and its Discontents," published in 1983, is itself an allusion to Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1931). In Freud's anthropological historicism, the psychological development of the individual parallels the development of civilization, just as the superego restricts the individual's pursuit of instincts through guilt and shame, civilization restricts the pursuit of desire (for death as well as lust) among individuals. In comparing femininity to civilization, Rose imparts to femininity the structure Freud imparted to civilization. Like civilization, femininity places a multiplicity of unspoken and unacknowledged restrictions on the individual, and these restrictions have consequences. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud wrote, "civilization behaves toward sexuality as a people or a stratum of its population does which has subjected another one to its exploitation. Fear of revolt by the suppressed elements drives it to stricter precautionary measures" (85). I read Rose as imagining femininity in a similar way. She writes, "The unconscious constantly reveals the 'failure' of identity. Because there is no continuity of psychic life, so there is no stability of sexual identity, no position for women (or for men) which is ever simply achieved" (Rose 91). Like civilization, femininity and masculinity restrict the psychic life of all individuals by demanding the achievement of a stable sexual identity, a process that is destined to failure. When she writes, "psychoanalysis becomes one of the few places in our culture where it is recognized as more than a fact of individual pathology that most women do not painlessly slip into their roles as women, if indeed they do at all," she is pointing toward the toll femininity extracts from its subjects (91).

I am drawn to Rose's consideration of the relationship between femininity and failure, and particularly, the acknowledgement that failure is not exceptional, but endlessly repeated.

This psychoanalytic register (especially the repetition of failure) is important, but so too, is Lauren Berlant's conceptualization, in which femininity is understood as a genre. Femininity is a kind of genre, for Berlant, because it is "something repeated, detailed, and stretched while retaining its intelligibility," it has a capacity to "remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations," and most importantly, "it is a structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances" (*The Female Complaint* 4). The most useful thing about Berlant's definition is its formalism. If femininity is understood as a genre then the question of what it presents is less important than the question of how it works or what its conventions are. To extrapolate what Berlant means, I want to turn away from her scholarly works and look closely at a short blog post she published in May of 2012.

Lauren Berlant begins this piece, titled "For Example" with the provocative and poignant statement: "My mother died of femininity." She goes on to explain how her mother's various ailments can be traced back to decisions she made in service to femininity. She attributes her mother's stage four lung cancer to a lifetime of smoking cigarettes that were purchased because they were thought to be a "weight reduction aid." Kidney failure, Berlant explains, was caused by an overconsumption of painkillers taken to treat chronic back pain. This back pain was caused in part by a habit of regularly wearing high heels; once, Berlant writes, "she had an abortion and on the way out tripped down the stairs in those heels, hurting her back permanently," and later, this back pain was exacerbated by her job as a Bloomingdale's shop girl, where she carried "500 lbs. of clothes every day," in heels. "More comically," she writes, "she had two fingers partly amputated because her nails got infected by a 'French wrap' gone wrong" (Berlant "For Example").

In this scene, femininity has multiple valences. It stands in as a kind of psychological disorder, an instigator of unhealthy habits and dangerous living. It is a form of pleasure in a world defined by crisis and disorder. It is also a contradiction in terms, perfectly figured by the woman who wears high heels to the clinic where she will have her abortion: she asserts her femininity—wears the heels that will accentuate her womanly figure—even as she resists the femininity represented by pregnancy. Femininity is that which structures how one inhabits the identity woman. Like all genres, it has certain conventions. Because it is also an identity, its conventions are not merely stylistic. Conventional femininity is white, youthful, beautiful, and always middle class. It is in this sense that the aspiration to achieve femininity is always bound to fail.

Berlant writes that "things are so bad, so minimally imaginative for sexual relations, that people tend to do the thing they heard about doing just to keep things going, and if it means poisoning themselves and wearing out their bodies, or being over- or understimulated, even, they'll do it. I do it. I make better decisions but not different kinds of decision" ("For Example"). In the end she acknowledges her own complicity in this system, with the "I do it," she makes herself too, the subject of femininity. This reading of femininity is reminiscent of Berlant's theorization of 'slow death,' wherein she considers how systemic obesity may have less to do with food quality and public health, and more to do with the fact that for many people in contemporary U.S. culture, survival has supplanted life building. For such bodies "eating can be seen as a form of ballast against wearing out... like other small pleasures, it can produce an experience of self-abeyance, of floating sideways" (Berlant *Cruel Optimism* 116). Femininity, like eating or sex or alcohol, can be something like a life-vest, it helps people keep on going, even in cases where it may end up being the ultimate cause of death.

This is how I think about normative femininity in this dissertation, as an ideal (and also as a model and an image) that people (usually women) strive for, even when they know better, even when it may cause more pain than pleasure. Importantly, this ideal is imagined as white, heterosexual, and middle class. Throughout the dissertation, I use the terms "conventional femininity" and "femininity" synonymously. In each instance, the words "white, heterosexual and middle class" are implied.

In thinking about white femininity as I explore it throughout this dissertation, Raka Shome's writing on the subject has been indispensable. In her 2014 book *Diana and Beyond*, Raka Shome offers an analysis that links white femininity to the performance of national identity. Importantly, Shome identifies a distinction between white women and white femininity. "The former," she writes, "relates to individual subjects, while the latter is much more structural, having to do with ideological scripts through which the former is influenced, shaped, constrained, and produced" (*Diana* 20). Shome's analysis of images of the late Princess Diana is not about Diana the individual, but rather, about what Diana represents as a national figure of white femininity. This analysis is based on the assumption that "white femininity centrally informs the nation, for in Anglo-national contexts, the nation is not interested in reproducing itself through Other women but through white women, and, in particular, the white heterosexual, upper-/middle-class woman whose body is deployed strategically to secure, as well as produce, dominant national desires" (23). The importance of white femininity, as Shome articulates it, is directly related to the notion of both social and biological reproduction.

The case studies laid out in this dissertation are about how models of professional femininity circulate, and about how they in turn produce particular understandings of femininity in relation to work. As such, my interest is in the popular perception of femininity, in so much as

it is something that is meaningful to ordinary people because it is intuitive, and based on shared understandings of gender and performativity that are common sense. Since the 1980s, feminist inquiry has moved away from the object 'woman' and toward 'gender,' as a result, scholarly interest in femininity has changed as well.

This shift from the object of woman to the object of gender has most recently been taken up by Robyn Wiegman in *Object Lessons* (2012). In that book, Wiegman examines how the transferential practice, epitomized by the move from woman's studies to gender studies, "promises to move the field toward critical coherence and political completion" (40). In the next section I will discuss the affective investments that mark the backdrop of Wiegman's analysis, but here, I want to consider how this conceptual change relates to femininity. Though Wiegman does not take up the concept of femininity, her analysis of the category 'women' is relevant here. She writes of the end of the conceptual category 'women' not with sadness, but with a clear-eyed acknowledgement that though feminist theory has moved on, the problem of women remains. As she puts it,

so convinced are we now of the category of *women's* inability to remain conceptually coherent and politically progressive that pointing toward it as a contemporary form of political belief risks being allied with those bourgeois feminist discourses still awaiting their own intersectional, poststructuralist, and post nationalist self-critique (55).

Wiegman is not being facetious or polemical. "Women" has become unsayable in feminist classrooms, because in repeating it, one aligns herself with forms of mainstream feminism that have yet to learn the lessons of intersectionality, transnational feminism, and queer theory. To study "women," in 2015 is to be behind the times. And so "women" has become the subject of critical deconstruction rather than generative theory (54). Femininity remains an acceptable



category of analysis precisely because it avoids the problems of woman.<sup>9</sup> Though femininity relies on universalizing tropes, it is not tied to a particular gender. Femininity may be associated with women, but it has no exclusive province over any gender.

### On Feminist Theory and History

Recent work in feminist theory has explicitly taken up how affective attachments structure scholarly inquiries regarding the history of U.S. Women's liberation. My engagement with femininity and history—and in particular, how femininity relates to feminism (in terms of activism and scholarship) and U.S. Women's history—is responding most directly to two recent works on the subject: Clare Hemmings' tour de force *Why Stories Matter* (2011) and Victoria Hesford's *Feeling Women's Liberation* (2013).

Clare Hemmings begins *Why Stories Matter* with a powerful claim. She writes that in spite of the variety of "authors, objects, disciplines, and practices," that make up feminist theory, "the story of its past is consistently told as a series of interlocking narratives of progress, loss, and return that oversimplify this complex history" (3). By utilizing narratives of progress, loss, or return, feminist theory inevitably simplifies the complexity of its history. Consequently, it (feminist theory) "positions feminist subjects as needing to inhabit a theoretical and political cutting edge in the present" (3). Simply put, these narratives put pressure on subjects in the present and the future to be more politically savvy than those in the past. The problem, for Hemmings, is that in such narratives of progress, loss, and return, the past is not considered in its own context, but always already in relation to the present. In order to justify the claims she makes about Western feminist theory, Hemmings' draws on an analysis of a six major English

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<sup>9</sup>The emergence of the subfield "Girl Studies" within Feminist Media Studies has something to do with these issues, in that it has become an acceptable way of analyzing the subject woman (in certain ways) without having to deal with the problems that the category women now entails.

language journals concerned with feminist theory,<sup>10</sup> from 1998 through 2007. Her method is to focus on how "changes within Western feminist theory" were represented within articles published in these journals (18).<sup>11</sup>

Though Hemmings identifies three distinct patterns in narratives of the history of feminist theory (progress, loss, and return), in every version of the story, second wave feminism is over determined with meaning. In progress narratives, current academic feminism is understood as having evolved from essentialist 1970s origins—universal woman is no longer the subject of feminist theory, instead, "feminism itself has become the object of detailed critical and political scrutiny" (3). In narratives of loss, this narrative is reversed, with the 1970s representing the heady promise of a unified social movement. In this version of the story, the "progressive fragmentation of categories and infighting have resulted in the increased depoliticization of feminist commitments" (3). Finally, narratives of return combine "the lessons of postmodern feminism with the materiality of embodiment and structural inequalities" suggesting that feminist theory has the capacity to "move on from the current theoretical and political impasse" (4). Importantly, in each story, the 1970s signifies the origin point of radical feminist theory or 'the past,' the 1980s signals identity politics, the sex wars and the intersectionality critique lodged by women of color, and the 1990s represents "difference proper" (deconstructionist critiques and queer theory). Inevitably, writes Hemmings, "whether positively or negatively inflected, the chronology remains the same, the decades overburdened yet curiously flattened despite each story's unique truth claims" (5).

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<sup>10</sup>*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society; Feminist Review; Feminist Theory; Nora: Nordic Journal of Women's Studies; European Journal of Women's Studies, and Australian Feminist Studies.*

<sup>11</sup>Importantly, when she cites examples of these common narratives, Hemmings includes the place and time of publication, rather than the author and article title, she explains that her intention is "to focus attention on repetition instead of individuality" (22).

My analysis is framed in part as a response to Hemmings' contention that feminist theory is plagued by a compulsion to repeat the same stories, either narratives of progress, loss, or return. In organizing my project alongside the chronology of recent feminist history (1963-present), I am consciously attempting to both participate in and trouble the "story we tell" about feminism, femininity, and history. Specifically, my decision to revisit to scenes from the 1970s is an attempt to complicate the all too easy categorization of that decade. My analysis is inflected by Hemmings' work, but ultimately, I am less interested in feminist theory proper than I am in feminist history. The archive I take up throughout this dissertation is composed not of theory, but of the ephemera of popular culture, historical documents, and interdisciplinary research on women in the U.S. Whereas Hemmings' work ultimately speaks back to feminist theory, my goal is to speak not to theory, but to a nascent feminist movement, Victoria Hesford is helpful in this regard.

In her 2013 book, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, Victoria Hesford re-reads the historical archive of women's liberation, specifically understanding "the *production* of women's liberation as a *white* women's movement" (3). Instead of seeing white women liberationist's failures, Hesford challenges critics to consider what such women made possible (regardless of their intentionality). She writes that the common critique of the homogeneity of white 1970s feminism "leaves unexamined the way in which the white middle-classness of women's liberation was a historical effect of its moment of invention" (87). Hesford explains the "moment of invention" by identifying major events that helped jump start women's liberation. In particular, she highlights *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Valerie Solanas's SCUM Manifesto (1968), and Robin Morgan's essay "Goodbye to All That" (1970). In different ways, each of these pieces positions feminism in opposition to mainstream femininity.

In her 2009 article "The Politics of Love," Hesford elaborates on this point. Glossing 'the personal is political,' she writes:

"The personal is political" has become an empty phrase—empty that is of the complex historical moment that engendered it. We are now more likely to hear it as the birthing cry of that most infamous of second wave crimes: essentialism. As a performance of essentialist thinking, 'the personal is political' is read as literally equating personal experience with the political. ... In this reading, 'the personal is political' signals a naive collapsing of 'women' with 'experience' and 'politics' that has resulted in the privileging of white middle-class women as the site and source of (second wave) feminism. But what if the meaning of the phrase was never so singular and fixed? What if we read its elegant simplicity as an enigmatic trace from the past, and, therefore, as potentially productive of multiple interpretations? (7-8)

Hesford's refreshing analysis opens up the history of women's liberation to new possibilities. She suggests that the young women who joined the movement for women's liberation in the early 1970s were motivated by strong personal feelings about conventional femininity rather than about politics. From Hesford's perspective, *The Feminine Mystique's* popularity is derived from the fact that it offered readers the chance to identify with feelings of depression about the monotony of heterosexual domesticity. She reads Friedan's subjects not as normative but as perverse; though they have every possible comfort, these women are unable to be "happy, sexually satisfied, and fulfilled mothers and wives" (Hesford *Feeling* 112). Similarly, Hesford reads other primary texts of the movement as constitutive of feminist subjects formed by "discomfort, anxiety" and the "angry denunciation" of the "scripts and scenarios of white, middle-class femininity" (112).

Hesford shows that in the context of postwar U.S. Culture, the rejection of domesticity, motherhood, and other forms of conventional femininity by middle class white women was truly radical. Though she doesn't mention them explicitly, Hesford's analysis calls to mind the notorious Manson family, led by the cult-leader Charles Manson. In the summer of 1969,

Manson's followers murdered seven people on three separate occasions, including, most famously, the actress Sharon Tate (wife of film director Roman Polanski), who was at the time pregnant. Reflecting on August 9, 1969, the day she learned of the murders, Joan Didion famously wrote, "I remember all of the day's misinformation very clearly, and I also remember this, and wish I did not: *I remember that no one was surprised*" (*The White Album* 42). Later in the same essay, Didion writes of the time she spent with Linda Kasabian at the Sybil Brand Institute for Women in Los Angeles, while she waited before delivering her key testimony in the Manson trial. Kasabian was a Manson family defector. Didion reports that in spite of her situation, Kasabian "dreamed of opening a combination restaurant-boutique and pet shop" (44). It's worth thinking about the ways in which the women who followed Manson (and other cult-leaders of the late 1960s) were acting out radical identifications of the sort that Hesford explores. To become part of the Manson 'family,' was to refuse to embody the traditional role white women were expected to play in the social order, and as such, to explicitly reject normative understandings of hetero-domesticity.

Hesford's reading of the shared history of 'second wave' feminism as "potentially productive of multiple interpretations" ultimately amounts to a reconsideration of the figure of the lesbian in feminist theory and history. For Hesford, the figure of the "feminist-as-lesbian" is "the primary vehicle for this mapping between historical inheritance and imaginative projection" (14). Where Hesford focuses on the feminist-as-lesbian, I focus on a figure of antagonism, the feminist-as-not-housewife. Though our findings are different, our analysis of history is similar.

On Femininity, Feminism, and Media Studies

Hesford's description of second wave feminism's disidentification with femininity echoes a body of literature in feminist media studies that is concerned with rethinking feminism's relationship to femininity. This literature also often engages with the question of "postfeminism." Key works in this literature by Brunsdon (1991, 2005, 2013), Modleski (1991), Hollows (2000), Lloyd and Johnson (2004), McRobbie (2009), and Gillis & Hollows (2009) often take as their starting point the notion that second wave feminism tended to define itself against traditional forms of femininity. By painting the household as a trap designed to keep women from finding life outside the home, *The Feminine Mystique* defined feminism as that which was against domestic forms of femininity. Because 'femininity' was understood as something to be transcended by feminist consciousness, it was seen as inferior to feminism. I find Charlotte Brunsdon's analysis of the complex relationship between feminism and femininity to be particularly useful. Brunsdon's interest is in the relationship between feminists and women's genres, and she uses the evolution of the "women's genre" within feminist scholarship to show how feminism's relationship to femininity has changed over time.

Writing in 2005, Brunsdon addresses the disjuncture between feminism and femininity. Here, she is writing again about pedagogy, and in particular, the experience of teaching Avant-garde feminist films from the 1970s to students born in the 1980s.

What second-wave feminism said was "We're not like that" and that kind of femininity is impossible. But if psychoanalysis and feminism have both taught us about some of the impossibilities of femininity, then there is also what McRobbie has called a "disidentity" at the heart of feminism. Disidentity—not being like that, not being like those other women, not being like those images of women—is constitutive of feminism, and constitutive of feminism in all its generations. For if second-wave feminists were not like the housewives and sex objects they saw in the media, they were in turn othered by the postcolonial critique of the 1980s. As second-wave feminism interrogated itself, those in the next generation of feminists felt compelled to declare their lack of identity with second-wave feminists. Second-wave feminism is remembered, and demonized, as personally censorious, hairy, and politically correct. It has also been the key other for

younger women keen to celebrate the femininity and feminism of Buffy and Ally ("Martha" 112).

In an analysis related to Hemmings' *Stories We Tell*, Brunsdon figures the relationship between feminism and femininity as cyclical.<sup>12</sup>

In figuring the relationship between feminism and femininity in these terms, Brunsdon has provided a useful and intuitive framework for thinking about the construction of feminist identities in relation to conventional femininity. Because 'second wave' feminists have been culturally remembered as 'not like' housewives and sex objects, they have been understood as unfeminine. In Brunsdon's frame, every new generation constructs its own feminist identity in relation to what has come before. Today's millennial feminists do not define themselves against conventional femininity, but rather, in conventionally feminine terms. If the assumption is that second wave feminists were politically correct and didn't shave their armpits, third wave feminists will do precisely the opposite. What others read as the progress of history, Brunsdon presents as an almost psychoanalytic compulsion to repeat.

One of the issues, as Johnson and Lloyd so eloquently write in their 2004 book, *Sentenced to Everyday Life*, is "feminism's continuing attachment to the shibboleth of a feminist prehistory in which women were trapped in a 'happy housewives' myth and with feminism's continuing attachment to a narrative of escape from this myth" (12). Academic Feminism helps perpetuate the tension between feminist and housewife because of its own historic attachment to what Johnson and Lloyd call "feminist prehistory." In this way, these figures of feminist and housewife are always already bound up with the stories U.S. Feminism tells about itself.

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<sup>12</sup>In a related passage in *Object Lessons*, Wiegman puts the problem even more bluntly: "I see feminism as constituted on and by its own self-annihilating principle" (133). Wiegman does not refer to femininity by name, but instead, to a "rejection of being 'her'" (133).

Brunsdon points out that in the early years of academic feminism—the early 1970s—institutional feminism was extremely suspicious of mass media portrayals of women (something I come back to in Chapter Three). Women's genres (women's magazines, novels, melodrama, etc.) were understood as "primary sites for the reproduction of patriarchal definitions of femininity" (Brunsdon *The Feminist, the Housewife, and the Soap Opera*, 22). Brunsdon offers a caveat, "this distancing from conventional femininity was contradictory, partial, and painful, as well as vehement and disciplining" (22). This is to say that while all feminists were not equally dismissive of femininity, there was a correct way to be a feminist, and it did not involve cooking. If one embraced too much conventional femininity, she would be disciplined (something I explore in relation to Didion in Chapter One). On this point, Brunsdon shares an anecdote from a book of interviews with British feminists, wherein Janet Ree recalls hosting meetings of a women's group in her home in the 1970s. Ree recalls being lambasted by another woman for "trying to make people feel at ease" and "smiling at people" (qtd. in Brunsdon, *The Feminist* 23). In the story, Ree is mortified because she feels the critic is correct, she is embarrassed that she served her guests coffee, tea, and homemade cake.

The point Brunsdon makes is that 'coming to consciousness' as a feminist was (and remains) a complicated process that has often involved the repudiation of conventional femininity (23). Because of this environment, the first feminist analyses of women's genres were undertaken with extreme caution, and ultimately, out of curiosity. Brunsdon writes that "traditional first world femininity is made strange by feminism—it is denaturalized, and therefore the multiplicity of textual sites on which it is elaborated become areas for possible investigation" (25). Feminists began exploring "femininity" as Margaret Mead might have explored a newly discovered tribe. Today, analyses of femininity are commonplace among



feminist researchers; unfortunately, savvy analysis of the relationship between feminism and femininity are less common.

### Post Feminism/Post Femininities: A Caveat

Because I am writing within the field of communication and media studies, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the growing body of work on postfeminism. The term "postfeminist" was coined in the 1980s and 1990s as a way to describe discourses of backlash that were emerging in popular culture. Tania Modleski, writing in 1991, claims that "in proclaiming or assuming the advent of postfeminism," some mass media texts are "actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism-- in effect, delivering us back into a prefeminist world" (*Feminism without Women* 3). In Modleski's writing, postfeminism is used to frame the conditions of backlash that characterized U.S. Culture after the women's liberation movement. Her use of the term is meant to show that 'postfeminism' is a problem that must be solved, in the introduction to her book, titled "Postmortem on Postfeminism," she calls for an end to such mass media proclamations.

Since Modleski's work was published, academic works on postfeminism have proliferated. In a recent anthology, Gill and Scharff (2011), claim that there are three other common uses of the word. First, they write, some use the term "to signal an epistemological break with feminism," in this work, postfeminism is an "analytical perspective" for challenging "hegemonic Anglo-American Feminism" (Gill and Scharff, *New Femininities* 3). Secondly, scholars use the term to "refer to an historical shift after the height of Second Wave feminism," sometimes (not unlike the backlash critique) to describe postfeminism as the situation wherein feminism itself is thought to be over, and other times, in terms "synonymous with Third Wave

Feminism" (3). Finally, they point out their own position, which aims to see "postfeminism as a sensibility" wherein postfeminism is positioned "as an object of critical analysis, rather than as a theoretical orientation, new moment of feminism or straightforward backlash" (4).

Gill and Scharff's conceptualization draws heavily on Gill's 2007 essay, "Postfeminist Media Culture." There, Gill argues more directly for this notion of postfeminism as sensibility, suggesting that postfeminist discourses are characterized by the "entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes," and additionally, by a "number of relatively stable features that comprise or constitute a postfeminist discourse," among them, the notion that

femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference (Gill "Postfeminist" 149).

Gill's claims allow 'postfeminism' to stand in as the explanation for a number of different kinds of cultural shifts, which might be explained historically, economically, or through an analysis of popular culture. This kind of thinking is indicative of most of the recent work on postfeminism, especially the collaborative (and independent) work of Diane Negra (2007, 2009) and Yvonne Tasker (2014).

In its insistence on the newness of such discourses of femininity, this work seems to forget its own history, which is to say, the history of academic feminism, born in the early 1970s. In 2009, Angela McRobbie argued, in *The Aftermath of Feminism*, for a definition of contemporary femininity as "post-feminist masquerade." There, McRobbie wrote about the phenomenon of this new kind of female subject:

the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern sophisticated girl. Indeed, this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom. There is quietude and complicity in the manners of

generationally specific notions of cool, and more precisely, an uncritical relation to dominant commercially produced sexual representations which actively invoke hostility to assumed feminist positions from the past, in order to endorse a new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation and pleasure. (18)

McRobbie's (2009) designation that this subject is new bypasses the long history of this kind of subject position.

In her 2015 essay "Notes on the Perfect," McRobbie revisits these questions. Though she is inspired by what she sees as a reinvigoration of feminism online, McRobbie is troubled by the fact that perfection has "entered into the common currency of contemporary femininity" (4).

McRobbie presents "The Perfect," as a complimentary position to the "post-feminist masquerade." As she puts it, "It seems then there is a battle to ensure that the new popular feminism which emerges or which holds sway is one which discards the older, welfarist and collectivist feminism of the past, in favor of individualistic striving. The perfect may well mark out the time and space dimensions of this struggle" (4). McRobbie's analysis of "the perfect" helps explain and contextualize my own distinction between the professionalization of domesticity and the professionalization of feminism. In the lengthy quote below, McRobbie touches on many of the themes I discuss throughout this project (especially in her discussion of the relationship between traditional femininity and feminism-- and the discourse of 'having it all):

The perfect relies, however, most fully on restoring traditional femininity, which means that female competition is inscribed within specific horizons of value related to husbands, work partners and boyfriends, family and home, motherhood and maternity. Reduced to journalistic clichés, this comes to be known as 'having it all.' The perfect thus comes to stand for the relationship between successful domesticity and successful sexuality. The extent to which feminism of sorts has entered into this terrain is marked by the seeming seriousness with which such a goal is to be pursued, on a par with taking an exam. In seeking this degree of excellence in life the young woman is therefore doing herself proud. She comes to embody the success of women today, those who like Sandberg are willing to speak out and acknowledge the forces of sexism which still have to be

overcome. This constellation of domestic excellence also works as a standard-bearer such that the new arrangements of queer feminism will also hopefully fall into line. (7)

McRobbie ultimately determines in the passage above that the perfect "comes to stand for the relationship between successful domesticity and successful sexuality." Throughout the dissertation, I talk about a similar phenomenon, though I parse it out differently. While McRobbie and I are both committed to understanding forms of contemporary femininity, our approaches are distinct. Where McRobbie structures her inquiry upon young women, an object other than herself, I'm interested in exploring the phenomenon she calls "the perfect" in relation to both feminism and femininity. What some academics refer to as postfeminism is, I contend, the continued working out of the tension between these two terms. I do not deny that neoliberalism has profoundly changed the way in which contemporary subjects negotiate their identities, but I am less interested in historical breaks than I am in historical continuities. Too often, such historical breaks are mobilized in order to dismiss nuances and complexities that inevitably exist within any cultural landscape.

### *Part Three: The Work of this Dissertation*

When playwright Wendy Wasserstein passed away at 55 in 2006, *The New York Times* obituary wrote that her plays "struck a profound chord with women struggling to reconcile a desire for romance and companionship... with the need for intellectual independence and achievement separate from the personal sphere" (Isherwood "Wendy Wasserstein Dies at 55"). In April 2015, Broadway saw its first revival of a Wasserstein play in a new production of *The Heidi Chronicles* starring Elisabeth Moss as Heidi Holland, a play about a young woman coming of age during the women's movement, struggling to balance her professional ambition with her

desire for romance, home and family. *The Heidi Chronicles* opened off-Broadway in 1988, and moved to Broadway in 1989, where it ran until 1990. The show was widely hailed by critics for capturing the zeitgeist; Wasserstein won the 1989 Tony Award for Best Play and the 1989 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. In her review of *The Heidi Chronicles* in *The New Yorker* Mimi Kramer wrote “Wasserstein wants Heidi to be not an advocate of the women’s movement but one of its victims— a vessel carrying around the ideals and experiences of her time” (Kramer “Portrait of a Lady). In *The New York Times*, Mel Gussow wrote “Following the chronicles of Heidi, theatergoers are left with tantalizing questions about women today and tomorrow” (Mel Gussow “A Modern-Day Heffalump”).

*The Heidi Chronicles* covers much of the same ground as this dissertation. Heidi Holland, like the subjects of each of my chapters, is a white middle class woman on a journey of self-discovery that is reflected in her chosen profession. As an art historian, Heidi Holland is interested in images of women throughout history. From the time we meet Heidi, at 16, to the end of the play, when she is 40, there are two men in Heidi’s life. Her best friend, Peter, whose homosexuality selfishly troubles Heidi because it means they can never get together, and Scoop, the man she loves, and who loves her, but marries a woman who is willing to put her career second to her role as wife and mother. *The Heidi Chronicles* manages to be both an expression of all the clichés that circulate about the plight of the contemporary U.S. Woman, and also, a very good play.

The 2015 Broadway revival of *The Heidi Chronicles* was an industry failure. It lasted for a mere eighty performances, closing on May 3, 2015 (Paulson and Schuessler, “‘*The Heidi Chronicles*’ is Trailed...”). In spite of the short run, the reappearance of *The Heidi Chronicles* in 2015 was an opportunity to consider the history of the “having it all” debate. Some critics felt

that the play's failure on Broadway was a result of it being dated. In *The Nation*, Alisa Solomon wrote, "the passage of time reveals *The Heidi Chronicles* to have been catching the rise of the neoliberal feminism that prevails in elite precincts today: that every-woman-for-herself kind of leaning in that makes no demands on the workplace or the state and builds no solidarity with others" ("Why *The Heidi Chronicles* Failed..."). Others felt it was not the play's individualism, but the depth of its lead character that presented problems. In spite of the fact that the play is called *The Heidi Chronicles*, most of the action of the play occurs among other characters. As Jesse Green put it in *Vulture*, "Heidi, for all her stage time, doesn't actually have much to do. She's not just an emotional wallflower but a dramatic one" ("Theater Review: *The Heidi Chronicles* Returns"). For all its problems, Wasserstein's play set an important precedent. One might say that *The Heidi Chronicles* made *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) possible, and more recently, prefigured the success of *Girls* (2012-present) and *Broad City* (2014-present). *The Heidi Chronicles* may not have been the feminist drama that critics wished for, but it helped create the conditions in which a legitimate exploration of female friendship could become attractive to network executives.

In 1989— *The Heidi Chronicles* expressed the frustrations of women's liberation. The play itself has a rather cynical outlook on feminism, which it expresses through Heidi's best childhood friend, Susan. In 1970, Susan takes Heidi to a meeting of the Huron Street Ann Arbor Consciousness-raising Rap Group. The meeting is led by Jill— a reformed housewife, and Fran— a lesbian physician in army fatigues. At the meeting, Fran's refrain is "either you shave your legs or you don't," which is Wasserstein's way of critiquing the militancy of some women's liberationists (Wasserstein 180). Jill offers a slightly warmer attempt at feminist conversion, "every woman in this room has been taught that the desires and dreams of her husband, her son,

or her boss are much more important than her own. And the only way to turn that around is for us, right here, to try to make what we want, what we desire to be, as vital as it would undoubtedly be to any man” (181). By the end of the meeting, the reluctant Heidi has become something like a feminist, convinced that she should ditch her “charismatic creep” of a boyfriend (181). As the play proceeds, Heidi becomes a feminist art historian— attending protests at art museums and finishing her PhD. Her friend Susan comes out as a lesbian, and moves to a Women’s Health and Legal Collective in Montana. But Wasserstein doesn’t seem to believe in such jarring changes. By 1979, Susan has moved back to NY to get an MBA, and by 1980 she has accepted a job working for a production company targeting films “for the twenty-five-to-twenty-nine-year-old female audience” (209).

In a key moment in *The Heidi Chronicles*, Heidi is meant to give a speech at her high school, on “Women, Where Are We Going.” Now an accomplished art historian, she is expected to impart lessons to younger women, but she finds herself at a loss for what to say. Instead, she tells a story about an experience in the women’s locker room at her gym, getting ready for aerobics class among a group of accomplished women, whom she cannot help but feel antagonistic toward.

“I’m embarrassed— no, humiliated— in front of every woman in that room. I’m envying women I don’t even know. I’m envying women I don’t even like. I’m sure the woman with the son at Harvard is miserable to her daughter-in-law. I’m sure the gray-haired fiction woman is having a bisexual relationship with a female dockworker and driving her husband crazy. I’m sure the hotshots have screwed a lot of thirty-five-year-old women, my classmates even, out of jobs, raises, and husbands. And I’m sure the mothers in the pressed blue jeans think women like me chose the wrong road. “Oh, it’s a pity they made such a mistake, that empty generation.” Well I really don’t want to be feeling this way about all of them. And I certainly don’t want to be feeling this way about “Women, Where Are We Going.” (THC 231)

In this pivotal scene we see Heidi acknowledge that she is unhappy with her life, but more than that, that she cannot help but feel a sense of competition with other women. Though she is

uncomfortable with the fact that she “feels this way” about other women, the fact is it’s true. Earlier in this introduction, I talked about this tension in relation to a disidentity at the heart of feminism, and also, in relation to Silvia Federici’s radical claim that work is not liberating because it inevitably puts women in positions of power in relation to other women. This tension comes up in Wasserstein’s work, Didion’s writing, and a vast majority of classic women-authored texts; on screen, it is a frequent theme as well.

Wasserstein is interested in the consequences of women’s liberation for the women who lived through it, and the next generation, whom she characterizes as much more comfortable with compromise. As a character named Denise says, “Our girls have a plan. They want to get married in their twenties, have their first baby by thirty, and make a pot of money. It’s just a much more together generation than ours” (226). This is, of course, the classic backlash discourse. Feminists did not actually achieve a new world, and thus, the next generation of women seeks a more reformist approach, embracing domesticity, motherhood, and career all at once. Rather than changing the world on behalf of all, this new generation seeks to build better lives for themselves and their own families. In this way, it is critical that *The Heidi Chronicles* ends in 1989, with its title character choosing to adopt a baby at 40 years old, whom she will raise on her own. Ten years after she wrote Heidi’s story, Wasserstein herself made a similar decision. At 48, after ten years of fertility treatments, she gave birth to her only daughter (Wasserstein “Complications”).

The trope of the successful career woman who finds herself saddled with a baby was common enough at the time of *The Heidi Chronicles*. Consider the plot of *Baby Boom* (1987), starring Diane Keaton as a successful executive who inherits a baby from a distant relative. The movie poster displays Keaton in power suit and heels, holding a leather briefcase in her left hand.



With her other hand, she holds a baby. Keaton's character is at first resentful of the child's appearance in her life, but over the course of the film, she becomes thoroughly domesticated—she finds herself more attached to the baby than to her work. When the film ends, she has moved to a farm in Vermont where she has combined her two skills (motherhood and business know-how) to build a successful homemade applesauce business. *Baby Boom*, like *Look Who's Talking* (1989) presents motherhood as the anecdote to professional ambition. When women become mothers, these films suggest, they are softened, becoming more attractive to the opposite sex, and also, more likely to find happiness. Motherhood also enables them to develop a proper form of entrepreneurial homemaking, through which they are able to put their domestic skills to good use in the market economy.

*The Heidi Chronicles* is part of a very particular milieu. Written in the late 1980s, the play inevitably responds to the feminist backlash that characterized that period. Though I do not take up these particular issues in the dissertation, they are nevertheless part of the story. As explored by Balsamo (1996), Hartouni (1997), Berlant (1997), Roberts (1997) and others, throughout the 1980s, debates ensued in the courts and in public discourse about proper motherhood. These debates were related to struggles between feminists about reproductive technologies. While some feminists, like Shulamith Firestone, embraced the possibilities of technological motherhood, others, especially the members of Feminist International Network of Resistance against the New Reproductive Technologies and Genetic Engineering (FINRRAGE), were avidly opposed to the new technologies. At their first conference, they declared their belief that “the new reproductive technologies and genetic engineering violate the autonomy and integrity of all life on earth now and will do so even more so [sic] in the future” (“Resolution of the first European Conference of Finrrage”). These feminist debates about the nature of

motherhood and technology were echoed in public court battles over surrogacy, In Vitro Fertilization, egg donation, and of course, abortion. This was the era of fictionalized epidemic of the “crack cocaine mother,” as well as a panic about white infertility. In the realm of popular culture, films like *Alien* (1979) and *The Brood* (1979) (to name just a few), explored the horror of the procreative woman, while other films like *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Working Girl* (1988) explored the horror of the non-procreative career woman.

*The Heidi Chronicles* appeared as one piece of this larger conversation. In relation to these other cultural texts, *The Heidi Chronicles* appears unique in that it presents a heroine (Heidi) who appears to be above the political battles of her time. Though she is deeply influenced by the feminist movement, she remains committed to her own ideals. *The Heidi Chronicles* is about straight white femininity from 1965 to 1989. This dissertation builds upon that narrative, while also acknowledging that it (the happy ending of independent procreation) may have been exhausted. I focus on different objects, but my inquiry is related to the kind of issues that Wasserstein explores, the complex relationship between femininity and feminism, between professional ambition and personal relationships. Researching and writing in 2015 allows my project to benefit from recent work in feminist history and theory, and to write about the phenomenon of backlash instead of merely participating in that phenomenon.

Before the revival of *The Heidi Chronicles* opened on Broadway, Elisabeth Moss gave an interview to Alexis Soloski of *The New York Times*. There, Soloski reports

“Work is vitally important to Ms. Moss, just as it is to Heidi and to Peggy. She spoke with emotion about a scene in the play where Heidi speaks of feeling “stranded.” Ms. Moss confessed that she sometimes felt stranded, too— again without too many specifics. She always recovers, she said, by “leaning on work, for sure. I love my work, I love what I do, it’s a huge part of my life, and it’s always a place that feels safe.” (Soloski “Elisabeth Moss, a Career Woman”)

Here we see the actress Moss discussing how much she loves work, a characteristic she shares with the characters she has famously played on television and on the stage— ambitious career women who, when presented with a choice, usually choose work over their personal lives.

This is the compromise offered by even the most progressive of media representations, because in the U.S., it seems difficult to imagine that a smart and ambitious person would put anything else before professional success. Federici's claim, in 1984, that "work is not liberation," is more prescient for feminism now than ever before (*Revolution at Point Zero* 59). As I show throughout this dissertation, contemporary re-imaginings of the relationship between the feminist and the housewife, in the first instance, where domesticity is understood as an escape from work— on the domestic blogosphere, and in the second, where femininity is evacuated of all characteristics besides vulnerability— in Reichardt's cinema, are troubling. Such representations are symptomatic of a cultural moment in which life outside of work is in danger of becoming unimaginable. Professional feminism has been recruited to the cause of "work," and can be seen in figures as disparate as pop stars like Taylor Swift and Beyoncé Knowles (each a self-proclaimed feminist), media mogul Ariel Huffington, Facebook CFO Sheryl Sandberg, and Presidential hopeful Hilary Clinton. Such women are on the rise while the vast majority of women's chances for economic success dwindle alongside a decrease in social services and support for working families.

### *Chapter Summaries*

In 2015, at eighty-one-years-old, Gloria Steinem published a memoir called *My Life on the Road*. In a *New Yorker* profile marking the occasion, Steinem is asked what she does for women. She responds: "I'm a media worker, in the parlance of the nineteen-thirties. It's what I

do” (Kramer, “Road Warrior”). When I read this, it occurred to me that each of the subjects of this dissertation is also a media worker—and that this term accurately describes precisely what unifies the kind of work these three women do. As media workers, their job is to produce popular knowledge of professional femininity, and because they are women media workers, they also—consciously or not—are, in everyday life, models of professional femininity.

I understand professional femininity and media culture throughout this dissertation in relation to two distinct themes. First, my analysis amounts to a historical reconsideration of two archetypal figures that continue to haunt contemporary debates about women, men, and work: the 'feminist' and the 'housewife'. I understand these figures in relation to what Charlotte Brunsdon has called "the disidentity at the heart of feminism," the idea that 1970s feminism was constituted by a rejection of conventional femininities, and as such, by an opposition between the feminist and the housewife ("Martha"). Second, I reconsider moments in second wave feminism in relation to contemporary problems. I aim to resist the tendency to be nostalgic about these historical moments, while at the same time giving historical actors the benefit of the doubt. This dissertation is also interdisciplinary, it draws on various literatures and multiple methodologies, especially historiography, literary criticism, and feminist film theory. The project is structured around three case studies, each of which considers the life and work of one exemplary figure through a historical perspective, always rooting back, genealogically, to a particular moment from the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The object in each chapter turns out to be not the woman at its center, or even her work, but the historical situation she provokes. In this way, I am attempting to describe social relationships between media objects, individuals, and the larger culture, to attend to media environments in the broadest sense.

In the first chapter, titled "Finding A Female Way of Being Serious: Joan Didion, 1963-1979," I focus on the early work of Joan Didion, considering that work (and Didion herself) in relation to the 1963 publication of Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Since she began working for *Vogue* and *Life Magazine* in the early 1960s, Didion has consistently written about femininity in relation to herself and other women. As a writer and public intellectual, she has been both an important model of (and a key figure for modeling) professional femininity in U.S. media culture. Since 1963, her profiles of specific professional women (e.g. Doris Lessing, Joan Baez, and Martha Stewart) have teased out tensions between the values associated with domesticity and those associated with feminism. In personal essays, she has explored these issues as they relate to her roles as writer, mother, wife, and woman. Didion is thus an ideal origin point for exploring the relationship between domesticity and feminism in recent history.

In the chapter, I explore Betty Friedan's notion of "the problem that has no name" alongside a discussion of Didion's nonfiction and fiction (primarily through essays and novels published between 1963 and 1977). I look at Didion's representations of women and femininity—including her fictional characters, the historical figures she profiles (writer Helen Gurley Brown and alleged murderess Lucille Miller), and also, her depiction of herself. In this chapter about the 1960s, I situate Didion in relation to the women's liberation movement and the new journalism in order to I think through how Didion both embodied in her self and described as part of her work, the tensions between her professional and personal life. In this way, this chapter seeks to trouble the notion that 'work-life' balance is a new or contemporary problem. What is different about this period is the way the problem of work-life balance was depicted and understood. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of contemporary interest in Joan Didion, connecting scenes from the 1960s to the present.

The second chapter, "Blogging Femininity: The New Home Economics," is set in two distinct historical periods. The chapter pivots between a scene that unfolded in 1971—feminist Robin Morgan's appearance at the American Home Economics Association-- and an analysis of online domesticity thoroughly grounded in the present. Throughout, I make reference to the birth of Home Economics at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and also, to the International Campaign for Wages for Housework, which was especially active around 1975. At the center of this discussion is popular U.S. food and lifestyle blogger Ree Drummond, known on the web as 'the pioneer woman,' a figure who helps connect the history of home economics to the contemporary lifestyle blog.

Ree Drummond is one of (if not the most successful) lifestyle bloggers working today, and as such, is an ideal model of the kind of professional domesticity that I deem entrepreneurial homemaking in this dissertation. The Pioneer Woman began as a single authored blog, and has become, over time, a multi-media business. Within the lifestyle blogging community and within academic work on blogs, Drummond is cited as an example of what success looks like on the web. As a role model of professional femininity, Drummond writes content meant to inspire her readers, some of whom are aspiring domestic bloggers, and others who hop online in search of digital domestic advice (with regard to cooking, cleaning, decorating, parenting, and homeschooling). Drummond is, in the context of this project, an excellent model for exploring the ways that entrepreneurial homemaking has been reinvented in the form of the professional domestic blogger.

Throughout this chapter, I consider the relationship between the figure of the feminist and the figure of the housewife by thinking through the professionalization of domesticity as well as the professionalization of feminism (as evidenced by the institutionalization of women's studies).

What is at stake for me is what the division between the work of women's studies and the work of home economics might bring to light about contemporary feminist thinking about domesticity. Ultimately, I suggest that representations of domesticity and conventional femininity (especially in relation to food) demand a reconsideration of the false dichotomy that exists between the popular perceptions of 'the feminist' and 'the housewife.'

The third chapter, titled "Kelly Reichardt's Realist Vision: Femininity, Precarity, and U.S. Cinema," like the second, hinges between a number of different historical moments. As the title suggests, this chapter is grounded in a discussion of the recent films of director Kelly Reichardt (especially those films released after September 11, 2001-- *Old Joy* (2006), *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), *Meek's Cutoff* (2011), and *Night Moves* (2014)). While Reichardt has received much critical and scholarly attention for her work, she has rarely been understood in relation to feminism or femininity. This chapter seeks to mend this gap in the research. Reichardt is, in some ways, a strange model of professional femininity. Unlike Didion and Drummond, on the surface, Reichardt's work does not seem overtly interested in traditional forms of femininity. Precisely because of the ways in which Reichardt's films seem unattached to the conventions of the women's film and traditional considerations of identity, she serves as an exemplary model of professional femininity in crisis. In her depiction of the unemployed woman at the center of *Wendy and Lucy*, Reichardt presents a counter-narrative to the assumption that the hardest hit victims of the great recession were men. Each of Reichardt's films offers a similarly uncommon model of professional femininity—understood together, it becomes clear that Reichardt herself is modeling the ways in which professional femininity is shifting in U.S. media culture.

In this chapter, before turning to contemporary cinema, I discuss French film critic Andre Bazin and Italian Neorealism, revisiting essays written by Bazin in the late 1940s. From there, I

move to a discussion of debates about realism that occurred within feminist film theory in the mid-1970s. Because Reichardt's films are concerned with outsiders, his third case study moves away from the figures of the feminist and the housewife, and amounts to an analysis of cultures of economic precarity in contemporary U.S. media culture. In particular, my understanding of Reichardt's films is framed by a review of two divergent contemporary narratives that circulate about femininity in the U.S. ("women on the rise" and "the feminization of poverty"). Ultimately, I claim that these films are representative of femininity in crisis, where community is impossible.

Throughout her films, Reichardt sublates the terms of the professional housewife and the professional feminist by demonstrating that this dichotomy no longer makes sense within U.S. culture. As I show in the chapter through my analysis of contemporary debates about gender and work, the economic basis for this distinction between home and work may now best be described as history. In other words, the dichotomy embedded within professional femininity that I explore through the dissertation, between feminism and domesticity, may no longer be an accurate description of contemporary history.

Throughout these three chapters, I show how this history has developed, and how changes in economic and cultural life have been reflected in media culture. My chapter on Didion explores the conditions in which the feminist and the housewife came to be understood as distinct entities, considering Didion herself as a figure that troubled the dichotomy even as it was being constructed. The second chapter explores the institutional ramifications of such a division, in relation to the field of home economics (the professionalization of domesticity) and the field of women's studies (the professionalization of femininity). Finally, the third chapter shows that such a division no longer makes sense, and thus, can only be expressed in popular narratives as a historical story (*Meek's Cutoff*).



## CHAPTER ONE—"FINDING A FEMALE WAY OF BEING SERIOUS:" JOAN DIDION, 1963-1979.

In the fall of 1975, Joan Didion arrived at Berkeley to spend a semester serving as visiting Regents' Lecturer. She returned to her alma mater as a minor celebrity, having published two novels, a book of essays, and co-written a number of Hollywood screenplays with her husband, John Gregory Donne. According to Caitlin Flanagan, who recounted this story for *The Atlantic* in 2012, Didion cut a strange figure among the Berkeley faculty (Flanagan was a teenager, and her father was, at the time, chairman of the English Department at Berkeley, where Didion was to be housed). Flanagan remembers that Didion seemed remarkably uncomfortable at dinner parties, and that her husband often spoke on her behalf (Flanagan, "The Autumn of Joan Didion").

When the time came for the Regents' Lecturer to give her talk, Flanagan recalls that her father and his secretary showed Didion and Donne the room designated for her address. Didion apparently exchanged a glance with her husband, and then, Donne apparently told them, firmly, 'the room is too small.' The secretary thought this young couple seemed a bit conceited, and in jest, booked Didion the largest auditorium on campus. Didion's lecture, "Why I Write" was a standing room only affair, with every seat in that enormous lecture hall filled with "a huge, rapt crowd of the type that doesn't feature in even the wildest dreams of most writers" (Flanagan). The lecture indeed, had the air of a rock concert, with young women clamoring for the attention of the authoress the way other young women might swoon for Paul McCartney or Mick Jagger.

The secretary stood corrected, and a consensus was reached among the faculty: "There's something *weird* going on with Joan Didion and women" (Flanagan).

Didion famously landed her first job in 1956 after winning first prize in *Vogue Magazine's* prestigious Prix de Paris contest for young writers as a senior in college.<sup>13</sup> By 1968, the publication of *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* had earned her the title of *Times* 'Woman of the Year,' an honorific given out by the *Los Angeles Times* in a feature that described her as a "life-giver to literary vignette" (Champlin "Times Woman of the Year"). Her second and third novels, *Play it as it Lays* (1970) and *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977) were both bestsellers, and after the critical success of their screenplay for *Panic in Needle Park*, she and Dunne were among the highest paid screenwriters in Hollywood (Garis "Didion & Dunne"). Throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, Didion was a regular contributor to publications as varied as *Life Magazine*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Review of Books*. Well before she won the National Book Award (in 2007 for *A Year of Magical Thinking*) or was awarded PEN Center USA's Lifetime Achievement Award (in 2013), Joan Didion was that rare thing: the woman celebrity writer.

At eighty years of age, Didion's star shines on unabated. In January of 2015, French fashion designer Phoebe Philo's label Celine revealed a new ad campaign featuring none other than octogenarian Joan Didion in a simple black sweater and sunglasses alongside French dancer Marie-Agnes Gillot and model Freya Lawrence. In *Vogue*, Alessandra Codinha reflected "who better to represent Philo's ideals—a certain ease of wear, simplicity of line, clothes that are assured, structured yet fluid, decidedly for the woman on the move—than Didion, the original chronicler of heartfelt experience, both her own and others?" ("Celine Unveils Its Latest Poster

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<sup>13</sup> As a prize winner, she joined the ranks of an elite group of women (Jacqueline Lee Bouvier won the prize in 1951, Sylvia Plath in 1955) (Dean, "Becoming Joan Didion").

Girl: Joan Didion"). To call Didion "the original chronicler of heartfelt experience" is to say something utterly ridiculous, and yet, this is the kind of comment people make when they write about Joan Didion. Just a few days after Celine unveiled its Didion ad campaign, Saint Laurent revealed its own new cover girl, 71 year-old Joni Mitchell, wearing a tunic, and strumming her guitar. Calling the news a "feminist and anti-ageist triumph, " Arielle Dachille wrote in *Bustle*, "Joan, 80, and Joni, 71, are independent spirits, badass ladies who create art that ferries young women through periods of self-discovery, offering an alternative to being objects of sexual desire," (Dachille "Older Women in Fashion Ads"). Didion is not merely famous, she is adored.

Considering her commercial and critical success, it might at first seem surprising that Didion inspires such a sense of relatability in her readers. There is, after all, nothing ordinary about Joan Didion. She is an extraordinary writer who has lived her life alternating between the Hollywood set and the New York City intelligentsia. And yet, anyone who has read her work knows that Joan Didion understands ordinary feelings of failure. Joan Didion's heroines (in fiction and otherwise) are always failures. They are frail and often prone to depression and or debilitating headaches. They cannot hold their liquor. They don't have the knack for day-to-day conversation or gossip. In marriage, they succumb to infidelity or boredom. They fail to be good mothers because their children are taken from them, either by history or illness. In spite of all of this, in stories where many characters take their own lives, they usually manage to survive. Because Didion is herself a very thin and frail woman, and because she has written about her migraines, and her inordinate shyness, many readers have made the mistake of reading Didion's heroines as autobiographical. But while there are some similarities (aren't there always?) Didion stands apart from the heroines of her novels and essays because she has some things that none of them ever really had, a tremendous amount of talent and a career.

What she shares with her fictional characters is an outsider perspective, what one critic called "a female way of being serious" (Amis "Joan Didion's Style"). It is this "outsider" identity that defines Joan Didion, and also, what has made her writing so popular. As one young writer recently put it in *The Paris Review*, "Joan Didion is the patron saint of girls like me...girls who grew up bookish and uncomfortable, who left home only to find themselves drawn back to it" (Romanoff, "California Girls"). Didion is the patron saint then, of outsider girls, young women who have to leave home to find themselves. Her capacity to inspire this sense of identification in young women is also related to her detachment from causes, political or otherwise. This chapter explores what Didion's famous outsider perspective has to say about middle class women, work, and what is today referred to as "work life balance." My analysis begins with a brief review of the literature on Didion, and from there, moves to a discussion of "the woman question" in Joan Didion's work, considering three essays she wrote about women between 1966 and 1972. The second section considers Didion in relation to 'the new journalism' associated most frequently with Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson, looking at Didion's discussion of "dreamers" in the forms of Lucille Miller and John Wayne. The third section considers Didion's fiction, focusing especially on *Play it as it Lays*. I conclude with a discussion of the various threads outlined in this chapter, considering what Didion brings to my overall analysis of contemporary discourses of work life balance and professional femininity.

Since the publication of Didion's first novel in 1963, she has been the subject of a remarkable amount of writing, both by academics<sup>14</sup> and journalists<sup>15</sup>. There is something about the way Didion writes (and indeed, the way she lives) that invokes either adoration or hatred.

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<sup>14</sup>For a general overview of scholarship about Didion, see the two anthologies, the first, *Joan Didion: Essays & Conversations*, edited by Friedman, the second, *The Critical Response to Joan Didion*, edited by Felton.

<sup>15</sup>For a general sense of the sorts of profiles that have been written in U.S. based publications about Didion over the course of the last four decades see Kazin (1971), Kakutani (1979), Garis (1987), and Wolfson (2013).

Though Didion inspires strong personal responses, the academic work on her writing leaves something to be desired. As Eva-Sabine Zehelein put it in a 2011 article on Didion, "raking through the smallish heap of critical leaves which have gathered over and around the (still growing) *oeuvre* of Joan Didion, one is quickly *au fait* with the fact that some leaves are very fresh, yet most of them are either brittle-dry or rather rotten" ("A Good Deal" 2). Didion's writing has been the subject of three book-length studies (Henderson 1981, Winchell 1989, Houston & Lombardi, 2009) and countless academic articles. The best of the academic work considers Didion as a writer of California and the American west (Brady 1979, Mallon 1980, Hardwick 1998, Zehelein 2011). Her work has been considered from the perspective of the environment (Goggans 2010), empathy (Steigman 2014), the road narrative (Ganser 2006), the new journalism (Muggli 1987, Mosser 2012, Pauly 2014), masculinity (Loughran 2013), autobiography (Miller 2007) and read through the theoretical lenses of Gayatri Spivak (Steigman 2012) and Jacques Lacan (Rhodes 2008). Didion has also been written about by a number of well-known women writers (Gloria Steinem in 1970; Catherine Stimpson in 1973; Barbara Grizzutti Harrison in 1980).

So much, in fact, has been said about Joan Didion in the past five decades, that what I am doing here might seem futile. But outside of the plethora of popular press profiles and literary odes to Joan Didion, since the 1980s, very few (if any) of the academic essays and books on Didion consider her work in its capacity as popular culture. Here, I revisit Didion's early work in relation to the structure of feeling of the times, specially those essays that were, when published, received as anti-feminist (such as "The Women's Movement"). Looking at these works now, removed from the heady radical feminism of the 1970s, Didion's works offers new insights about important old problems.

*Part One: Joan Didion and the woman problem*

As a child of an upper middle class Sacramento family, who had roots that extended back to the first California settlers, Didion was the kind of girl who went to college.<sup>16</sup> Didion distinguished herself from her peers when, after graduating from Berkeley in 1952, she moved to New York City to work for *Vogue*. Didion could have remained in California living on her parent's ranch. But she wanted to write. Didion was a new kind of woman, she worked not for political causes or charity (as former generations of white middle class women had) but for herself. Didion never stopped working, not when she married John Gregory Donne, or when they adopted their daughter Quintana.

When Didion moved to New York City in 1952 to begin her job at *Vogue*, she would have joined a growing cohort of other young working women. Histories such as William Chafe's *The American Woman* (1972), Lois Scharf's *To Work and To Wed* (1980) and Alice Kessler-Harris's *Out To Work* (1983) have clearly demonstrated that while U.S. Women have been working for a wage since the nation's founding, a steady influx of white middle class women in the workforce began in earnest in the 1920s, and increased throughout the 1950s. Citing the 1955 White House Conference on Effective Uses of Womanpower, an event sponsored by the Department of Labor, Kessler Harris claims that there was a "subtle shift in government policy that insisted on women's capacity to take jobs" (*Out to Work* 300). The thinking behind this event was that working women were a valuable resource to the booming postwar economy. Women's increased workplace participation was also a response to the fact that the consumer driven economy was beginning to require two incomes. A woman's wages might not have been able to

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<sup>16</sup>In the U.S. in 1950, 5.2% of the female population had completed 4 or more years of college by the time they were 25 years old (compared to 7.3% of the male population) (Snyder, "120 Years of American Education"). As a point of comparison, in 2010, 30.3 % of U.S. males and 29.6 % of U.S. females had reached the same level of education (Digest of Education Statistics).

sustain a middle-class family, but her income helped support newly created middle-class needs such as college tuition, deluxe kitchen appliances, and the family car (Kessler-Harris 302). In his book about the period, William Chafe goes so far as to declare: "A plausible argument could be made that female employment was the crucial means by which some families achieved middle-class status" (Chafe 183).

Women's roles were changing rapidly in the post-war period, and as a result, the status of women was a major topic of public discussion. Chafe writes that "the woman problem" was a "subject of nationwide controversy," in his words, "Every side offered its own interpretation of the female dilemma. Feminists claimed that women were unhappy because they were still tied to the home. Anti-feminists blamed the upsurge of discontent on the fact that females had ventured too far from their traditional role" (Chafe 201). All agreed, according to Chafe, that there was a problem. Often, mainstream representations of the 1950s fail to take into account these kind of nuances. Such popular culture representations make it possible for Stephanie Coontz to glibly remark, "Contrary to popular opinion, 'Leave it to Beaver' was not a documentary" (*The Way We Never Were* 29). The persistence of the image of the happy housewife living in the suburbs represented on *Leave it to Beaver* has been the subject of much recent work in women's history.<sup>17</sup> Because of its persistence as a cultural touchstone, *The Feminine Mystique* came to stand in as representative of the experience of U.S. women in the 1950s and early 1960s, as a result, it is often the starting point of such revisionist histories.

Joan Didion's writing from the period, too, is concerned with the so-called 'woman problem.' Though she lived an unconventional life—as one of the new working women living

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<sup>17</sup>With the publication of Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound* (1988), Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were* (1992), Lynn Spigel's *Make Room for TV* (1992) and Jane Meyerowitz's anthology *Not June Cleaver* (1994), a reconsideration of domestic ideology in the cold-war period began in earnest, and has continued with recent work by Deutsch (2010), Plant (2010), Nickerson (2012), and anthologies edited by Donohoe (2012) and Hagemann and Michel (2014).

independently in New York City—Didion posed a problem for second wave feminists precisely because she was not interesting in explicitly connecting her personal life to any political ideology. She has attributed this tendency in herself to the fact that she grew up in the 1950s rather than the 1960s. In the essay “On the Morning After the Sixties” she writes of “the ambiguity of belonging to a generation distrustful of political highs, the historical irrelevancy of growing up convinced that the heart of darkness lay not in some error of social organization but in man's own blood” (206). Women like Didion who were building careers in the early 1960s had come of age in a different kind of culture—and while some (notably Betty Friedan) were founders of new feminist movements, others couldn't see the relevancy of such groups. Didion's writing reveals a person who is never surprised to find that individuals do cruel things to each other and alternatively, a person who seems to have a fundamental distrust of all ideological systems and political identifications (including feminism).

Joan Didion's writing from this period offers a counter-point to *The Feminine Mystique*. Throughout the 1960s, as Friedan emerged as a leading voice in the growing women's liberation movement, Didion published essays exploring women's changing social roles, often, acknowledging sacrifices she herself had made on behalf of her career. In addition to depicting housewives, Didion explores women who work outside the home. Rather than offering a utopian vision of women's work—wherein work is presented as the avenue by which women can find personal fulfillment—Didion's writing explores how guilt and regret structure the lives of women, whether their choices privilege family or work. As such, her writing presupposes many contemporary debates about "work-life balance." Below, I discuss three of Didion's essays from the period in relation to the women problem, first, "Bosses Make Lousy Lovers (1965), second,



"In praise of Unhung Wreathes and Love" (1969), and finally "The Women's Movement," (1972) Didion's only explicit discussion of the U.S. women's liberation movement.

In 1964, Didion interviewed controversial writer Helen Gurley Brown. Brown's two best selling advice books for young women, *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962) and *Sex and the Office* (1964) had caused a stir because they encouraged young women to use their sexuality for professional advancement. In historian Julie Berebitsky's words, Helen Gurley Brown "brought sex in the office out of the closet" ("The Joy of Work," 93). After the success of her books, Brown famously went on to become a legendary editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, supervising the magazine for over 30 years. In 1965, just before Brown's editorship became public, Didion's profile, "Bosses Make Lousy Lovers," was published in *The Saturday Evening Post*. Didion characterizes Brown's books as "very girlish and potentially very useful to the young women for whom they were written" (Didion "Bosses" 36). Didion finds Brown's advice, that her reader "stop 'being a slug' and get out there and work for what she wants," compelling and refreshing (Didion "Bosses" 37). In the profile, it becomes clear that for Didion, Brown is the kind of woman who demands respect because of her serious work ethic and her own sense of "self respect."

Elsewhere, Didion writes that "people with self-respect exhibit a certain toughness, a kind of moral nerve; they display what was once called *character*" (STB 145). Though she doesn't say so in the essay, it is clear that whatever self-respect is, Helen Gurley Brown has it. She writes:

Although Helen Gurley's history was in fact as unpromising in outline as that of her average reader, a kinship she likes to embroider, there runs through it a thread of old-fashioned ambition so increasingly uncommon that her younger readers will recognize it only from early Joan Crawford movies on the *Late Late Show*... She is the small town girl who wanted to be the toast of Big Town, a role disappearing with the small towns which bred it ("Bosses" 37).

According to Didion, Helen Gurley Brown is not in fact ordinary, she is only masquerading as such. She is unique both because of her old-fashioned ambition and her tremendous commitment to "hard work."

to talk to Helen Brown in the waning days of the 13-week promotional tour of the United States and England was to talk to a very tired woman indeed, a woman weary of flirting with disc jockeys, tired of parrying insults and charming interviewers and fighting for a five-minute spot here and a guest appearance there, exhausted by writing her syndicated column in airports on typewriters borrowed from her press agents and by waking up in different time zones and by debating, *just once more, Helen baby*, the proposition "Resolved: Bosses Make Lousy Lovers! (37)

Brown's version of her life story is a romance—she worked her way up the ranks in advertising, becoming one of the highest paid copywriters on the west coast, and at 37, married her prince charming, a movie producer named David Brown (Berebitsky 96). But Didion shows throughout her piece that Brown's success did not come from her husband or from simple know-how. In the middle of her essay, she spends an entire page outlining Brown's schedule on book tour, in order to demonstrate all the effort that has gone into this flawless performance. The piece ends with an anecdote where Brown convinces her manager that she must do an interview with the one Los Angeles radio station that they haven't booked. According to Didion, Helen Gurley Brown says "I do three-minute interviews, Skip,"... "I do everything" (38). The picture that emerges of Brown is a woman who is willing to do whatever it takes to get ahead; even as Didion reveals the furious activity behind Brown's placid exterior, she cannot help but respect Brown's sheer strength of will.

In a 1969 essay called "In Praise of Unhung Wreathes and Love" published in *Life Magazine*, Didion explores some of these issues in relation to herself. The piece is concerned with what is today called, work-life balance, but Didion's point of view could not be further from the ethos of the 21<sup>st</sup> century 'mommy wars.' This is a personal essay, a mother's reflections on a

Christmas she won't spend with her daughter. Writing about the winter holidays, she reflects "I suppose that it is some specter of failed love, some chasm between the idea and the reality, that makes us wonder, come Christmas, if indeed we have been doing anything right" ("In Praise" 2B). The idea of Christmas, Didion says, makes her question her decisions, she admits that she sometimes even finds herself wishing that she was the sort of woman "who might even now be hanging a holly wreath on her door in Fairfield County" ("In Praise" 2B ). The fantasy Didion conjures is the Connecticut housewife who is the subject of *The Feminine Mystique*, the woman whose sole occupation and purpose is to be wife and mother, to create the cozy holiday home depicted on television.

Instead of being home with her family, Didion is writing in the wee hours of the evening in an empty office. She and her husband are in New York doing research for the film that will one day be called *The Panic in Needle Park* and have an appointment to meet a heroin dealer at a Blimpy Burger the following day. She continues:

I tell myself that I am crying because the baby told me in November that she wants a necklace for Christmas, and instead of stringing beads by firelight I am watching an AP wire in an empty office. But of course that is not why I am crying at all. Watching an AP wire in an empty office is precisely what I want to be doing: women do not end up in empty offices and Blimpy Burgers by accident, any more than three-year-olds and their mothers need to make pomegranate jelly together to learn about family love. I am crying because I am tired and feeling sorry for myself because the abstract that is Christmas seems always to heighten the capacity not only for self-pity but for self-delusion, seems ever to make me forget that we design our lives as best we can (Didion, "In Praise of Unhung Wreaths" 2B).

It seems quite clear that Didion feels guilty about being away from her daughter during the holidays, but instead of attributing that guilt to some essential truth about motherhood and parenting, she blames it on the "abstract that is Christmas." The important point is that Didion insists that what she is feeling is not a personal problem, it is a problem brought on by the holiday season. Didion works long hours because she has chosen to do so, she did not end up in

an empty office "by accident," but because her work requires late nights in such offices. She, like Helen Gurley Brown, is living the life of a professional woman—and it is not always a glamorous one. But she is no one's victim. She loves her daughter, she also loves her work, and that she believes, in the end, her relationship with her child will not be ruined by her late nights at the office.

This essay was not, in 1969, deemed a statement of feminism, overt or otherwise. At the time, one of the most strongly held feminist positions was that women should pursue their careers with zeal. Didion, a successful novelist, journalist, and screenwriter, was in some senses, a woman liberated from the trappings of hearth and home. But in this essay she puts her finger on a problem that was not clearly articulated by second wave feminism—the problem of balancing motherhood with career. Second wave feminist texts were concerned with the fact that women household labor was unpaid and exploited (Mainardi 1968, Federici 1975, Landes 1975), but these texts usually found the structure of the family to be the fundamental cause of women's oppression in the home. As Robin Morgan wrote in 1970 for the anthology, *Sisterhood is Powerful*, "the nuclear family unit is oppressive to women (and children, and men). The woman is forced into a totally dependent position, paying for her keep with an enormous amount of emotional and physical labor which is not even considered work" (Morgan, xxxii). Such positions demanded the fundamental unit of capitalism—the family—be replaced by new alternatives. Radical feminists refused to accept that the traditional family unit would survive their revolution, and so they did not explore the question of how women might balance dual roles. Indeed, people who wrote about dual roles (like home economists) were seen as retrograde, and in some cases even "anti-feminist." Significantly, Didion, did consider this issue. Her essay "In Praise of Unhung Wreaths and Boughs" has been mostly forgotten—it was never

anthologized—but in it Didion voices both her dedication to her work and to her child. She expresses a sense of maternal guilt, and then talks herself out of it. And she does so in print.

Throughout her long career, Didion has strategically avoided the thorny issue of feminism. While she occasionally references women's liberation in her writing, the only sustained discussion of feminism occurs in a review essay, titled, "The Woman's Movement," published in *The New York Times* in 1972. Didion's attitude toward women's liberation as expressed in this essay is one of disappointment. Parroting the extremism of some writers on the drudgery of housework, she writes:

They totted up the pans scoured, the towels picked off the bathroom floor, the loads of laundry done in a lifetime. Cooking a meal could only be "dogwork," and to claim any pleasure from it was evidence of craven acquiescence in one's own forced labor. Small children could be odious mechanisms for the spilling and digesting of food, for robbing women of their "freedom" (Didion "The Women's Movement," 2).

Her piece ultimately claims that many of the big ideas behind contemporary feminism (in her example, Simone de Beauvoir's "grave and awesome recognition of woman's role as 'the Other'") have been trivialized (represented for Didion by Alix Kate's Shulman's marriage contract "wife strips beds, husband remakes them" (qtd. in Didion "The Women's Movement," 2)).

Didion's difficulty with the women's movement is best understood through that line about Simone de Beauvoir, whose theory Didion calls "awesome and grave." Beauvoir famously related the situation of men and women to the Hegelian self and other. She wrote, "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," to show that the objectification of women was not a priori, but something that occurred in culture. She did not see the sexual oppression of women as inevitable, but she did see it as likely. Woman was always understood in relation to some man, and as long as she defined herself that way (as mother, wife, or daughter) she would never be

free to choose her own destiny. Beauvoir saw financial independence as the only way for a woman to achieve her own subjectivity, to be a person with an identity that was not determined in relation to others. For Didion, Beauvoir's philosophical understanding of the role of woman is simply of a different order than Shulman's marriage contract. One is a deeply philosophical theory, the other a clever public relations stunt. One is substantial, the other trivial. I suspect her impatience for what she calls "trivialization" is related to her sense that the women's liberation movement was essentially ideological. As she writes later in the piece "that fiction has certain irreducible ambiguities seemed never to occur to these women, nor should it have, for fiction is in most ways hostile to ideology" (Didion 2).

Throughout the piece, Didion uses language devised to shock and appall those who have been persuaded by the ideology of the women's movement. Though Didion's critique is pointed and devastating, it would be a mistake to read her as an anti-feminist. Her criticisms highlight many of the issues that contemporary feminist theory has with its own history. She notes that trivia—by which she means facts that demonstrate the oppression of women (as in the amount of time wives and husbands spend on housework)—has been a "key technique in the politicizing of women" (2). But Didion warns that such discoveries are often meaningless because women "failed to make that inductive leap from the personal to the political" (2). The most prescient critique is this one: "To read even desultorily in this literature was to recognize instantly a certain dolorous phantasm, an imagined Everywoman with whom the authors seemed to identify all too entirely" (2). In the most provocative passage, Didion describe the "everywoman" of the women's movement:

This ubiquitous construct was everyone's victim but her own. She was persecuted even by her gynecologist, who made her beg in vain for contraceptives. She particularly needed contraceptives because she was raped on every date, raped by her husband, and raped finally on the abortionist's table. During the fashion for shoes with pointed toes,

she, like "many women," had her toes amputated. She was so intimidated by cosmetic advertising that she would sleep "huge portions" of her day in order to forestall wrinkling, and when awake she was enslaved by detergent commercials on television. She sent her child to a nursery school where the little girls huddled in a 'doll corner,' and were forcibly restrained from playing with building blocks. Should she work, she was paid "three to ten times less" than an (always) unqualified man holding the same job, was prevented from attending business lunches because she would be "embarrassed" to appear in public with a man not her husband, and, when she traveled alone, faced a choice between humiliation in a restaurant and "eating a doughnut" in her hotel room.

The half-truths, repeated, authenticated themselves. The bitter fancies assumed their own logic. To ask the obvious-- why she did not get herself another gynecologist, another job, why she did not get out of bed and turn off the television set, or why, the most eccentric detail, she stayed in hotels where only doughnuts could be obtained from room service-- was to join this argument at its own spooky level, a level which had only the most tenuous and unfortunate relationship to the actual condition of being a woman. That many women are victims of condescension and exploitation and sex-role stereotyping was scarcely news, but neither was it news that other women are not: nobody forces women to buy the package. (2)

The key point here is not Didion's hyperbolic description of the everywoman, but her insistence that the level at which the feminist argument often occurs is one "which had only the most tenuous and unfortunate relationship to the actual condition of being a woman;" in painting all women as victimized and oppressed, Didion rightly points out, the feminist movement will likely lose many of its most willing supporters. Didion, clearly, has not "bought the package" of exploitation, in part because, as the rest of the essay makes clear, she rejects the definition of the everywoman, who does not speak to her own experience. Importantly, Didion's critique of second wave feminism's reduction of all women to one particular kind of woman anticipates the charge of 1970s essentialism that feminist theory continues to struggle with.

To accept the ideology of the women's movement, for Didion, would be to say that "All one's actual apprehension of what it is like to be a woman, the irreconcilable difference of it-- that sense of living one's deepest life underwater, that dark involvement with blood and birth and death" was "invalid, unnecessary, *one never felt it at all*" (14). Ultimately, Didion refuses to accept the notion that femininity itself is merely a social construct because she is unwilling to

deny the "irreconcilable difference" of being a woman (Didion "The Women's Movement" 14). Finally, Didion sadly determines that many of the followers of this new feminism are women who are looking not for freedom, but for romance and excitement. Didion describes them as little girls seeking the fulfillment of their childhood dreams. As she writes, "the astral discontent with actual lives, actual men, the denial of the real ambiguities and the real generative or malignant possibilities of adult sexual life, somehow touches beyond words" (14).

Didion's piece caused a flurry of letters to the editor at the *New York Times* as well as a critical rejoinder in *Ms. Magazine* by Catherine Stimpson. On August 27, 1972, a few weeks after the offending piece was printed in the Sunday book review, the *New York Times* published a selection of excerpts from their mailroom<sup>18</sup>. The letters, many of which are vitriolic, are instructive precisely for their misreading of the offending piece. Nearly all of the letters respond to Didion's tone rather than what she actually says about the women's movement. Her tone, to be clear, is one of summary judgment-- she seems to be putting the nail in the coffin of a movement that is just getting started.

The most bizarre among these letters is a note signed by feminist Susan Brownmiller, wherein Brownmiller depicts Didion as a reformed conservative. The entirety of her letter reads: "When a former partisan of *National Review* attacks Women's Lib for daring to disobey Marxist notions of class, I know at whose door to lay the charge of intellectual rigidity. The conversion of Joan Didion by Joan Baez, painted by herself a few years back, has now assumed truly religious proportions" (Brownmiller, "Letter" 127). Brownmiller is making reference to the fact

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<sup>18</sup>Patricia Kelly of New Jersey writes, "Miss Didion, may your next review for The Times be written while one diaper needs changing, one grilled cheese needs tending, and a lasagna needs to be made for company dinner. Baby, that's how I'm writing this letter" (Kelly, "Letter" 127). Yvonne Quinlan of Cambridge, Massachusetts writes "This mishmash of neo-Freudian prejudice and stereotypes is a sad excuse for true commentary" (Quinlan, "Letter" 127). The NY Times also published some letters in support of Didion's words, Cynthia DiNardo, of Ohio, writes "Thanks to your reviewer for expressing-- so perceptively-- the discontent that many of us feel, vis-a-vis the direction (or lack of direction) taken by the Movement" (DiNardo, "Letter" 127).



that Didion was a frequent contributor to the conservative leaning publication *The National Review*, and to the fact that she wrote a profile of Baez, first published in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1966 (and later in *STB*). Brownmiller's point is to dismiss Didion as a conservative pundit (because of the reputation of *The National Review*), and simultaneously, as a newly converted leftist (because of the piece on Joan Baez). Frankly, Brownmiller's meaning is not particularly clear. But in her response, which amounts to dismissing Didion for her intellectual rigidity, demonstrates that she likely did not read what Didion had written on the subject of the women's movement. Indeed, one might say that Brownmiller's attack on Didion-- which focuses not on Didion's ideas but on the details of her professional biography, proves Didion's point about trivialization within the women's movement.

While Didion has rarely discussed "the woman problem" explicitly, her work consistently attends to these issues. In the essays I have discussed in this section, Didion's ideas become somewhat clearer. The notion of "old-fashioned ambition" that Didion attributes to Helen Gurley Brown is a particularly feminine ambition, distinguished by its own claim to ordinariness (Brown's modesty is itself a symptom of her drive to succeed) and by its acceptance that success will require hard work and sacrifice (Brown will wear herself out physically if necessary, but she will promote her book on every radio station). Didion discusses this again years later, in a 2000 profile she wrote on Martha Stewart-- though there she calls it "the dust bowl story." She writes that Stewart's success, "her cultural meaning" is derived from the presumption that she is ordinary rather than extraordinary.

This is not a story about a woman who made the best of traditional skills. This is a story about a woman who did her own I.P.O. This is the "woman's pluck" story, the dust-bowl story, the burying-your-child-on-the-trail story, the I-will-never-go-hungry-again story, the Mildred Pierce story, the story about how the sheer nerve of even professionally unskilled women can prevail, show the men; the story that has historically encouraged women in this country, even as it has threatened men. The dreams and fears into which

Martha Stewart taps are not of 'feminine' domesticity but of female power, of the woman who sits down at the table with the men and, still in her apron, walks away with the chips (Didion, "Everywoman.com").

Joan Crawford (invoked in Didion's earlier discussion of female ambition in relation to Helen Gurley Brown) plays out, in the 1945 film *Mildred Pierce*, the woman's pluck story-- the story of a woman who rises above her circumstances not merely because of her skills, but because of "sheer nerve." This figure, identified by Didion in the fictional *Mildred Pierce* and the real life Helen Gurley Brown and Martha Stewart, is a recognizable figure in U.S. Contemporary history. Comedian Joan Rivers comes to mind, as do many women who came of age at a time when pluck was just as necessary for professional success as skill (it probably still is).

The notion of "female power" is something that Didion explores over and over again in her work. In the essay "The Women's Movement" this comes up when Didion writes, of her contemporaries, "no one forces women to buy into the package" suggesting that something like personal ambition or self respect separates those who are oppressed from those who make the best of their situation. This is of course also related to Didion's own personal history. As she has been rehearsed in print, Didion's great-great-great-grandmother, Nancy Hardin Cornwall, was one of the original members of the Donner party-- the famous group of California settlers who, stuck in the Sierra mountains during the winter in 1846, resorted to cannibalism in order to survive. Nancy Hardin Cornwall had parted from the Donner party by the time they reached the Sierras, but this history is important for Didion (Kakutani, "Staking"). The story of the Donner Party is "the burying-your-child-on-the-trail-story" that comes up in the above passage, a narrative of survival and perseverance that Didion honors precisely because of its cold resolve. The narrative of the woman who beats the odds is the story of the exceptional figure, not the

collective. This is how Didion tells stories, and as the next section illustrates, this tendency has consequences not just within the context of particular stories, but in the larger culture.

### *Part Two: Joan Didion's New Journalism*

In the 1960s and 1970s, a group of journalists began (independently and somewhat unbeknownst to each other) applying creative writing tactics to their investigative reporting. According to Tom Wolfe (who wrote about the birth of new journalism for *New York Magazine* in 1972) throughout the 1960s new journalism was simply "in the air;" many journalists were spontaneously using literary devices in their long-form feature stories, amounting to a "new artistic excitement in journalism" (Wolfe, "The Birth"). In their 1974 publication on the subject, Everette E. Dennis and William L. Rivers claimed, "the new journalism is complicated, a wild mixture of styles, forms, and purposes that defies simple definitions so completely that it can be summarized only in the most general way: dissatisfaction with existing standards and values" (*Other Voices* 1). As a literary style it was immediately embedded with the values of the 1960s, with a sense that journalism—like every thing else—had to be made anew. In books and essays about what is now called "the new journalism," Joan Didion is usually the one woman mentioned in a group of men (often Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, and Hunter S. Thompson). In this section, I explore how Didion's version of the new journalism was negotiated in relation to professional femininity.

According to Tom Wolfe, new journalism was characterized by four devices: "scene by scene construction; fully recorded dialogue; the third person point of view; and the recording of everyday details" (habits, gestures, manners, customs, clothing, furniture, etc.) (*The New Journalism* 31-2). Joan Didion's literary voice easily fit into this loosely defined genre, with its powerful narrators, carefully integrated dialogue and its attention to seemingly mundane details.

By way of example, in *A Book of Common Prayer*, Didion writes that her protagonist, Charlotte Douglas, had been provided with "clean sheets, orthodontia, lamb chops, living grandparents, attentive godparents," and a number of other unrelated things, that, when combined, paint a picture of Charlotte as "nortemaericana." As a North American, Charlotte is a person whose very bearing carries a history of creature comforts that mark her as an outsider in Central America (60). I consider Didion's work as a particular version of the new journalism, a feminine take on what was largely a masculine style of writing.

The above quote from *A Book of Common Prayer* is indicative. Though it is lush with detail, it is lush with a different sort of detail than, for example, Hunter S. Thompson's classic feat of new journalism, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Didion's nonfiction essays always position her as an outsider. *Fear and Loathing* famously begins with the line "We were somewhere near Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold" (1). Thompson immediately places himself in the center of the action. Didion's style is to remain external to the action—to tell a story in the style of new journalism while remaining separate from the events she explores. "Slouching Toward Bethlehem," an essay as famous as *Fear and Loathing*, begins "The center was not holding" (84). The tone Didion takes is one of a much less intimate storytelling. Unlike Thompson, she places herself definitely outside of the scene, both physically, and temporally. She is writing in the future about a place somewhere else at a different moment. When Didion does finally place herself in the story, introducing the "I," so important to the style of 'new journalism,' it is a maternal voice that emerges:

It was not a country in open revolution. It was not a country under enemy siege. It was the United States of America in the cold late spring of 1967, and the market was steady and the G.N.P. high and a great many articulate people seemed to have a sense of high social purpose and it might have been a spring of brave hopes and national promise, but it was not, and more and more people had the uneasy apprehension that it was not. All that seemed clear was that at some point we had aborted ourselves and butchered the job, and

because nothing else seemed so relevant I decided to go to San Francisco. San Francisco was where the social hemorrhaging was showing up. San Francisco was where the missing children were gathering and calling themselves "hippies." When I first went to San Francisco in that cold late spring of 1967 I did not even know what I wanted to find out, and so I just stayed around awhile, and made a few friends. (84-85)

Didion's "I" emerges in the above passage as a result of a social situation of unrest. She goes to San Francisco "because nothing else seemed so relevant," and in so doing, positions herself as a person concerned about what's happening in her county. The language she uses to describe that unrest is the language of motherhood. Describing the state of the U.S., she writes that "at some point we had aborted ourselves and butchered the job" and as San Francisco as the place where the "missing children were gathering"(85). The moral position that Didion takes on in this essay is derived from her personal position as a woman, and more specifically, as a mother. It is a feminine take on the new journalism, somewhere between gonzo and novelist.

Below, I look at the first two essays in Didion's first collection, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream," Didion's essay on Lucille Miller, written in 1966, and "John Wayne: A Love Song," written in 1965. I've put these two essays together because both utilize the language of dreams to talk about public figures, where the story of Lucille Miller is the story of the woman's pluck story gone horribly wrong, the narrative Didion conjures of John Wayne is something else entirely, the story of the end of a certain kind of old-fashioned American manhood. Each of these profiles offers a mythological explanation of the subject at its center, she or he exists as a particular kind of figure in the story of the U.S., and especially, in the story of California.

"Dreamers of the Golden Dream" is Didion at her best, exploring the dramatic arc of a marriage that ended in murder in a sweet little town in San Bernardino County, CA. Didion begins: "This is a story about love and death in the golden land, and begins with the country" (3).

She goes on to explain the setting in which the case of Lucille Marie Maxwell Miller has unfolded, "not the coastal California of the subtropical twilights and the soft westerlies off the Pacific but a harsher California" (3). The harsher landscape has bred—or attracted—harsher economic conditions, "here is where the hot wind blows and the old ways do not seem relevant, where the divorce rate is double the national average and where one person in every thirty-eight lives in a trailer" (4). After three pages of such description, Didion describes the crime with the intensity of an action movie. She describes how Lucille Miller drove to the market to pick up some milk, how her Volkswagen came to stop suddenly and burst into flames, all while her husband was innocently sleeping in the back seat. It is only at the very end of this section that Didion reveals the punch line: Lucille Miller has been charged with first-degree murder.

After the scene has been set, the crime laid out, she begins in earnest, "Of course she came from somewhere else, came off the prairie in search of something she had seen in a movie or heard on the radio, for this is a Southern California story" (Didion, *STB* 7). And there it is, Lucille Miller—the murderess who had fifteen minutes of tabloid fame in 1965—has become a character in a common enough story, the story of a girl who dreamed she would find a new life in golden California. After explaining Miller's version of the story, and the discrepancies the police found at the scene of the crime, Didion gently suggests that there might be a different version of the story, the authorities, she writes,

set out to determine what might move a woman who believed in all the promises of the middle class-- a woman who had been chairman of the Heart Fund and who always knew a reasonable little dressmaker and who had come out of the bleak wild of prairie fundamentalism to find what she imagined to be the good life-- what should drive such a woman to sit on a street called Bella Vista and look out her new picture window into the empty California sun and calculate how to burn her husband alive in a Volkswagen. ( *STB* 15)

The whole piece is written in this way, as if Lucille Miller is a particular kind of woman, or, more perversely, as if any unhappy woman could—out of the blue—find herself in Lucille Miller's position. The suggestion is that Lucille Miller took what she saw on television too seriously, she too eagerly believed in the golden dream. Didion writes that at some point, Lucille Miller's extra marital affair "ceased to be in the conventional mode and began to resemble instead the novels of James M. Cain, the movies of the late 1930's, all the dreams in which violence and threats and blackmail are made to seem commonplaces of middle-class life" (17). In this sentence, "the dreams" are films produced in Hollywood, unfortunately, "the dream was teaching the dreamers how to live" (17). Lucille Miller's fatal flaw is that she has taken the movies at face value, has imagined herself as the femme fatal of a film noir, only to find that the reality of a woman's prison is far less glamorous than the movie version.

Indeed, in Didion's telling, the plot points of Miller's story do seem to resemble Barbara Stanwyck's performance in the 1944 film *Double Indemnity*. There was an unhappy marriage to a man with too much debt, an affair with another man, a sizable life insurance policy, and a suspiciously staged accidental death. The story of Lucille Miller does not end well. Didion carefully records the details of her trial, of Miller in maternity clothes, "a slight, intermittently pretty woman, already pale from lack of sun... a meticulous woman who insisted, against her lawyer's advice, on coming to court with her hair piled high and lacquered" (21). Ultimately, Lucille was seen as a woman who wished to rise above her peers, "an erring woman, a woman who perhaps wanted too much," and this was the sin, Didion says, "more than the adultery, which tended to reinforce the one for which she was being tried" (22). When describing the California Institute for Women at Frontera, where Lucille Miller is spending her prison sentence, Didion writes "A lot of California murderesses live here, a lot of girls who somehow

misunderstood the promise" (25). Some of these girls thought—Didion insinuates—that if they were as clever as the heroines they emulated in the movies, perhaps they could get away with murder.

Didion's piece subtly points out the cruel joke that while Lucille Miller sits in prison, her ex-lover pursues a new romance. The lover, Arthwell Hayton, like Lucille, lost his spouse under tragic circumstances. Months before the death of Lucille's husband, his wife Elaine simply did not wake up one morning, her death was reported as accidental, thought to be the result of a hairspray allergy (17). There were no suspicions of foul play, no one was put on trial, though Didion suggests that perhaps there is something more to the story. A few months after Miller's sentencing, Hayton marries his children's 27 year-old governess. Didion ends the piece at the scene of this wedding, writing that the bride "carried a shower bouquet of sweetheart roses with stephanotis streamers" (28).

The second essay in this collection considers 'the dream' from the other side. In "John Wayne: A love song," Didion writes about her childhood fascination with Hollywood, and the effect that John Wayne had on her fantasy life. She begins with a scene from her own life, with seeing the film *War of Wildcats*, a film in which John Wayne tells the woman on the screen that he will "build her a house at the bend of the river where the cottonwoods grow" (30). She confesses, "As it happened I did not grow up to be the kind of woman who is the heroine in a Western, and although the men I have known have had many virtues and have taken me to live in many places I have come to love, they have never been John Wayne, and they have never taken me to that bend in the river where the cottonwoods grow" (30). The point for Didion is that "when John Wayne rode through my childhood, and perhaps yours, he determined forever the shape of certain of our dreams" (30). The dream that John Wayne represented was of a certain



kind of masculinity, of a world "where a man could move free, could make his own code and live by it" (31). It is another kind of golden dream.

John Wayne, like Lucille Miller, came from somewhere else. Born Marion Morrison in Winterset, Iowa, he moved with his family as a child to Lancaster, CA, and later to Glendale, CA:

Imagine Marion Morrison in Glendale. A Boy Scout, then a student at Glendale High. A tackle for U.S.C., a Sigma Chi. Summer vacations, a job moving props on the old Fox lot. There, a meeting with John Ford, one of several directors who were to sense that into this perfect mold might be poured the inarticulate longings of a nation wondering at just what pass the trail had been lost. "Dammit," said Raoul Walsh later, "the son of a bitch looked like a man." (31)

In this tale, Marion Morrison was simply a mold into which could be poured a national nostalgia about the Wild West. Just as the Wild West was long gone by the time John Wayne started making westerns, the man himself has been wounded by the time Didion meets him in person in 1964. The journalist meets the man at the center of her personal love song on the set of *The Sons of Katie Elder*, a film that was delayed because of its Wayne's struggle with lung cancer.

Didion recounts the set of *The Sons of Katie Elder* with anthropological curiosity. Her essay is the story of an aging legend, "working too soon, finishing the picture with a bad cold and a racking cough, so tired by late afternoon that he kept an oxygen inhalator on the set" (37). In spite of it all, John Wayne remains committed above all to "the code." Didion claims that "the code" is a certain style of manhood, that involves, among other things, never getting so drunk that you have to be assisted to your room. It is also a way of being with other people. Didion observes that this group of men (and one woman, the leading lady in the picture, who is referred to by the others as "the girl") "communicates by sharing old jokes," "by making gentle, old-fashioned fun of wives," by "treating the oldest among them respectfully" and the youngest fondly (39). It is a charming old-fashioned game they are playing at—Didion calls it "man's

country," a "world peculiar to men who like to make westerns, a world of loyalties and fond raillery, of sentiment and shared cigars, of interminable desultory recollections; campfire talk, its only point to keep a human voice raised against the night, the wind, the rustlings in the brush"—but it's a game nonetheless, facilitated by a sound stage (36).

The story of Lucille Miller is the profile of an alleged killer—and as such, strikes a balance between character study and true crime. The John Wayne profile is a loving portrait of a figure well known because of what he has always represented on film. But both are stories about dreamers, Hollywood, and above all, romance. Didion famously begins *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* with a warning to her reader, that "*writers are always selling somebody out*" (xiv, emphasis hers). The way Didion sells people out as a writer is to mythologize her subjects, to turn individuals into representatives in the life long story she has been weaving of American life. Exploiting her role as social observer, Didion uses the genre of the essay to explore the way changing modes of femininity and masculinity are changing that story. Traditionally, the essay was a genre that allowed a writer to demonstrate his craft, to riff on any theme (friendship, walking, etc.)—and in so doing, to say something broad about the human experience. This is what Montaigne's essays did, and later, how American essayists like Thoreau and Emerson used the form. Didion's "new journalism" is a refreshing take on that long literary tradition, where she blends the essay with investigative reporting, creating a particular style of writing. This is Didion's particular brand of "new journalism," to use elements of the essay as well as elements of reporting to tell a story about how particular individuals, or situations, relate to life in the contemporary U.S. Though Didion's writing makes us of some of the same stylistic mechanisms as other new journalism writers—her overall style is different. And what is different is Didion's interest and investment in femininity. Though she steers clear of politics, Didion is interested in

how the lives of women are framed by femininity and masculinity, and this interest marks her journalism in a distinct way.

Lucille Miller stands in for the kind of woman who wants to live a modern life, but finds herself stuck in the traditional role of housewife and homemaker. Out of boredom or loneliness, she begins an affair, but what she really wants is to live a different kind of life than those around her. While Lucille fails in her attempts to rise above her station (and indeed, is punished for having such dreams) Didion's writing suggests that the world is becoming more open to women like Lucille as it becomes less open to men like John Wayne. In Wayne, Didion is exploring a form of masculinity that now only exists in the movies. John Wayne himself, she shows us, has always represented a historical notion of masculinity—the movie star and the cowboy all at once. John Wayne, one might say, is the kind of man little girls see on screen and dream about. Suppose the little girl grows up and gets the dream in real life—the man who builds her a house at the bend in the river where the cottonwoods grow—will she be satisfied? Didion claims that she dreamed of John Wayne when she was a girl, but the implication is that she would never have been happy with such a man as an adult. Though she is charmed by what such a man represents, she knows that the actual world is "characterized by venality and doubt and paralyzing ambiguities," that the world John Wayne suggests "may or may not have existed ever but in any case existed no more" (30-31).

These paralyzing ambiguities are historical. Didion is talking here not merely about how the social order is changing (it is 1965 after all) but about how the social order was already changed when she was a small girl watching John Wayne's movies. The reference is both to the present and to her personal past, as a child brought up in the shadow of the Second World War. Thus, Didion's new journalism in particular connects the 1960s to the decades before in ways

that are all too easily forgotten. Women (like herself) are no longer forced to make the central story of their lives a romance. Lucille Miller's experience proves this. The story of Miller's life may involve romance, but ultimately, she has ensured that her narrative revolves around a different theme: revenge.

### *Part Three: Didion, Fiction, and Femininity*

Didion's early novels, *Run River* (1963), *Play it as it Lays* (1970), and *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977) offer a nuanced portrait of 'the woman problem' I discussed earlier in this chapter. The women in these novels are wealthy and good-looking—they live in beautiful homes, which they pay other women to clean. And yet, they struggle to perform even the most basic tasks—as one character says about the Lily Knight, the central character of *Run River*, "Somebody holds the door open for Lily in a hardware store, and she thinks she has a very complex situation on her hands" (172). After reading these novels in quick succession, the "Didion woman," whom Michiko Kakutani identified for *The New York Times* in 1979, emerges quite clearly. She is small and frail, with an electric but misplaced sexuality well into middle age.<sup>19</sup> She is a mother who has trouble with the day-to-day, but thrives in a crisis. She may come from money, but in addition to privilege, she comes from a people long accustomed to geographic hardship. As Kakutani wrote "They are outsiders, but they are also survivors, fatalists who keep on playing the game regardless of the odds" (30).

The "Didion woman" is an apt description of the heroines of each of Didion's novels, but each of the above-mentioned novels also presents a foil to the heroine, a woman who has made different sorts of compromises. Together, Didion's female characters make up a tableau of a

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<sup>19</sup> In an illustrative scene in *A Book of Common Prayer*, the narrator, Grace writes: "What Charlotte and Gerardo did that afternoon was reverse the entire neutron field on my lawn, exhausting and disturbing and altering not only my mood but possibly the cell structure (I am interested in this possibility) of everyone there" (203).

historical moment. It's not quite 'the feminine mystique' that these women are troubled with, though that may have what Friedan diagnosed. As the narrator puts it in *Play it as it Lays*, "It occurred to Maria that whatever arrangements were made, they worked less well for women" (46). The Didion women who survive the Didion novel-- Grace, Maria and Lily-- are independent. They have either left their husbands, divorced them, or the husbands have killed themselves. Indeed, the men in Didion's novels suffer just as much as the women; they are as oppressed by masculinity as the women are oppressed by femininity. At the end of Didion's novels, a lone woman faces an uncertain future, with no man to fall back on.

*Play it as it Lays* (1970), Didion's second fictional work, is a sparse novel about a woman spiraling out of control. At the center of the novel is Maria (pronounced Mariah), an out-of-work actress who has been institutionalized. Maria is unique among Didion heroines because she has a trade. Though she no longer works, she admits that she was good at modeling, good at acting: "I was getting \$100 an hour from the agencies and \$50 from the magazines which in those days was not bad" (8). The novel begins at the end, at Maria in the institution, and then flashes back to tell us the story of how she ended up there. The reader is led to piece Maria's story together through fragments, most of them short scenes told from the perspective of a narrator. The exceptions are a few scenes written in Maria's voice, one scene written in Maria's ex-husband's voice, and another in the voice of Maria's friend, Helene. This novel is set in a Hollywood where surface impressions are far more important than blood or familial ties, a place which Maria finds overwhelming and devoid of meaning.

*Play it as it Lays* has received more critical attention than Didion's other novels. David Geheren argues that *Play it as it Lays* is an existential novel, with a "uniquely feminine" protagonist (108). Others read the novel as specifically responding to American culture, "Didion

demands that we use Maria's agonized explorations as a vehicle for the examination of nothing less than our heritage as Americans" (Wolff 125). Even as Maria says she has found nothing, no meaning in any of it, critics of the novel search to make sense of this novel that does not satisfy.

The circumstances of Maria's life are as follows: Maria was until recently the wife of Carter Lang, a successful Hollywood director; she is the mother of Kate, a child with a developmental disorder who has been sent to a home for such children; she is the daughter of a drinker and a gambler, raised in Silver Wells, NV, a town that no longer exists. Before marrying Carter Lang, Maria was a model, and later an actress—appearing in two of Carter Lang's films. In the first of these films, titled *Maria*, she played herself. The film was a seventy four minute chronicle of a woman (Maria) engaging in everyday life—"doing a fashion sitting," "asleep on a couch at a party," "on the telephone arguing with the billing department at Bloomingdales" etc. In the second film, *Angel Beach*, Maria played a woman who was raped by the members of a motorcycle gang. Of *Angel Beach*, the narrator tells us that Maria "liked watching the picture: the girl on the screen seemed to have a definite knack for controlling her own destiny," of the other film, "the girl on the screen in that first picture had no knack for anything" (21).

The story Maria prefers-- the film about a victim of gang rape-- is the film about a woman who goes through a terrible trauma and survives it. The studio cut of *Angel Beach*, the version Maria likes best, ends with a dolly shot of the main character walking around a campus. The director's cut (Carter's) of *Angel Beach* ends with a shot of the motorcycle gang, "as if they represented some reality not fully apprehended by the girl Maria played" (19). The other film-- *Maria*-- makes Maria feel sick. When she finds herself at an intimate screening of the film, she "has to sit outside on the beach smoking cigarettes and fighting nausea for seventy-two of the seventy-four minutes" (21). Maria understands that her experience as an actress has made her

into a representational figure, but she chooses to see the girl on screen as someone else, because it is the only rational way to deal with the fact that there is a film called *Maria* in the world-- a motion picture chronicle of her own life-- that someone else owns, and can watch at will (21). Perhaps because of this sophisticated understanding of herself as a screen image, a filmic representation, Maria insists throughout the book that the things that happen to her are of no significance. As she explains in the opening lines of the novel, "What makes Iago Evil? Some people ask. I never ask" (3). Maria Wyett is not interested in questions of good and evil, questions of why. She is not interested in interpretation or finding meaning.

In the following scene, which is an entire chapter in this book structured by short scene-length chapters, Maria goes to the grocery store and puts on a show of being a successful young wife and mother, who has a family at home to care for. At this point in the narrative, she is divorced, living alone in a furnished house in Beverly Hills.

She had watched them in supermarkets and she knew the signs. At seven o'clock on a Saturday evening they would be standing in the checkout line reading the horoscope in *Harper's Bazaar* and in their carts would be a single lamb chop and maybe two cans of cat food and the Sunday morning paper, the early edition with the comics wrapped outside. They would be very pretty some of the time, their skirts the right length and their sunglasses the right tint and maybe only a little vulnerable tightness around the mouth, but there they were, one lamb chop and some cat food and the morning paper. To avoid giving off the signs, Maria shopped always for a household, gallons of grapefruit juice, quarts of green Chile salsa, dried lentils and alphabet noodles, rigatoni and canned yams, twenty-boxes of laundry detergent. She knew all the indices to the idle lonely, never bought a small tube of toothpaste, never dropped a magazine from her shopping cart. The house in Beverly Hills overflowed with sugar, corn-muffin mix, frozen roasts and Spanish onions. Maria ate cottage cheese. (123)

Maria recognizes that she is becoming a known character type, the woman alone in the world, so she insists on keeping up appearances. She does not wish for others to see her as the kind of woman who shops for one, so she puts on a show of shopping for a household. The performance may be convincing to other shoppers-- but anyone who attempts to interact with Maria will know

that something is off. Even as she manages to look the part, Maria's words (or lack of words) always give her away. To her friends, she often chooses not to speak. When Carter asks her what she wants, what she feels, all she can say is "nothing" (205).

*Play it as it Lays* hinges on two vivid events, Maria's abortion and BZ's suicide. Maria, pregnant with her lover's child, decides to get an abortion to appease her husband. The decision to have the abortion is a calculation Maria makes because she does not want Carter to take their daughter, Kate, in a custody battle ("If I do this, then you promise I can have Kate? You promise there won't be trouble later?," she asks). And so, Carter finds her the number for a doctor who does "clean work," and Maria makes an appointment. The abortion takes place in the yellow-wallpapered bedroom of a house in Encino, a neighborhood in the northwest corner of Los Angeles. Maria is instructed by an anonymous voice on the telephone to meet him in the parking lot of a Thriftmart on the appointed day and time, with \$1000, a pad and a belt. When she arrives at the parking lot, she finds a man in duck pants who gets into her car and tells her to drive. Sitting in her car with this man, in the driveway of a house in the suburbs of LA, the narrator, tells us, "she saw now that she was not a woman on her way to have an abortion. She was a woman parking a Corvette outside a tract house while a man in white pants talked about buying a Camaro" (79). Inside, she lays on a cot in bedroom where the floors are lined with newspapers. While it is happening, she tries to think about other places, other scenes. She tells herself that "the pain as the doctor scraped signified nothing beyond itself, no more constituted the pattern of her life than did the movie on television in the living room of this house in Encino" (82). The implication is in fact that what is happening in that bedroom does constitute the pattern of her life. Maria continues to pretend it is of no consequence, even as she dreams there are "hacked pieces of human flesh" stopping up the pipes in her house (97).



The second critical event in the book is BZ's suicide. BZ is Carter's producer, and a key character throughout the book, especially when thinking about "the arrangements" people make. BZ likes to watch Maria's films, and he likes to watch Maria. While everyone else in the novel seems to find her selfish or spoiled or rude, BZ finds her fascinating. The narrator tells us that first time Maria meets BZ, they discuss *Angel Beach*, which Carter is, at the time, editing. BZ tells Carter, "The rough cut looked fantastic, except your missing the story" (111). Carter is confused, "meaning what," he asks, "Meaning," BZ goes on, "how did Maria feel about the gang bang, the twelve cocks, did she get the sense they're doing it not to her but to each *other*, does that *interest* her, you don't get that, you're missing the story" (111). For BZ, the subtext of the film is how Maria relates to the circulation of homosexual desire that is necessarily taking place in the gang bang. It is in scenes like that that Didion fills out the details of the relationship between BZ and Maria, which is at times almost violent (when she wakes up after a night of drinking and tries to suppress scenes from the night before of which "she had only the faintest ugly memory"), and at other times, loving (162). BZ's marriage is characterized by scenes of all manner of sexual mischief, and yet he seems wounded to discover that his wife—Helene—is sleeping with Maria's husband, Carter.

Throughout the book, Didion also shows us that BZ, like Maria at the grocery store, participates in rituals that help him perform the role he is expected to play. At the start, BZ and his male friends are described as "gleaming, unlined, as if they had an arrangement with mortality" (46). But over the course of the book, BZ changes, "for the first time Maria noticed a sag beneath his eyes," by the time he knocks on her door with his pockets full of Seconal, "all the musculature seemed gone from BZ's face" (164, 211). These characters both suffer physically throughout the book (on the day of Maria's divorce, her friend Helene comments "You look like

hell, Maria, this isn't any excuse for you to fall apart") but it is BZ, not Maria, who cannot bear the exhaustion of daily life (107).

It is Maria's understanding of "nothing," her instance that she feels "nothing" that attracts BZ to her bed on the night he has chosen for his suicide. Maria is in the desert where Carter is shooting his new film. On the last day of filming, everyone is in Vegas to celebrate, but BZ and Maria have remained behind. BZ knocks on Maria's door, though it is sweltering outside he wears a blazer and tie. He shows her the pills in his pockets.

"You want some?"

She looked at him. "No."

"You're still playing." BZ did not take his eyes from hers. "Some day you'll wake up and you just won't feel like playing anymore."

"That's a queen's way of doing it."

"I never expected you to fall back on style as an argument."

"I'm not arguing"

"I know that. You think I'd be here if I didn't know that?" (212)

In the scene that follows, BZ and Maria lie next to each other in her bed. As BZ sits up to get the pills, Maria quietly says "Don't." He replies, "Don't start faking me now" and asks her to take his hand and go to sleep (213). He swallows the pills, and she holds his hand. She knows what he is doing, and she doesn't try to stop him. She lets him kill himself. It is this act that is interpreted by others as a nervous breakdown, and it is this that lands Maria in an institution. This scene is one of the only genuine moments in a book where conversation usually takes place at the most superficial level. BZ came to Maria because he did not wish to be alone in his last moments, and because he knew she would not try to stop him. What Maria does, in letting BZ go, might be seen as an act of kindness, but she also knows it might be interpreted differently, and is willing to accept the consequences. At the end of the book, though she is living in an institution, Maria is happy; the only downside is that she can't be with her daughter Kate. She tells us her plans for the future are "(1) get Kate, (2) live with Kate alone, (3) do some canning," (210).

Gloria Steinem's 1970 review of *Play it as it Lays* closes with the line: "I hope someday there will be a novel, perhaps by Joan Didion, about a woman who tries (even if she fails) to control her own fate" (Steinem, "Didion Novel of How a Housewife Came to Cope" 9). Steinem ultimately finds Maria wanting, "seeing her husband's cruelty and the sham of their friends' lives so clearly, why isn't she able to get out?" (9). This is precisely the wrong question, but it is one that is always asked of novels in which the protagonist has less chutzpah than the novelist who created her (from George Eliot to Virginia Wolff). To criticize Didion for writing a character who is not able to keep herself out of a psychiatric hospital is no more rational than criticizing George Elliot for letting Dorothea Brooke marry the musty scholar Mr. Casabaum. Didion's novels are not about extraordinary women who break down societal boundaries, they are about flawed women who frequently misinterpret their own desires. The contradiction of Maria's intelligence coupled with her complacency is precisely what makes her an interesting character.

Steinem misses the point of Didion's novel, which is not ultimately, exclusively, about Maria. Writing in 1974, Cynthia Griffin Wolff reads *Play it as it Lays* as an allegory for changing times, as a challenge to the very idea of "freedom." Reflecting on Maria—a woman who moved far away from her parents to pursue an acting career, and as an adult, wishes most of all to return to the authenticity of the home she left behind, she writes:

It may be desirable, even necessary, for children to leave the family and seek their own fortunes; but it is not "free." The rancor that can come between husband and wife may require the desperate measure of divorce; but divorce is not "free." Abortion may be no more than "induced menstruation" or a "humane operation," but abortion is far from "free." We have eased the old, crippling restrictions, and we have introduced flexibility and choice; however, we have not expanded our moral categories to include such easements. Instead, we have behaved as if moral categories were simply no longer relevant. The result has not been the Utopia we had hoped for, but rather a nightmare world in which identity itself has been lost in the shuffle. Such is the burden of Didion's fiction. It seems to be the case, she argues mordantly, that we need moral categories if we are really to "be." (Wolff 135)

Wolff is right, I think, to point out the way that Didion challenges simplistic ideas about morality and freedom. This novel, in particular, with its emphasis on the price people pay for the games they play (in its title and in the consistent references to card games) insists that with every pleasure, with every freedom, comes a cost. The costs are, the novel suggests, especially high for women. Wolff, too, is speaking specifically about women, when she writes "the result has not been the Utopia we had hoped for," acknowledging that feminism (and all the other social movements of the 1960s) have not actually radically changed social structures.

*Conclusion: Didion as Model of Professional Femininity*

In his 1980 review of *The White Album*, Martin Amis writes the following about Joan Didion's style:

Miss. Didion is already being called 'major,' a judgment that some might think premature, to say the least: but she is far more rewarding than many writers similarly saluted. In particular, the candour of her femaleness is highly arresting and original. She doesn't try for the virile virtues of robustness and infallibility; she tries to find a female way of being serious. Nevertheless, there are hollow places in even her best writing, a thinness, a sense of things missing.

...  
There are two main things that aren't there. The first is a social dimension... the other main thing that isn't there is any kind of literary spaciousness or solidity." (Amis, "Joan Didion's Style")

In one sentence, Amis compliments the writer on the fact that she does not try to write in a masculine way. Her writing is feminine, he seems to say, because of its candor, a sincerity. The "female way of being serious" that Amis finds in Didion's writing—one has to assume—is defined in opposition to robustness and infallibility. Didion's writing, in this formation, is honest about its own limitations. And yet, he also characterizes the writing as "thin," he writes later in the piece that Didion's writing suffers from problems with the writer, the fact that she suffers from a lack of interest in people different than herself, and also, that she is not sufficiently well-read. It does not seem to occur to Amis that the very things he seems to like about Didion's

writing—the candor of her femaleness, for example—might be a result of consciously leaving out some details. Just because Didion does not write about the sorts of people Amis wishes she would write about does not mean that she hasn't thought about them. He makes the mistake of reading the absences in Didion's writing as if they are mistakes, rather than intentional choices. Even as he calls her writing "arresting," he treats her as if she is an amateur.

Amis has misread Didion, but his designation of her writing as finding a 'female way of being serious' is well-said. Didion tries to capture particular forms of the actual experience of femininity in her time and place, and that experience, she repeats over and over again, is full of a sense of things missing. This has something to do with Didion's ability to describe femininity both from the inside and the outside, which is to say, she understands and can describe what it looks like as well as how it feels. In her essay on Helen Gurley Brown, she paints a picture of a certain kind of professional femininity—it is an old-fashioned story of grit and determination. This kind of professional femininity—with its drive for success—requires an appropriate object, it requires a task at which the woman may excel. When there is no such task, no job or profession, it can be displaced into some other kind of work, as in the case of Lucille Miller or the fictional Maria Wyeth. Lucille's drive to be better than her neighbors led her to demand too much of suburban life, to take risks that landed her in a woman's prison. Maria's drive to get out of her one horse town (Silver Wells, NV) brought her success, but left her feeling empty because she found herself surrounded by people with whom she only has superficial relationships. These characters are all struggling with 'the woman problem,' with a kind of ambition that frequently causes trouble in one's personal life. Brown, who marries but never mothers, has the most "successful" trajectory. But the other characters find themselves having a difficult time being good mothers. While she serves her sentence, Lucille Miller's infant is being raised by her oldest

daughter. Maria thinks often of Kate, but her actions have landed her in her own kind of prison, where she cannot take care of her daughter or even visit her. Didion herself struggles with being a mother and also being a professional woman, but she never considers the alternative.

The men, too, struggle in these writings. The fact that John Wayne is sick with cancer, is, for Didion, a sign that the old societal order is crumbling. His style of masculinity has become a way of being that only happens on film, or in men of a certain age. The suicide of BZ at the end of *Play it as it Lays* is too, an indication of the pressures of masculinity. BZ, the implication is, has grown weary of his sham marriage, tired of pretending he is something he is not, of only sharing intimacies with people when he is high or drunk. When Maria asks BZ why he has come to her room with his pills, he says "Because you and I, we *know* something. Because we've been out there where nothing is. Because I wanted—you know why" (*PLAIL* 212). What Maria knows is never revealed to the reader, she herself insists that she knows nothing because there is nothing to know. Nothing has any meaning.

BZ is not the only man to die in a Didion novel. *Run River* begins with a homicide and ends in a suicide. In the homicide, a husband has shot and killed his wife's lover, and in the suicide, he takes his own life. Like Maria with BZ, the wife (Lily) lets her husband shoot himself. The narrator reflects, "Leave him be. It was all she could do now, the only present she could make him... Maybe the most difficult, most important thing anyone could do for anyone else was to leave him alone; it was perhaps the only gratuitous act, the act of love" (*Run River* 263). This is also how *A Book of Common Prayer* ends. At the end of that book, Charlotte, the heroine, refuses to leave Boca Grande (the fictional central American nation where the novel is set) in spite of a bloody "transfer of power" that is unfolding. When her husband begs her to

leave, she says "I walked away from places all my life and I'm not going to walk away from here" (*BOCP* 257).

While it is somewhat true that, as Katherine Henderson has written, in her novels "Didion dramatized the very mystique of which Friedan wrote, the myth that a woman finds her real self in husband, home, and children," such a reading misrepresents what is so interesting and important about these novels (58). Ultimately, Didion's characters are not desperate housewives, they are never under the illusion that their real self can be found in someone else--they are indeed suspicious of the very idea of a real self. The endings of the novels reveal the many ways in which Didion does take seriously the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. In these novels, the heroine ultimately decides to live (or die) for herself. In allowing others to take their own lives, these heroines act out the other main principle of Beauvoir's existentialism, they let other people live for themselves, too. In the end, though Didion does sometimes writes in terms of mythological types (the dust bowl story, John Wayne), and the irreducible difference of being a woman, she also insists that individuals are more complicated than the types she has invented. She refuses to understand herself as a particular type of woman in her essay "Unhung Wreathes and Boughs," and she refuses to accept the feminist critique precisely because she believes it reduces all women to one kind of woman. She is interested in characteristics shared among women, but ultimately, she the cares more about the differences between them.

But at the same time, Didion is still a rugged individualist. And it is in her capacity as such that she has become one of the best-known and most beloved chroniclers of femininity in U.S. media culture. Even as Didion ages, her influence on women continues unabated. A new film adaptation of her novel *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977) is in pre-production, with Christina Hendricks (Joan Harris on AMC's *Mad Men*) cast as Charlotte Douglas, the Didion

heroine. Didion herself is the subject of a new documentary, produced by her nephew Griffin Dunne and documentarian Susan Rostock, titled *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live* and a new biography (the first), *The Last Love Song*, both set to be released in 2015<sup>20</sup>. Finally, in March 2015, *Deadline* reported that Didion's essay "Good-bye to all that" about loving and leaving New York City, has been optioned for a feature-film, which producers hope will be written and directed by a woman (Busch, "Joan Didion's Goodbye to all that optioned for Feature Film").

This resurgence of interest in Didion's life is not coincidental. The turn toward the 1960s and 1970s is of course related to the fact that baby boomers are aging, and reflecting on their own personal history, but I suspect that there is more to the story. The 1960s discussion of 'the woman problem' rages on in the contemporary U.S. Press, in the form of 'the mommy wars,' in terms of the debate about whether or not (and how) women can have it all-- a career and a personal life. As I claim in the introduction, this is now a problem faced by men as well as women. From the outside, Didion might seem to have the solution to this problem. Here is a woman who built a successful career as a writer in the 1960s, and whose personal life can sometimes seem almost mythic (the marriage to John Gregory Donne that lasted almost forty years, the beautiful photographer daughter, and then the loss of both, in less than five years). At this late stage in her story, Didion has indeed become one of her own heroines, a survivor, facing the world alone. Joan Didion, I am trying to say, seems to know something about how to be a woman, about how to get what one wants, and also, how to endure life's inevitable disappointments. But Joan Didion's writings will not solve the problems facing young women

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<sup>20</sup>Though she isn't technically a baby boomer, this resurgence of interest in Didion's life is related to the aging of that famous generation. In recent years, many 1960s icons have released memoirs (notably Carole King's *A Natural Woman: A Memoir* in 2013 and Patti Smith's *Just Kids* in 2010).



seeking to "have it all," they will offer escape, perhaps even inspiration, but they will never spurn a revolution. Didion is a writer interested in, ultimately, the exceptional, not the ordinary.

## CHAPTER TWO—BLOGGING FEMININITY: THE NEW HOME ECONOMICS?

Journalist Emily Matchar's first book, *Homeward Bound: Why Women are Embracing the New Domesticity*, was published in 2013 to a veritable media storm. The 31 year-old Matchar's press tour included Good Morning America, The BBC News Hour, and Comedy Central's The Colbert Report; her book was reviewed in print (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker* and *The New Republic*) and online (*Slate*, *The Hairpin*, *Salon*). The critics almost universally applauded the young journalist's take on "the new domesticity," a term Matchar uses to describe a phenomenon wherein young middle class men and women are rejecting the working world and embracing the traditional domestic arts. In her words, the new domesticity describes "the Brooklyn hipster who quit her PR job to sell hand-knitted scarves at craft fairs" or "the dreadlocked 'urban homesteader' who raises his own chickens to reduce his carbon footprint" (Matchar 4). In spite of her tendency toward caricature, Matchar has pointed toward something important. In "the new domesticity" she has identified a juncture where a discourse about working mothers meets traditional homemaking, where so-called feminist meets so-called housewife.

I complicate Matchar's account of the new domesticity by looking at the contemporary phenomenon of lifestyle blogging in relation to the now-defunct academic discipline (and industry) of home economics. At issue in Matchar's new domesticity is nothing less than the relationship between home and work in contemporary U.S. Culture. But while Matchar presents her subjects as embracing a "new" domesticity, I show that they are part of a long history of domesticity movements—and domestic writing—in the U.S. I connect the lifestyle blog to this

history, which I align with at least three discreet phenomena: the fall of home economics, the rise of women's studies, and the tradition of the entrepreneurial homemaker (from the domestic advisor to the lifestyle blogger). For both the home economist and the entrepreneurial homemaker, a woman's attachment to femininity is utilized to obtain credibility and also, to rationalize one's participation in the public sphere. But there is an important difference between these two modes of professionalization. While the entrepreneurial homemaker is ultimately concerned with personal profit, the home economist has a function to perform on behalf of some larger group (either a company, the public interest, the university, or the state). The entrepreneurial homemaker is an entity of capital, whereas the home economist is an expert whose research can be utilized for any number of purposes.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I claimed that the professionalization of femininity could be thought about in two distinct ways, in terms of the professionalization of domesticity, and the professionalization of femininity. This chapter is concerned with the former. Here, I think through the professionalization of domesticity in two ways. First, in terms of the academic discipline of home economics as it existed from 1909 until the 1970s, and second, in terms of entrepreneurial homemaking, specifically focusing on the new phenomenon of lifestyle blogging. While both formations draw on a traditional idea of femininity— where femininity is deeply attached to domesticity— they have fundamentally different consequences. Entrepreneurial homemaking is individualistic; women who make use of this style of femininity do so in order to accumulate wealth and to some extent, power and influence. Home economics is fundamentally different because it is by nature, collaborative. In the tradition of social science, home economists sought to work together to garner information about how people live in the world, and then, to improve that world through their research. This was then, a tradition oriented toward

the betterment of the community. This chapter crucially explores these issues in the service of thinking about pressing problems facing middle class people in the U.S.— child and elder care, food safety, affordable housing, and education.

By thinking through professional domesticity in all its forms, my hope is that the present might be inspired by the past. I have organized a number of dichotomies as a way to structure this chapter, each is a different version of the 'feminist/housewife' debate discussed in the introduction. I call home economics and entrepreneurial homemaking different forms of the professionalization of housework. I juxtapose women's studies and home economics-- both disciplinary formations that emerged out of social movements led by politically disenfranchised women. Each of these distinctions (between housewife and feminist, home economist and entrepreneurial homemaker, women's studies and home economics) is also a distinction between "work" and "life," where each word is different configured based on its context. The chapter begins with a brief history of home economics, which pivots around a critical moment in recent history-- the meeting of radical feminism and institutional home economics, Robin Morgan's speech at the American Home Economics Association in 1971. From that discussion, I move on to discuss the emergence of the lifestyle blog, and finally, I conclude with a discussion of the above-mentioned false dichotomies.

### *Part One: Home Economics and Feminism*

#### Historicizing Home Economics

In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan reserved a special kind of contempt for those who taught Home Economics to young girls. As she put it, "Instead of opening new horizons and wider worlds to able women, the sex-directed educator moved in to teach them adjustment within the world of home and children" (237). Following Friedan, and emboldened

by the lessons of the women's liberation movement, the first set of histories about home economics were unabashed in their criticism of a discipline which placed so much emphasis on the home (Ehrenreich and English 1978; Strasser 1982; Cowen 1983, Matthews 1987). In the mid-1990s, with the publication of the important collection *Rethinking Home Economics* (Stage and Vincenti 1997), academics began to reconsider the role home economists had played in social reform throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (Rossiter 1995, Nerad 1999, Leavitt 2002; Elias 2008; Gordan 2009; Goldstein 2012). This recent work has explored the role of home economists in expanding women's roles in government and in the university, suggesting that while founders of home economics might not have called themselves feminists, their work helped make second wave feminism possible.

Ellen Swallow Richards (1842-1911), considered the founder, or "engineer" of Home Economics, was part of the first generation of college-educated women in U.S. History. At Vassar College, Richards studied Chemistry, but upon graduation in 1870, she could not get a job as a chemist. Determined to continue her studies, she entered MIT, where she earned a BS in Chemistry at MIT in 1873, distinguishing herself as the first woman to earn a degree from that institution (Stage "Ellen Richards," 22). Richards continued studying and working at MIT, but she consistently faced challenges from an institution that was uncomfortable with a woman scientist. Sarah Stage writes of Richards, "throughout her life she would use the camouflage of domesticity, as she did at MIT, to advance women's education and careers" (22). It was Richards' interest in applying science to the household that led her to help found a new academic discipline, Home Economics.

As more women like Richards earned advanced degrees in science, education, and public policy, a desire grew to find a place where educated women could put their expertise to good

use. There had long been a cultural tradition of middle class white women working in what was broadly deemed, domestic science; such women worked at charitable organizations that sought to uplift the lower classes and as writers of advice manuals and cookbooks. The women who founded home economics were part of this larger tradition, but were seeking to build a discipline with a strong grounding in science. They wished to connect new developments in food science, water sanitation, child development, and textile design. In this way, the emergence of home economics was the result of a strategic shift away from the 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition of domesticity (epitomized by Catherine and Harriet Beecher's best selling 1869 domestic advice book, *American Woman's Home: or, Principles of Domestic Science*) and toward what was seen as the future: a scientific approach to household efficiency. According to Stage, Ellen Richards was at the center of this shift, and led the way in moving home economics away from an earlier "preoccupation with bread baking and better servants" (Stage "Ellen Richards," 25). Sarah Stage goes so far as to suggest that Richards strategically built her organization as a counterpoint to the pre-existing National Household Economic Association (NHEA), an organization founded in 1893 to improve the quality of household servants, because she wanted to move home economics away from what she saw as 19<sup>th</sup> century thinking (Stage 25).

Richards' plan occurred over the course of nine years, from 1899 to 1908, when home economics practitioners met annually in Lake Placid. There, they performed the organizational work of building 'Home Economics' as an academic discipline. In these meetings, they sought to "make home economics respectable as an academic discipline ... and a profession" (Nerad *The Academic Kitchen*, 7). They constructed standard curriculum for elementary schools, colleges, and Universities, and defined the contours of their new field. The conference proceedings from the Lake Placid meetings demonstrate the seriousness with which the task was undertaken. The

goals were, from the outset, not only to offer educational courses in Home Economics, but also to conduct research to be utilized in public policy and private industry ("History and Outline of First Conference," 4). As the Lake Placid conference grew to include hundreds of members, the old-fashioned NHEA was, as Richards had hoped, dissolved. According to their last president, the organization was no longer necessary because "the Lake Placid conference was now doing much better work along the same lines" (Larned, 185).

The National Household Economic Association was representative of a long tradition of entrepreneurial homemaking in the U.S. This tradition did not end with the formal institutionalization of home economics. As I gestured toward in the last chapter, it continued in the publication of domestic advise manuals and the rise of the entrepreneurial homemaker, historically epitomized by figures like Fanny Farmer, Julia Child, and Mary Kay Ash. Today figures like Martha Stewart, Nigella Lawson, and also, America's Test Kitchen Founder Christopher Kimball, fill this role. Later in this chapter, I will position domestic bloggers as a continuation of this tradition. My point here is to highlight the distinction between the work of domestic advising, which I understand as a form of entrepreneurial homemaking, and the work of home economics, which, like all academic disciplines, is ultimately motivated by the production of knowledge.

In 1909, The American Home Economics Association (hereafter referred to as the AHEA) was officially founded, boasting 700 original members. Alongside the organization, a Journal was established, *The Journal of Home Economics*, to provide an outlet for research and debate among members. The organization's constitution, published in the first issue of the Journal, clearly states the organization's aims, which were, "to improve the conditions of living in the home, the institutional household and the community," a purpose which would be

advanced in multiple ways, including research about the household within and outside of the university, the establishment of professional courses and training programs for teachers and practitioners, and the publication of works that would enable policy changes for the good of the community ("Constitution of AHEA" 1909, 40). While there were certainly divergent views among founding members about whether women were well suited for work outside the home, Richards' view--that the work of home economics was of vital importance to the larger community--is clearly reflected in the constitution.

If not for federal legislation expanding land-grant universities in the U.S., the AHEA might have remained a quaint organization known only to historians. But as a result of the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 and the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, Home Economics departments emerged at most major land grant institutions in the U.S. (Nerad 9). Together, these laws provided funds for each state to distribute to its agricultural colleges for "agricultural extension work," and for teacher training and teacher salaries in newly stipulated areas, one of which was home economics (Nerad 9). In addition to a place in the University, in 1915, the US Department of Agriculture opened an Office of Home Economics, and in 1923, expanded the office to a Bureau of Home Economics, which was led by Chemist (and Home Economist) Louise Stanley until 1943. Though the Bureau was reorganized in 1940, Home Economics remained a federal agency until 1960, when it was dissolved. By 1923 then, Home Economics was an established discipline both inside the university system as a field of study, and within government, as a practical area for public policy. In both senses, it was led by women.

As every history of the movement shows, from the start, home economics was fraught with ironies, not least of which was the fact that some home economists (working women themselves) strongly advocated for the notion that a woman's place was in the home. While the



proponents of home economics believed the household to be a vitally important place in American life for both men and women, the courses were always designed for the education of women, thereby reproducing and perpetuating the sexual division of labor that had made the image of the housewife so thoroughly feminized.

This becomes especially clear in Elias's (2006) description of practice houses, simulated homes that college students would live in in order to put into practice the various skills they were learning in school. Within such practice houses, students would take turns managing the budget, cooking meals, and even caring for real infants. Housework was only one portion of the work any individual engaged in on a given day, allowing members of the family to maintain outside relationships and interests. Elias writes, "This ideal of balance between home and the wider world was basic to the home economics movement yet elusive in real lives" (2008, 48). Home economists were sometimes able to achieve such ideals, in part because many professional home economists never married, and chose to live out their lives with other women in a "partnership that was truly equal" (Elias 2006, 68). It was this ideal, not the reality of heterosexual married life, that was expressed in the university practice houses. The practice houses, like many other elements of the home economics curriculum at major universities, reveal the fundamental contradiction of the discipline; the irreconcilability of its radical potential (communally shared housework and childcare) and its conservative values (the sanctity of the traditional family). While home economists were theoretically committed to imagining new modes of social organization, in reality, their work often fell short. Inevitably, they privileged white middle class modes of social organization to the exclusion of every other alternative.

By the early 1960s, there were murmurs in the press about a "woman problem," anticipating the best-selling critique of mainstream femininity that was *The Feminine Mystique*.

Home economics courses, which in all appearances seemed to prepare young women for motherhood and marriage, were increasingly looked at with a critical eye. The American Home Economics Association, too, was beginning to look 'out of touch' with the social mores of the times. By 1971, when Robin Morgan was invited to speak at the annual meeting of the AHEA, the field was having an identity crisis.

#### Robin Morgan encounters Home Economics in 1971

Robin Morgan's 1971 address at the AHEA was published in 1973 in the *Journal of Home Economics* (hereafter abbreviated as *JHE*). The journal, along with many of the foundational documents of the AHEA and the home economics movement, have been archived online through Cornell University's Albert R. Mann library, as the Home Economics Archive: Research, Tradition, and History (HEARTH). These documents are readily available to anyone with an Internet connection. While the availability of the home economics archive has helped facilitate rich scholarly examinations of the field, it has also led to rather shallow journalistic discussions. A 2014 piece for the *The New Republic* by Rebecca Traister is exemplary. Traister's headline "Feminists killed Home Economics" neatly sums up her position.

Using Robin Morgan's 1971 address to the American Home Economics Association (AHEA) as evidence, specifically the line "As a radical feminist, I am here addressing the enemy," Traister credits Feminism with the downfall of Home Economics (Morgan 1973). In just a few sentences, she constructs the all too easy--and misleading--binary between the archetypal feminist and the archetypal housewife. By producing the history as a debate between Feminism and Home Economics, with a clear winner (Feminism) and loser (Home Economics), Traister rhetorically constructs feminism and domesticity as enemies. By perpetuating the notion that home economics (the domestic) and feminism (the political) are incompatible ideologies, she

allows the sexism that threatened them both in the 1970s to go unnamed, unexamined, and unchallenged.

In 1971, most members of the AHEA were working women, and understood their field in terms of the values their founder Ellen Swallows Richards had espoused in 1909. While they may not have described themselves as feminists, they would certainly not have identified themselves as housewives. In my analysis, Morgan's speech was not designed to dismiss home economists as "the enemy," but to challenge them to join her as important allies in the fight for women's liberation. History shows that Morgan's speech did indeed shake the foundations of the AHEA, but not, perhaps, in the ways one might expect. As AHEA president Marjorie East put it at the time, "Robin Morgan's attack came as a great shock to me because we've been teaching dual roles for women for years; I just couldn't believe we had many members who felt the woman's place was in the home" (East et al 1973, 10). In her capacity as AHEA president and as chair of the Home Economics department at Penn State, East understood herself to be preparing students not for homemaking, but for work within and outside the home (what she calls dual roles).

Robin Morgan did not appear on the big stage at the AHEA, nor did she appear alone. Morgan spoke on a panel titled "Rights vs. Responsibilities in Women's Changing World" (1971 "General Session Speakers," 236). The panel was billed as a discussion between three women with differing views: Morgan would represent "the militant women's lib advocates," Dr. Jean Cooper, chairman of the home economics department at NC Central University, would address "the effect of the liberation movement on black women," and Mrs. Jayne Spain, who was presented as "homemaker, top businesswoman, and volunteer on behalf of the handicapped" would offer "the traditional view" ("General Session Speakers," 236). The description published

by the *Journal of Home Economics* (hereafter referred to as the *JHE*) of these three women paints them as three opposing forces, but all three speakers were professional women who were working in their own ways toward gender equity. Reading Morgan's speech in context means understanding that she came to the AHEA to be the voice of radical feminism, it was her role to counter the more conservative perspectives of Spain and Cooper.

The transcripts published in the *JHE* reflect that while all participants agreed that women were fully capable of working outside the home, they had different beliefs about the need for women's liberation. Mrs. Spain, who was, at the time, working as Vice President of the Civil Service Commission (where she worked to ensure that hiring decisions were based on merit) maintained that "the country cannot afford to maintain artificial barriers of race, sex, or physical handicaps... that prevent the full use of all human resources," but she did not seem convinced that there were any significant social barriers facing women ("Today's Frontiers" 1971, 406). For Spain, women's equality had been achieved, and it was up to individual women to take their place in the professional world.

Dr. Jean Cooper's comments that day, titled "Women's Liberation and The Black Woman," offer an important alternative perspective. While many white women's liberationists were seeking "liberation from babies, dishes, diapers, and boredom," Cooper pointed out that black women had different, more immediate needs (Cooper, 522). Black middle class women, Cooper said, were still seeking liberation from "exorbitant mortgage payments," and "subtle indignities" (522). Poor black women, she said, sought freedom from "hunger and poverty," "gross economic exploitation on the job market," and "the near total lack of real choices" (522). Cooper reminded her audience that liberation from the home, though paramount to many white middle class feminists, was simply not a top priority for many black women. For the black

woman, she said, the "ability to spend more time in her own home with her own family" remains a luxury because "most black women, including those of the middle class, have *had* to work--not for personal fulfillment and not to help out temporarily, but for real!" (522).

In the September issue of the *JHE* published immediately following the meeting at Denver, the panel on women's rights is described as having "touched off a spirited discussion that carried over to the box luncheon following the session" ("Today's Frontiers" 1971, 408). In the few paragraphs that follow, Cooper and Spain's comments are summarized, while Morgan's are conspicuously absent. Cooper's contribution to the panel was published in full in the October 1971 issue of the *JHE*, while Morgan's speech was not published until January 1973 (Spain's complete address was never published). Clearly, Cooper's caveat about what liberation meant for black women was less provocative within the AHEA than Robin Morgan's comments about Home Economics. The historical record suggests that the delay in publishing and responding to Morgan's critique was a result of a general feeling among the leadership that they did not have a clear response: "we didn't have any data, any real information that would support our feeling that we weren't the problem" (East et al 1973 10).

Not until January 1973 did *JHE* subscribers have the opportunity to read what Robin Morgan had actually said at Denver. By this time, *JHE* readers would have been familiar with the women's liberation movement, which had been receiving coverage in the mainstream press since at least 1970 (Hesford 2013; Dow 2014). Morgan began her speech by offering her understanding of the AHEA: "the main emphasis of your organization is to reinforce three primary areas--marriage, the family, and the issue of consumerism, which you may euphemistically call consumer protection" ("What Robin Morgan Said" 1973, 13). She then claimed that marriage, family, and consumption "are three of the primary areas that the radical

women's movement is out to destroy." (13). She continued, "So, one could say that as a radical feminist, I am here addressing the enemy" (13). In most histories, this line is reduced to "As a radical feminist, I am here addressing the enemy" (Traister 2014; Goldstein 2012, 282; Elias 2008, 162; Stage 1997, 1), but Morgan's actual phraseology holds a different meaning. By claiming that "one could say" she was addressing the enemy, Morgan was offering the possibility that one could also say otherwise. Morgan was in fact setting up a call to action that would recruit Home Economic as a potential ally, rather than enemy, of Women's Liberation.

Morgan acknowledges that the women in the room "have immense power, psychological and economic, because every young woman in our culture at one time or another passes through your tutelage" (13). Morgan goes on to paint an extreme portrait of the consequences of the home economics classroom:

After marriage, of course, like the average American housewife she [the American girl] will work a 99.6-hour workweek for no pay at a job for which society has contempt; she will walk five miles a day even if she never leaves her house; she will wash 7,000 glasses a year. And it is not even considered a job. On quiz shows they ask, "Do you want to work? Or are you just a homemaker?" You're getting her ready for that. And you are working against everything in her that might want to be something else (13).

After she had thoroughly engaged the attention of her audience, Morgan acknowledges "I realize that many of you don't like that image of home economics and are trying to fight against it, and I want to talk about some concrete ways in which if you are sincere you can change that image and, more importantly, change women's lives" (13). Contrary to the dominant reading of this moment-- that claims Morgan's position was in strict opposition to Home Economics (offered by Stage (1997), Elias (2008), Goldstein (2012), and Traister (2014))--I am suggesting that Robin Morgan was making a sincere effort to shake up the AHEA.

In 1971, the AHEA had a membership amounting to 27,808 people, with chapters in all fifty states ("AHEA Membership Report" 1971). The AHEA was one of the oldest women led

professional associations in the nation, and had a long history of lobbying on behalf of women's educational and professional opportunities. Certainly, Robin Morgan's politics were far more radical than those of the AHEA, but her decision to appear in front of this group reflects a desire to challenge the association, not as a combatant, but as an interested observer. Morgan, an experienced political organizer, would have recognized this as an opportunity to enlist new women to her cause. To this end, Morgan made specific suggestions to her audience. She told them to: quit their jobs (presumably as home economics teachers); demand that home economics not be a required course; demand that home economics be offered to both men and women; tell the truth about women's lived experience (about abortion, about the boredom of the American housewife, about women who are not middle class, about women on welfare, about corporations and ecology, about economic bigotry against women); and begin to deal with their own oppression as women. It's a long list, said Morgan, but unless changes are made, "you run the risk of becoming obsolete" (13).

The final portion of Morgan's speech was the most passionate. There, she urged those who would stay in the field of Home Economics "not to further reinforce the mores of society but to change them" (13). She insisted: "institutions that home economics has been hooked into are dying, and they are dying even without the feminist revolution" (13). Morgan backed up her claims with statistics, pointing out that one third of marriages were ending in divorce, and that the nuclear family was a thing of the past. She concluded "It's your choice whether you're going to crumble with that system and stand in the way while history rolls over you or whether you're going to move with it. I hope that you will join us--but we're going to win in any event" (13). Morgan's words reflect the excitement of the times, and the belief that the feminist future was imminent.

Even though the AHEA was more progressive than Morgan suggested, the image of Home Economics that Robin Morgan reflected back at her audience unsettled them, evidenced by the published conversation of "The Women's Role Committee" that accompanied Morgan's speech in the 1973 issue of the *JHE*. The conversation reflects a serious interest in Morgan's points, and a general astonishment that home economists could ever be understood as complicit in perpetuating gender inequality. Marjorie East, who was at the time president of the AHEA as well as chairperson of the Department of Home Economics Education at Penn State, said, "our critics, and some home economists too, feel that home economics primarily teaches domesticity and that the woman's role is in the home as wife and mother, and that anything else she does is secondary. If home economics does indeed perpetuate this concept of women, we have some rethinking to do" (East et al 1973, 10).

The conversation initiated by Morgan's address is an incredible rejoinder to those who might claim the AHEA was an organization of homemakers. The published conversation, remains, in 2015, a sophisticated analysis of the difficulties faced by women-dominated academic departments. One theme that emerges is the fact that home economics may have been indirectly responsible for women feeling guilty about their work and their inadequacy at managing so-called "dual roles" as wife and worker. Weis explains, "I think this is a conflict that has been repressed by a lot of us. We teach one lifestyle and we ourselves practice another lifestyle" (11). Similarly, there is a discussion about women in the workplace and the reality that they often face discrimination that men do not. In the long conversation below, this concern leads to talk of a women's studies department:

Weis: It's very interesting that several years ago a lot of the qualities that were used to describe ineffective, unhealthy personalities were feminine terms. Now, we're seeing an about-face on this everywhere--a general consciousness raising.



Robshaw: There is so much documentation now breaking down these fallacies. When management says we don't want to spend \$5,000 to train her because she's just going to leave, the fact is that more men change jobs in management now than women do. Women need to know these facts and go armed with them and say "Now wait a minute, you're not speaking the truth."

Trotter: Where can women get the facts? I think this is an argument for a women's study program-- and it might evolve out of the home economics curriculum.

Weis: It might be cooperatively developed with other departments such as sociology and political science. I would also like to see secondary programs in home economics take on greater responsibility and leadership in this area of women's studies.

Ford: I think the concept should be interwoven into the curriculum and not be so special. We might develop something in terms of integrating women's studies into all areas of home economics.

East: But the problem is not all one of women's roles. If we take on women's studies in home economics, we will just reinforce the myth that we are concerned only about women and not about people. We need to study the roles of both sexes and how they are changing. It's very necessary to get the boys in high school. (15)

In the above conversation, the women's role committee reaches some astounding conclusions. In 1973, the AHEA was calling for an interdisciplinary, collaborative academic endeavor to study the "roles of both sexes and how they are changing" as well as the problems women experience in the workplace.

Not only did the women's role committee anticipate the institutionalization of academic feminism in the form of women's studies, they anticipated key debates that would not take place within Women's Studies until the 1980s and 1990s. East resists incorporating women's studies into home economics because she feels it will "reinforce the myth that we are concerned only about women and not about people" (15). Her gesture toward the notion of changing roles seems to anticipate the emergence both of masculinity studies and gender studies within academic feminism.

At about the same time the above-cited home economists were debating whether women's studies courses should be offered within their departments, universities around the country were discussing the need for women's studies programs. In 1977, The National Women's

Studies Association (NWSA) was founded, establishing the field of women's studies with a professional organization and a journal. The consolidation of a professional organization and institutional space, however, did not signify the first interest in women's studies. These developments marked the beginnings of institutional power for an academic perspective that had existed for many years, arguably, within departments of Home Economics. For far too long, connections between the two disciplines have been obscured by what have been perceived as irreconcilable differences.

Home Economics and Women's Studies not only share an interest in studying the lives of women (something that had long taken place in Home Economics departments,)<sup>21</sup> but also, they shared the unfortunate fate of being sites where institutional politics played out. Why were these departments frequently reorganized and renamed? In her analysis, historian Margaret Rossiter claims that the disappearance of Home Economics departments from the 1950s through the 1980s was a result of basic and uncomplicated sexism (1999). Rossiter tells a story of a few tireless women who tried to keep their field alive in the face of university presidents who wished to eliminate the words "home economics" from their course catalogues. She writes that it was not a lack of Ph.D.'s on the faculty or declining enrollments that motivated dreaded "reorganizations," but rather, "the hostility and related lack of communication between a new breed of ambitious university presidents ... and the many women deans who tried repeatedly and futilely to define the field and to improve and expand their programs with little outside support" (Rossiter 1999, 115). Rossiter demonstrates that as these stalwart women retired, home economics programs were reshaped into 'gender-neutral' departments of "nutritional sciences," "human development," or "human ecology." (116).

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<sup>21</sup>In *Stir it Up*, Megan Elias discusses mentions a number of courses taught within Home Economics, as early as 1912, that were committed to considering the condition of women's lives. In such courses, Elias writes, "the consideration of womanhood itself was an essential condition of the study of the home" (51).

Education researcher Maresi Nerad tells a similar tale in her study of the Home Economics Department at Berkeley. When department Chairwoman Agnes Fay Morgan retired in 1954 after thirty-six years of service, the college announced that the department would be re-named and reorganized as "The Department of Nutritional Sciences" (Nerad 1999). Between 1954 and 1968, the department's composition radically changed, from Ninety One to Thirty One percent female, and importantly, from female to all male leadership (Nerad 1999, 135). The story that Nerad and Rossiter tell is one that occurred all over the country starting in the 1960s. By the time Morgan appeared at the AHEA in 1971, Home Economics departments were already in the midst of major reorganization. By the 1980s, most Home Economics departments were disbanded or given more scientific titles. While these changes seemed, in some cases, cosmetic, the re-naming of a department often involved the erasure of the history of women's work that had gone into building up a Home Economics program. Moreover, as evidenced by the situation at Berkeley, these shifts often meant that many women lost their jobs. Home Economics classes disappeared from high schools not because of feminism, but because Home Economics programs--by and for women – disappeared from Universities.

Since 1994, The American Home Economics Association has been known as The American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences (AAFCS), the "brand story" on the organization's website explains "for more than 100 years, AAFCS members have been working to improve the quality and standards of home and family life by delivering educational programs, influencing public policy, and conducting research" ("AAFCS brand story"). The work of the founders of Home Economics continues, but something has been lost in the translation of the AHEA to the AAFCS. The new organization has reduced ninety years of history as the AHEA to

a few paragraphs about Ellen Richards. The organization that formerly sought to bring value to women's household work has been stripped of its affiliation with femininity.

Over the same period of time that name 'Home Economics' disappeared from major universities in the U.S., programs in 'Women's Studies' emerged. The story of the emergence of women's studies programs is dramatic-- colored as it is by the transformation of the women's liberation movement into a viable academic discipline. Often, such narratives hinge around what Catherine Orr (1999) has called "a recurring tension that seems to exist in women's studies disciplinary identity that pits the professionalized practices of our present institutional strength in the U.S. academy against a vision of the radical uses of our past marginalization" (212). In her essay about San Diego State College, Orr insists that the tension between institutional strength and radical marginalization has been present in Women's Studies programs since their very inception. Nevertheless, essays about the institutionalization of women's studies are often tinged with nostalgia for the old women's studies (see Rothenberg "Women Studies-- The Early Years: When Sisterhood was Powerful" and Shircliffe "Feminist Reflections on University Activism through Women's Studies at a State University: Narratives of Promise, Compromise, and Powerlessness"). Institutionalization has meant-- in many cases-- prioritizing the fight for limited university resources over the battle for social change.

This kind of nostalgia is present in part because the institutional form of Women's Studies has faced many of the same challenges that Home Economics faced. Over time, academics have debated about whether or not Women's Studies is a discipline, since it is by nature, interdisciplinary (Romero, 2000; Boxer, 2000), they have debated what the subject of Women's Studies should be (Wiegman 1999/2000), whether or not Women's Studies should offer PhDs (Boxer, 1998; Friedman, 1998, Guy-Sheftall, 1998), and most presciently, whether

Women's Studies is an adequate name for the institution (fiercely debated in a 1997 special issue of the journal *differences*, titled "Women's Studies on the Edge" with notable contributions by Wendy Brown "The Impossibility of Women's Studies" and Biddy Martin "Success and its Failures"). Recently, Wiegman (2012) has extended these debates to a larger discussion about the relationship between identity disciplines, politics, and knowledge production.

My point in bringing up this connection is merely to point out that what Women's Studies and Home Economics share as disciplinary projects is a difficulty in establishing disciplinary boundaries and maintaining coherency over time. While all disciplines have their share of internal battles over these issues, Women's Studies and its contemporary iterations in Departments of Women's and Gender Studies and Departments of Feminist Studies shares with Home Economics a history of female leadership in a male-dominated university. When right-wing politicians seek to criticize the liberal arts university, they frequently invoke Women's Studies programs as cites where students are taught "useless" knowledge. As the Governor of North Carolina, Pat McCrory, recently put it, "if you want to take gender studies, that's fine. Go to a private school and take it, but I don't want to subsidize that if it's not going to get someone a job" (Binker & Sims "McCrory: Fund Higher Education Based on Results").

This remark-- which trivializes Gender Studies as if it is a luxury consumer good-- is reminiscent of a scene that unfolded in 1959, when Nikita Khrushchev visited a home economics classroom in Ames, Iowa. Newspapers at the time reported that the Soviet Premier "looked on with a quizzical smile at girls learning how to wash and iron and cook. 'We don't have such schools,' he remarked. 'Our mothers have to teach that.' After wishing the girls success in finding husbands, he left with a compliment. 'I don't know how you feed your people,' he said, 'but you are very nice girls'" (qtd. in Elias 100). Megan Elias notes, "Although reporters following

Khrushchev's visit to the United States tended to portray him as both blustering and doctrinaire, when the topic was home economics, writers seemed to agree with him that there was something adorably silly about this branch of American education" (*Stir it Up* 103). Women's Studies departments may not be seen as "adorable," but they are frequently characterized as silly or frivolous because they are associated with femininity. Engineering programs and hard sciences will never face these kinds of critiques, and thus, their place in the university (and in the public) is secure.

## *Part Two: The New Home Economics*

### The Emergence of the Blogosphere

In May of 2006, decades after Robin Morgan's appearance at the AHEA, a woman named Ree Drummond started blogging. Because she was writing from a remote cattle ranch in Oklahoma, she cheekily called her blog, "Confessions of a Pioneer Woman." Drummond posted a mixture of short photo entries and longer pieces; she wrote embarrassing tales about her past and funny tales of life on the ranch (Drummond, "The Pioneer Woman"). In March of 2007, less than a year after she had started writing, Drummond's blog was awarded a Bloggie for "Best-Kept Secret Weblog"<sup>22</sup> ("Seventh Annual Weblog Awards"). In 2009, The Pioneer Woman won the Bloggie<sup>23</sup> for "Weblog of the Year," beating out both The Huffington Post and Perez Hilton ("Ninth Annual Weblog Awards"). That same year, Drummond was named a top 100 blogger by

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<sup>22</sup>"Bloggies" are prizes given out annually by The Weblog Awards, they are the people's choice awards of the Internet.

<sup>23</sup>Since 2007, Drummond's blog has been awarded a number of additional Bloggies. In 2008, for "best food weblog," and "best writing of a weblog." In 2009, for "best designed Weblog." In 2010, for "weblog of the year", "best designed weblog", and "best writing of a weblog." In 2011, she won again for "weblog of the year" and "best designed weblog."

Technorati<sup>24</sup> and profiled by the *Los Angeles Times*. In the profile, Rene Lynch reported that *The Pioneer Woman* drew 13 million page views per month (Lynch). In a 2011 profile for *The New Yorker*, Amanda Fortini put the number of page views at 23.3 million (Fortini).

Eight years into her blogging career, Ree Drummond is now the master of a small media empire. In addition to her blog, she has a weekly cooking show on The Food Network, and is the author of one memoir, three cookbooks, and a series of children's books starring her dog, Charlie (all of which are bestsellers). She does this on top of homeschooling her four kids, and managing her large household. Her "stay-at-home-mom" persona does not hold up to even the smallest amount of scrutiny, and yet, it is a critical element of her success. Like other bloggers who write about the domestic sphere (and like domestic advisors before them), Drummond's credibility comes from her experience as a wife, mother, and homemaker. The fact that her blog generates an enormous profit is an open secret; to acknowledge the fact that blogging is Drummond's career (and that it has been very lucrative) would undo the mystique that makes the writing so successful. Her popularity is derived from her presumed regularity, and so the myth--the flustered pioneer woman who makes big mistakes--prevails. Drummond, and other lifestyle bloggers like her, are entrepreneurs of homemaking; they make a living by monetizing everyday life. Today's lifestyle bloggers continue in a historical tradition of entrepreneurial homemaking, modeled upon figures like Martha Stewart and 19<sup>th</sup> century domestic advisor Lydia Marie Child.

Weblogs began appearing on the Internet as early as 1995, the first were hand coded, time-stamped online journals. In 1997, filter weblogs appeared, sites where an author linked to and wrote commentary about other web content. At this point, the population of webloggers was

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<sup>24</sup>David Sifry founded Technorati in 2002, and was the company's CEO until 2007. Until May 2014, Technorati produced well-respected annual blog rankings. In 2014, they abruptly deleted their archived top 100 blog rankings, eliminating all official recorded data. Bloomberg news reported the story under the headline "Department of Blogging Extinction: Technorati Rankings are Dead" (Gillette).

limited to users with basic programming skills. In 1999, the introduction of free and easy-to-use weblog publishing tools like Blogger changed the landscape, making it possible for anyone with an Internet connection to self-publish her thoughts for the entire world to read (Karlssoon 138).<sup>25</sup> Almost immediately, blogs began multiplying at an extraordinary rate. According to Technorati, which until 2014, tracked the state of the blogosphere, in October of 2004, there were 12,000 new weblogs created each day (Sifry, "State of Blogosphere"). By 2005, the word weblog had been shorted to "blog," and had been pronounced 'word of the year' by Merriam-Webster, which had officially added it to the dictionary (Karlssoon 139). In a 2006 survey, researchers at the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 8 percent of Internet users kept a blog, and 39 percent of Internet users regularly read blogs (Lenhart & Fox, "Bloggers" i).<sup>26</sup> In a follow up 2010 survey, the same researchers found that blogging had decreased among teens and young adults, but increased among older adults (Lenhart et al, "Social Media" 2). Drummond was part of a group of bloggers that came up in the mid-2000s, when the phenomenon of lifestyle blogging emerged online. The 1990s riot grrl attention to crafts and DIY culture (itself a continuation of a long tradition of domestic artistry among U.S. Women) was reborn in the shiny world of food, parenting, and craft blogs.

Almost as soon as the blog emerged as a format for composition, a distinction was made between personal blogs, generally associated with women and teens, and political blogs

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<sup>25</sup>Blogger and Live Journal launched in 1999, Wordpress and Typepad in 2003. The emergence of Twitter and Tumblr (in 2006 and 2007) was already beginning to alter the form of blogging, emphasizing brevity and interactivity.

<sup>26</sup>The academic Minh-ha Pham has used this data to support her own argument that the blogosphere is "much more racially and ethnically diverse than current blog studies would have it" (5). As a result, she argues, the blogosphere is a space where users may "disrupt hegemonic relations among digital and visual technologies, consumer capitalism, and racialized femininity" (10).



(sometimes called filter blogs), associated with professional white men.<sup>27</sup> Filter blogs were favorably viewed as radical tools of democracy and social change, whereas personal blogs were feminized and syphoned off to the realm of lifestyle. It was almost as if the personal blog was one new medium, and the political blog another. As Minh-Ha Pham, an academic who studies fashion blogs, wrote in 2010:

blog studies inadvertently represents bloggers as politically efficacious subjects only when they are blogging about formal or "serious" politics (such as electoral politics and so forth)-- a domain that is historically and structurally male-dominated. In so doing, blog studies tacitly reinscribe the political sphere with white masculinity, and, as such, reify the concept of the ideal political subject as male. (Pham, "Blog Ambition" 7)

While the political blogosphere becomes equated with "white masculinity" as Pham claims, the culture blogosphere-- concerned with topics other than so-called serious politics (food, fashion, parenting, design, craft, etc.) are equated to the private sphere, in what Pham refers to as "the abjection of femininity" (8).

The general consensus among researchers is that single-author narrative blogging peaked in the mid-2000s. In 2010, researchers at the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that young people are much more likely to participate in social media platforms than they are to start blogs (Zickuhr, "Generations" 3). Since the 2010 Generations survey, Pew has not produced any new data on blogs, suggesting that there is nothing significant to report. The growth of multi-author blogs (Boing Boing, Huffington Post, etc.) and the rise of micro blogging sites like Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram have made the traditional blog seem old-fashioned. Young people use Instagram and Tumblr to share photos and short sentences, not narratives. When, in January of 2015, longtime blogger Andrew Sullivan's (of *The Dish*) announced that he would

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<sup>27</sup>The perception that most blogs are about politics persists, regardless of the fact that "all the available evidence suggests that blogs are more commonly a vehicle of personal expression than a means of filtering content on the Web, for all demographic groups including adult males" (Susan C Herring et al. "Women and Children Last").

stop blogging, the Internet erupted in a discussion about the death of the blog<sup>28</sup>. At *Bloomberg*, Megan McArdle speculated that the demise of blogging had occurred both because of social media and because "blogging is exhausting" (McArdle "Goodbye to the Dish"). Ezra Klein, writing for Vox, attributed the decline of blogging to the fact that the form doesn't scale well. As he put it, "blogging is a conversation, and conversations don't go viral," and "the bigger the site gets, the bigger the business gets, the harder it is to retain the original voice" (Klein "What Andrew Sullivan's exit"). Overall, the sense among journalists seems to be that while blogging has radically altered journalism-- blogs are now integrated into the online platforms of most major news outlets-- the golden age of single-authored blogging is behind us. But this commonly held view is based on the assumption that when one talks about blogging, she is talking about 'political blogging.' While the traditional political blogosphere might be dying, the lifestyle blogosphere is alive and well.

### Domesticity Online

In recent years, blogging has received critical attention from researchers working in many disciplines, including Communication (Harp & Tremayne 2006, Lopez 2009, Siles 2011, Chen 2013), English (McNeil 2006, Morrison 2011, Morrison 2014), Critical Cultural Studies (Nunes 2011, Taylor 2011, Pham 2011, Pham 2013, Duffy 2015, Ryan 2014), Psychology (Bane et al 2010, Sinanan et al 2014) and even Public Health (McDaniel et al 2012). Blog studies is thus a field attracting multiple methodologies and disciplinary attachments. The research considers culture blogs in relation to identity formation, community building, and everyday life.

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<sup>28</sup> There is some push-back against the "death of the blog" thesis. In December of 2014, Gawker Media CEO Nick Denton announced that his company (which manages Jezebel, Gawker, Lifehacker and a number of other popular multi-user blogs) was getting back to blogging. As he put it, "It's the only truly new media in the age of the web. It is ours. Blogging is the essential act of journalism in an interactive and conversational age" (Denton "Back to Blogging").

A common theme in the literature is the contention that the blogosphere is "an important and severely under theorized site of cultural political struggle" (Pham "Blog Ambition" 8). Writing about Asian American and British Asian fashion bloggers, Pham claims that particular blogs have the capacity to "create new subject positions, reveal hidden histories, and reconstitute public culture at the nexus of computer-mediated communication technologies and consumer culture through a radical politics of sentimentality" (3). In another analysis that draws on the affective dimension of the production and consumption of blogs, Aimee Morrison claims that mommy blogs produce "intimate publics" through which they help bloggers and readers "come to terms with and explore the identity work involved in shifting into and growing in the multiple roles of women, mother, worker, wife, daughter, and friend" (Morrison "Suffused by Feeling" 52). In each instance, the political potential of blogging has to do with its ability to create communities through which stable identities (of, for example, the Asian American Woman or the "Mommy") can be troubled.

Where Pham and Morrison have focused on how bloggers disrupt the stability of subject positions, other research is more critical of the structural limitations bloggers face. Duffy, for example, argues that the circulation of myths of "amateurism, autonomy, and collaboration," conceal the fact that the fashion blogosphere is "progressively hierarchical, market-driven, and self-promotional" (Duffy "Amateur" 2). Duffy uses the term "aspirational labor," to explain why bloggers-- who frequently receive no compensation for their work-- participate in the deployment of the above myths, why they emphasize their amateur status, their autonomy, and the collaborative nature of the form. She writes that "many bloggers aspire to capitalize off their passion projects, *getting paid for doing what they love*" (12). Aspirational labor, Duffy claims,

highlights the potential for digitally enabled activities to provide female participants with future social and economic capital. Much like individuals enacting social roles through

aspirational consumption (i.e., purchasing luxury goods to mark one's status), aspirational laborers seek to mark themselves as creative producers who will one day be compensated for their craft-- either directly or through employment in the culture industries (2-3).

Duffy's analysis is unique in its attention to the time and effort that prospective bloggers invest in their work. This labor is often unpaid and undertaken on top of full-time employment.

There have been few academic studies directly attending to what I call the "domestic" blog. While there has been work on mommy blogs (Lopez 2009, Chen 2013, Morrison 2011, Van Cleef 2015) fashion blogs (Pham 2015, 2011, 2012; Duffy 2015) and food blogs (Salvio 2012), academic work on lifestyle blogs is only just beginning to be published (Ryan 2014; Luckman 2015b). In *Homeward Bound*, journalist Matchar cites lifestyle blogs as evidence of the new domesticity, as she puts it, "nowhere is the new domestic chic so apparent as in the blogosphere" (3). Online, Matchar writes, the word "housewife" has become "electric with the shivery delight of taboo-breaking" (3). The strongest element of Matchar's book is her interrogation into why young people are turning toward the domestic. Most relevant to my analysis are her suggestions that young adults in the U.S. have become increasingly distrustful toward "government, corporations, and the food system" and utterly "discontented with contemporary work culture" (15). Matchar attributes the success of the domestic blogosphere (and its particular brand of the new domesticity) to the fact that her generation is seeking an escape from work culture and is uninterested in traditional forms of political organization. The domestic blogosphere is a community devoid of traditional politics and is thus especially appealing to people who wish to re-engage in the work of home-making.

Matchar's research shows an increasingly tangled and nuanced relationship between the figure of the feminist and the figure of the housewife. In 2015, the notion of a traditional "housewife" is definitively obsolete. When "housewife" is invoked in popular media, it is usually

to conjure up and then refute 1950s nostalgia. Most of the stars of Bravo's hit franchise "The Real Housewives" are businesswomen who work outside the home, some of them are married, but many are divorced or single. The title of the show can only be understood as a wink toward the viewers, "Real Housewives," show producers seem to be saying, are entrepreneurs with full-time household help. Real housewives, therefore, are not actually housewives. ABC's hit drama "Desperate Housewives" (2004-2012) about suburban moms in a perfectly manicured neighborhood made a similar gesture with its title. Throughout the show's long life, many of the characters, so called "housewives," worked outside the home. "Desperate Housewives" is meant to recall Betty Freidan's characterization of the 1950s housewife, desperate, as she was, for something more than marriage and motherhood. It is in the same sense that Drummond calls herself a desperate housewife in the short bio that appears on the right hand side of her website (Drummond). Identifying as housewife not only fits with the retro theme of her site, it suits Drummond's self presentation, her repeated protestations that her daily life is a kind of cosmic joke-- "I live in the middle of nowhere on a working cattle ranch. My days are spent wrangling children, chipping dried manure from boots, washing jeans, and making gravy. I have no idea how I got here..." (Drummond "About").

The traditional housewife alluded to on television and in the lifestyle blogosphere may be rare, but she continues to exist in the cultural imagination. Matcher's study contains interviews with many women who have chosen to stay at home so they can work full-time caring for children and making a home. To be clear, this is not merely a matter of economics. Matchar's interviewees do stress the cost of good day care, but they also believe that parents make the best caregivers. In one illustrative example, Matchar interviews a former graphic designer who explains, "as soon as I had Emmy I just knew I just didn't want to be away from my baby. It was

primal. So my husband goes to work, and I stay home" (209). After a few years, Mallory (who Matchar reports has a degree in women's studies) found that homeschooling her daughter herself and doing all her cooking from-scratch was not enough of a challenge. As a result, Mallory and her husband are selling their house in the suburbs, and moving to a small sustainable farm where she can homestead. Matchar writes that Mallory "hopes that homesteading will give her a greater sense of purpose and that growing vegetables will give her a sense of 'contributing to my family emotionally' if not financially" (210).

The domestic blogosphere reveals all kinds of strange contradictions of the sort Matchar identifies in Mallory, the women's studies major turned stay at home mom. Domesticity online is for everyone, often revealed in the strange intersections among hippie homesteaders and fundamentalist Christians, both of whom, for example, are critical of corporate food culture and public schooling. While much early blog research focused on the continuities between the blog and the diary (McNeil 2003, Karlsson 2004), I see today's domestic blogosphere to be a continuation of the tradition of the domestic advice manual, which was itself composed of a mixture of advice on cooking (in the form of recipes), etiquette, and household organization. The very structure of Drummond's blog, which contains sections for "Confessions," "Cooking," "Home and Garden," "Homeschooling," and "Entertainment," suggests this comparison.

#### Ree Drummond: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Pioneer Woman

Readers of Drummond's blog are greeted, by way of introduction, with a short blurb on the right side of her homepage and a vintage depiction of a sweetly smiling woman with red curls and a green cowboy hat. The text reads, "My name is Ree. I'm a desperate housewife. I live in the country. I channel Lucille Ball, Vivien Leigh, and Ethel Merman. Welcome to my frontier!" (Drummond, *The Pioneer Woman*). Ree Drummond's narrative precisely follows the

structure of a romantic comedy, complete with conventional nicknames for the main characters (the pioneer woman and the Marlboro man) and a quirky love-story. Drummond was a big-city girl living in LA with an exciting job and a great shoe collection when she made a visit to her hometown in Oklahoma that changed her life. There, she met the dashing rancher who would become her future husband. Love-struck, she stopped studying for the LSAT, got married and moved to a ranch in the middle of nowhere, where she and her cowboy husband started a family. Drummond's blog tells the story of her daily life raising four kids on this sprawling ranch.

The narrative of lifestyle bloggers usually follows the same pattern: a woman begins her blog in order to keep family and friends up to date about her life. When she finds an audience, she is flattered and humbled. Drummond's version is illustrative:

"I thought having a blog might allow me to stay connected to my mom, who lives in another state, and to share photos of my kids with the ladies on a homeschooling message board I used to frequent. So I began uploading photos and, inexplicably, writing strange stories-- stories of my youth, stories of humiliating moments in my life, stories that have always resided in the deep, dark, reaches of my mind. Then, *strangely*, other people-- *people I didn't even know*-- began stopping by my blog." (Drummond, "Full Circle")

Success on the blogosphere amounts to enough page views to attract advertising, corporate sponsors, and the inevitable book deal. Top bloggers make it look easy, but in actuality, the work they do is quite difficult. Drummond and the handful of other famous lifestyle bloggers (Heather Armstrong of *Dooce*, Mario Lavandeira of *Perez Hilton*, Deb Perelman of *Smitten Kitchen*) are, by any standard, masters of their genre. Their blogs have become lucrative businesses because they produce consistently high quality content, content that attracts new readers and keeps old readers returning. The individuals quoted above are the exceptions, not the rule. The vast majority of bloggers will never be able to quit their day jobs. A 2006 PEW Blogger survey found that a paltry 8% of bloggers report actual income, and only 15% cite earning money as a reason they blog (Lenhart et al, "Bloggers" 15). The majority of respondents said they blogged "to

express themselves creatively," "to share personal experiences," or "to stay in touch with friends and family" (iii). Domestic bloggers, in particular, rarely talk about the financial element of blogging.

The successful domestic blogger is marked by integrated advertisements, a book deal, and branded products. Writing about BlogHer (the blogging network for women) and its role as a facilitator of relationships between bloggers and advertisers, Lopez (2009) points out, "Women have always been hailed by advertisers because of their spending habits, and mothers serve as particularly good consumers because they also make purchases on behalf of their entire family" (740). Lopez's reference connects the domestic blogosphere to the history of professional domesticity. Indeed, as 19<sup>th</sup> century industrialization led to the mass production of consumer goods, the work of managing a household became increasingly tied to consumption. Home economics was, from the outset, designed to teach women to be rational consumers. As Carolyn Goldstein summarizes, "equipped with a home economics education... a woman would be a more discriminating, demanding consumer and, in the process, influence the making of superior products" (*Creating Consumers* 30). The optimistic view represented by home economists assumed that consumer education would force manufacturers to make better products. Today, domestic bloggers participate in consumer education, recommending their favorite products to readers in blog posts. While the home economist taught consumers how to shop, the domestic blogger tells her readers specifically what to buy.

Because they trade in the personal, it's easy to conflate a blogger with the human behind the screen. It is true that lifestyle bloggers share a lot about their personal lives, but if you search their work for details, you might be surprised at how few are offered. Until her family began appearing on her TV show in 2011, Drummond, for example, never mentioned the names of her



children. So called "queen of the mommy bloggers," Heather Armstrong's prose offers many more examples of struggle than Drummond's does, but the reader won't find any details, just opaque musings about everyday emotions (Belkin, "Queen"). Jon Armstrong told Lisa Belkin that his (now ex) wife "has the ability to take a single episode and turn it into an epic, and then, if you go word by word and ask, 'What did she reveal?' It's really not very much" (Belkin). Successful bloggers excel at writing in a manner that conveys both expertise and ordinariness. They must have a unique story to tell-- Drummond lives on a working ranch-- but readers must also be able to identify with them-- Drummond, like many of her readers, spends a lot of time doing the laundry and arguing with children. Writing on this, Fortini describes Drummond as having a unique capacity to make "average life look heroic" (Fortini).

The other side of this somewhat untenable skill-- the ability to tease interesting content out of everyday life-- is serious ambition and hard work. In her profile of Drummond, Fortini writes

Several bloggers who know Drummond told me, in the furtive tone one might use to convey gossip about a friend, that she is 'a very savvy businesswoman.' But no one would offer specifics. 'She's quietly, insanely ambitious,' Ed Levine, a friend and the founder of the Web site Serious Eats, said. 'Drummond reminds me of a duck: underneath the water, it's paddling like mad, but above the surface it's placid.' (Fortini)

On top of writing chops, the most successful bloggers work extremely hard. The work of blogging involves much more than writing, it requires photography skills, photo editing software, and knowledge of basic html. Bloggers must also create and maintain multiple social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram and Pinterest), and respond to comments and emails from readers. Once a blog is ad-supported, the blogger must also manage her relationships with advertisers. All of this work is time-consuming, making it all the more difficult to succeed in the business of blogging. It is not a coincidence that Drummond was

successful-- though she never mentions it in her posts, Drummond most certainly has paid household help. The working ranch Drummond lives on happens to be one of the largest ranches in the country.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of the folksy tone of her literary persona, Ree Drummond lives a very different life than most of her readers. This is an open secret, one that Drummond's detractors, a number of whom run satirical blogs about The Pioneer Woman, are all too eager to exploit. As the homepage of the website "The Marlboro Woman," claims, "It's our opinion that Ree Drummond, marketing herself as The Pioneer Woman, is perpetrating a hoax. The less-than-candid Drummond used a trust fund and other family resources to hire publicists and agents who orchestrated her rise to fame by manipulating journalists, television producers and other industry professionals" ("Disclaimer"). The Pie Near Woman, the most faithful satire site, explicitly mocks Drummond's website layout, recreating images from The Pioneer Woman with Barbie dolls dressed like Drummond and her husband (Pie Near Woman).

In addition to her personal wealth, Drummond's critics scoff at her recipes, which are never short on butter, cream, and cheese. But Drummond's recipes, like the posts about her personal life, are soothing. Her cooking is simple, nostalgic, and designed to please-- Drummond does not strive to be gourmet, but to feed her family homemade food that tastes good. In 2010, writer Jennifer Reese wrote a piece for *Slate* comparing two identical meals culled from two different best selling cookbooks, Drummond's first cookbook, *The Pioneer Woman Cooks*, and Napa Valley restaurateur Thomas Keller's *Ad Hoc at Home*. The menu consisted of fried chicken, biscuits, mashed potatoes, a salad of ice berg lettuce, and a pineapple upside down cake.

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<sup>29</sup>Every year, The Land Report, "the magazine of the american landowner" publishes "The Land Report 100" an annual list of "America's Hundred Largest Landowners;" in 2014, the Drummond family was 17th on that list. Drummond could certainly support herself with her blog, which, in 2010, she claimed was bringing in about one million dollars in revenue annually, but considering her family's status, she has never had to worry about her finances.

Reese determines that her family will serve in judgment of these two different versions of the same meal. Her discussion goes a long way toward explaining the particular appeal of The Pioneer Woman, as a blogger, as a cook, and as a brand.

Writing of the meal prepared following Drummond's recipes, Reese acknowledges that nothing was especially wonderful. She says "I've never understood the appeal of a cake built around canned pineapple. But it made my husband and children happy--which is what the Pioneer Woman is all about. I felt not so much proud of this meal, as maternal and beneficent" (Reese "Fried Chicken Cookoff"). After cooking the same meal using Keller's recipes-- which require an extraordinary amount of preparation and technique--Reese admits the food is sublime, but when she looks around the table, she finds that her family doesn't notice much of a difference from Drummond's food. As she writes, "Apparently, when it comes to comfort food served around a kitchen table, good enough is good enough" (Reese). In spite of her family money and her luxury kitchen appliances, Drummond has always presented herself as a no-frills kind of woman. Her content appeals because her recipes are easy. At the end of her piece, Reese admits that while she found Keller's food to be much better than Drummond's, she has not attempted any more of his recipes. But she has, she somewhat sheepishly admits, made Drummond's scones, her sheet cake, and her meatloaf.

The success of a lifestyle blogger ultimately rests on one question-- will readers return to the website? If they do, the website will attract advertising, if they don't, it will remain a labor of love. Drummond became one of the most successful bloggers on the web not because of her family money, but because she built up a following of readers. Her confessional content is amusing and light, and her recipes are easy to follow and always taste good. People keep buying

her cookbooks, reading her blog, and watching her Food Network show because they like her. Ultimately, the lifestyle blogger, like the domestic advisor, is selling herself.

*Conclusion: Connecting Home Economics, New Domesticity, and Lifestyle Blogging*

Not all lifestyle bloggers are as apolitical as Ree Drummond. Sharon Hayes, who blogs at The Radical Homemaker, offers an interesting rejoinder to The Pioneer Woman. Hayes, like Drummond, blogs about rural life, but that is where the similarities end. Hayes grew up on a farm, and after college, decided to pursue a Ph.D. in sustainable agriculture. When her husband lost his job in the middle of her Ph.D. program, the couple made a conscious decision to leave the traditional work force. They moved back to the farm where Hayes had grown up, and began living a lifestyle sustained by local food. With the publication of her 2010 book, *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture*, based on interviews with other families like her own living across the U.S., Hayes has tried to summon something like a revolution. Of the people who identify as radical homemakers, she writes "they did not let themselves be bullied by the conventional ideals regarding money, status, or material possessions," instead, they pursued their goals of living a sustainable life by refusing to pay for those things (education, health, childcare) which may be acquired for free (Hayes "Radical Homemakers"). Hayes' six published books and her blog are all written from the perspective of ecological sustainability. Her attitude toward homemaking is infused with the promise of 1960s back to the land movements, and the expertise gained by many years spent in pursuit of a specialized education in agriculture. Hayes and her family have chosen to live a life outside of the mainstream. She writes about this life because she sees her personal decisions as part of a political movement.

The Radical Homemaker (Hayes) and The Pioneer Woman (Drummond) are engaged in very different sorts of work. Drummond's blog is a distraction from everyday life, whereas Hayes's blog represents a direct challenge to its readers (to buy and shop local, to stop driving, to remove themselves from what Hayes calls 'the extractive economy'). And yet, both of these women trade on their personal experiences and individual choices. The pioneer woman sells a charming vintage version of home life-- with recipes and images that look like they came from an old western. The radical homemaker sells a sustainable lifestyle. Though the radical homemaker sees herself as part of a greater movement, the only way a reader might become part of that movement is to make the individual choice to leave the traditional working world. That such a choice is not possible for most people (because of the start-up capital necessary to start a small farm) hardly needs mentioning.

In *Homeward Bound*, Matchar claims that young people today are apathetic about government, corporations, and food policy; it is her contention that the would-be home economists of our time (the urban homesteaders, from-scratch cooks, makers, and domestic bloggers) are choosing not to fight for better food/housing/childcare for all, but rather, for themselves and their families. For Matchar, this "troubling hyperindividualism" is especially visible online, where it is epitomized by both Ree Drummond and Sharon Hayes (248). These bloggers offer their readers solutions to their individual problems, but make no reference to efforts to seek larger social change. In a similar analysis, Morrison, in her work on mommy bloggers, discusses the limits of virtual community: "while the intimate public of personal mommy blogging offers its members group identity as well as emotional release, ultimately the potential political or public power of this group identity and shared purpose is undermined by many bloggers' reluctance to interweave their participation in this community into the rest of

their lives" (Morrison 2011 49). According to these writers, the potential political impact of the virtual community facilitated by the blogosphere is undermined by the disconnection between what happens online and what happens in the real world.

But it is not merely the weakness of the virtual community that should concern critics working in blog studies-- there is also the matter of considering blogging itself as work. While Minh Ha Pham, drawing on Lauren Berlant's theorization of cruel optimism claims that bloggers are engaged in "a radical politics of sentimentality," I find Duffy's characterization of blogging as "aspirational labour" more compelling. Rather than a radical politics of sentimentality, bloggers seem to be capitalizing on a culture of what Berlant calls "cruel optimism." Duffy sees bloggers as "aspirational labourers," meaning that they present the most perfect versions of their lives, while purposely hiding the hard work and effort that goes into creating that stylized vision. Duffy writes that this kind of aspirational labor has "romanticized work in a moment when its conditions and affordances are ever more precarious, unstable, flexible-- and *unromantic*" (14). It is precisely this romanticization of domesticity online that necessitates a return to old-fashioned home economics.

In 1971, Dr. Jean Cooper, a home economist, speaking on the same panel as Robin Morgan at The American Home Economics Association's annual meeting, said that many black women "would give their eye teeth" in exchange for the luxury to be a homemaker (Cooper, 522). Her point was that historically, black women had spent their days working in the homes of white women, while their own families were cared for in what amounted to a second shift. Cooper reminded her audience that most black women worked "not for personal fulfillment and not to help out temporarily, but for real!" (522). At the time, Cooper's comments were an important rejoinder to her audience, and also to her fellow panelists, Robin Morgan and Jayne

Spain. Four decades later, Cooper's comments seem especially pressing. Increasingly, most (if not all) women who work do so not for self-fulfillment, but out of economic necessity.

The proliferation of the domestic blogosphere, I have shown in this chapter, is a symptom of how such changes are playing out in popular culture. As women (and men) spend more and more time in the workplace, they find themselves increasingly entranced by the fantasy offered up in lifestyle blogs-- by a world in which there is time to live out aspirations of domestic bliss. What is cruelly optimistic, in Berlant's theorization, about this attachment to domesticity is that when people form an attachment to "domesticity," a problematic object, they do so knowing in advance that they will not be able to live up to the fantasy they have envisioned. They become attached to the vision of domesticity offered by the blogosphere, a vision that reflects the long history of traditional normative white femininity as it has been expressed by entrepreneurial homemakers throughout U.S. history. But this optimism-- that one might live up to the fantasy, that one might 'have it all,' is cruel because the very process of attempting to fulfill the promise includes its own unraveling.

Successful blogs like "The Pioneer Woman" are characterized by lush depictions of home life, an affirmation of traditional gender roles, and the absence of cultural or political struggle. The effect is a whitewashed representation of domesticity that denies the existence of real struggle (whether financial or otherwise). Drummond is not worried about the issues that plague working mothers because she has access to a plethora of financial and familial resources. She can hire other women to help clean her house, care for small children, and handle the day-to-day reproduction of her household. She is, in this way, not unlike the small minority of high-power women who seem to "have it all." I'm thinking of Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer and Facebook CFO Sheryl Sandberg, both of whom have spoken publicly about their own professional and

personal success. What troubles me about the image of femininity presented by Drummond (and Sandberg and Mayor) is that it is an image of self-reliance (what McRobbie recently called "perfection"). Their performance of 'having it all' perpetuates the notion that they have achieved success individually; in so doing, they refuse to make visible all the other people engaged in the domestic labor of social reproduction (child-care providers and domestic workers) that make their own choices possible.

In this way, lifestyle blogs offer a fantasy vision of domestic life. They offer readers and bloggers the pleasurable (and sometimes practical) experience of looking at a vision of home-making that is free of struggle. But the reality faced by U.S. Women is something different. This problem that haunts the public sphere, and perhaps even the interior contours of many female (and increasingly male) minds, is this: how to manage what Home Economists would have called 'dual' roles, how to manage both work and life, and all the various relationships such management entails. The solution is not domestic advice (lifestyle blogs), nor is it career advice (Lean in), the solution involves the creation of public policy to support the personal lives of all workers (mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons). Professional home economists of the 20th century were scientists, educators, and public servants who sought to institute legislation that would ensure that all people had access to healthy food, safe and adequate housing, and high quality infant and child care. Instead of describing a fascination with mid-century nostalgia, what if Matchar's "new domesticity" was articulated as a new brand of home economics?

The thriving domestic blogosphere is symptomatic of a culture of endless work. By connecting the entrepreneurial homemaker (from the domestic advisor to the lifestyle blogger) to the institutionalized field of home economics, my aim has been to re-introduce an important history of women working to institute policies that support home-life. The contemporary



conversation about work life balance all too often fails to consider the historical conditions through which today's working mothers have come to be. In this chapter, I have sought to describe the evolution of the lifestyle blogger through a connection to the tradition of the professionalization of housework in U.S. women's history.

In 1971, Robin Morgan spoke to the AHEA of a feminist future. She did not elaborate in her speech about what that future might look like, but Morgan's other writings suggest that in her dream of a feminist future, women would be freed of the burdens of domesticity. Looking back, this dream seems impossibly naive. First, human infants (and elders) are extremely needy animals, and their needs-- to be held, fed, and cleaned-- cannot be met by non-human solutions. Computers cannot raise children (yet). Some humans will always have to do care work. If wages were provided for social reproduction (as demanded by the international movement for wages for housework,) the question remains, who would do the supposedly menial work of caring for others? Second, the characterization of domesticity as a burden is alienating to those women who take pleasure in domestic work. Simply put, the feminist future must include the work of domesticity.

Speaking directly to this point, in 1984, Silvia Federici wrote that the marginalization of the wages for housework position within mainstream 1970s feminism was a fatal mistake.

Describing the many losses U.S. feminism had seen since 1978, she wrote:

As everybody admits, "women" has become synonymous with "poverty," as women's wages have been continuously falling both in absolute terms and relative to male wages... Moreover, we have lost most subsidized forms of childcare, and many women now work on a cottage-industry basis, at piecework rates often below the minimum wage, because it is the only possibility they have to earn some money and take care of their children at the same time. (*Revolution* 59)

As I will discuss in the next chapter, Federici's discussion of the feminization of poverty and the challenge of dual roles continues to ring true. If anything, these problems have only been

exacerbated in recent decades. I am compelled by Federici recent (2010) call for a reconstruction of the commons (145). There, she writes, "arguing that women should take the lead in the collectivization of reproductive work and housing is not to naturalize housework as a female vocation. It is refusing to obliterate the collective experiences, knowledge, and struggles that women have accumulated concerning reproductive work, who's history has been an essential part of our resistance to capitalism" (148). Feminism must account for reproductive work-- and domesticity is part of that work. Federici's dream is bold and brash. Pragmatically, it seems to me that while we continue to wait for the revolution, the model of Home Economics might be able to inspire the institution of Women's Studies to tackle some of the problems home economists were unable to solve (for starters, universal child care and adequate family leave).

### CHAPTER THREE—KELLY REICHARDT’S REALIST VISION: FEMININITY, PRECARIETY, AND U.S. CINEMA

Kelly Reichardt's 2008 film, *Wendy and Lucy*, is a film about a young woman named Wendy (Michelle Williams) on the road to Alaska looking for work in a cannery. Wendy's entire life is packed in her aging Honda. She has very few possessions, but she does have one friend, her dog Lucy. Her car breaks down in a particularly desolate small town in Oregon, where the action of the film takes place. There, Wendy has to let go of her car (it's beyond repair) and Lucy (who she believes will have a better life in a stranger's backyard than on the road). In a particularly poignant scene, by way of a goodbye, Wendy's only acquaintance, a kind security guard at Walgreen's, hands her some cash. Wendy hesitates, but the man insists that she just "take the money." When the camera zooms in, we see that he has handed her a total of \$6. Nothing seems to sum up the desperation of small town U.S.A., (and the lives that are entirely outside the dream of social mobility) quite like Kelly Reichardt's simple shot of Michelle Williams' hand, clutching those crumpled bills.

By the time *Wendy and Lucy* was released, Kelly Reichardt had already established herself as a major directing talent keen to tell stories about people who are normally absent from the big screen (*River of Grass*, 1994; *Ode*, 1999; *Old Joy*, 2006).<sup>30</sup> While Reichardt has received much critical and scholarly attention for her work, she is rarely understood in relation to 1970s feminist film theory. A.O. Scott of *The New York Times* has written that Reichardt is "quietly

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<sup>30</sup>In this way, Reichardt is part of a tradition of mostly female directors of U.S. independent film who are quietly bringing stories of poor and working class (mostly) white people to the screen. I'm thinking particularly of Kimberly Pierce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1994), Courtney Hunt's *Frozen River* (2008), Debra Grenik's *Winter's Bone* (2010), Derek Cianfrance's *Blue Valentine* (2010), and Lisa Cholodenko's work, especially *High Art* (1998) and the recent miniseries *Olive Kitteridge* (2014).

establishing herself as an indispensable American filmmaker," and academic discussions of her films have been written by Gorfinkel (2012), Schoonover (2012), Horton (2013), King (2014), and Seymour & Fusco (forthcoming) (Scott "This (New) American Life"). In a rare acknowledgment of the feminist implications of Reichardt's filmmaking, David Denby wrote in *The New Yorker* that *Meek's Cutoff* "offers a new kind of feminist and materialist realism" ("Strange Trips"). It is precisely this line of argument that I will pursue in this chapter.

This chapter seeks to consider Reichardt as a model of professional femininity both in relation to feminist film theory (especially 1970s debates about realism) and the tradition of Italian Neorealism (especially contributions made by French critic, Andre Bazin). My analysis builds upon recent work that has argued for a reconsideration of realism, and a more complete account of the origins of feminist film theory. Following Alexandra Juhasz and Shiyla Warren, who have argued that the feminist-realist debates of the 1970s amounted to the canonization of feminist Avant-garde films at the expense of feminist documentary. In what follows, I suggest that feminist film theory has not merely "lost" access to early feminist documentary, but also, to those feminist feature films (women made or otherwise) that utilize a strategy of cinematic realism. By analyzing Reichardt in relation to Italian neorealism and the tradition of Feminist critique, my goal is to place these small films where they belong, in a historical tradition of feminist materialist realism, and perhaps even, quiet feminist revolution.

The first part of this chapter is a discussion of historical debates within film studies about cinematic realism, specifically focusing on those debates about realism that took place within the pages of *Women & Film*, a short lived magazine devoted to feminist film analysis (published between 1972 and 1975). In this section, I look at the intellectual history of realism and neorealism as it has been understood within U.S. Film studies, particularly focusing on feminist

discourses that helped to establish the "anti-realist" tradition. The point of my analysis is to consider the notion of a feminist neorealist cinema. In the second part of the chapter, I consider Reichardt's position within contemporary U.S. Culture, both her role as a director who happens to be a woman, and as a director who is drawn to the stories of people living on the margins of U.S. Culture. Alongside my discussion of the films, I include an analysis of two dominant discourses circulating at present about women in the U.S. (First, that women are becoming "the new men," and second, that poverty is increasingly feminized).

This final chapter is different from the others in at least three important ways. First, I have chosen to focus my attention away from the mainstream. Kelly Reichardt may be well known among film critics, but her five feature films have attracted neither commercial success nor cult-classic status. Her films are made on a shoestring budget, and only released in major metropolitan areas. This is to say, Kelly Reichardt is not a popular object. Second, Reichardt's work is distinctly different in tone and feeling than the work of Didion or Drummond. Whereas Didion and Drummond appealed to 'the everywoman,' Reichardt's films are not recognizably part of the women's genres of romantic comedy or romantic drama. What is feminine about Reichardt's films occurs at the levels of tone and style, not genre. In a different dissertation, I might have focused on indie director Nicole Holofcener or multi-media artist Miranda July, filmmakers whose feature films offer the familiar tropes of feminine genre films (love, friendship, courtship, etc.). I have chosen to focus on Reichardt because I wanted to show femininity in crisis. This is a chapter about the importance of telling stories of ordinary people living out unexceptional lives; for such characters, gender itself often becomes luxurious.

Finally, this chapter is different because it has a different relationship to the framework (the professionalization of femininity) set up in the introduction. There, I wrote that Martha

Rosler's "Semiotics of the Kitchen" evoked a new antagonism between the figures of the feminist and the housewife— an antagonism that had been brought about by the women's liberation movement. I claimed that the dissertation as a whole would show that the relationship between these figures had changed once again. This chapter seeks to mark this change. In the analysis that follows, I focus (for the first time in this dissertation) on the lives of poor white women, as represented in Reichardt's films, and in popular press narratives about contemporary U.S. culture. In total, this chapter presents a form of professional femininity that collapses the boundary between domesticity and feminism, between life and work.

Reichardt's filmmaking is a key element in this argument, because it is a turn away from other models of feminist filmmaking (especially melodrama) that rely on more traditional understandings of femininity and masculinity. Classical melodrama often dramatizes the tension between the feminized home and the masculine workplace. It may even be that melodrama is the filmic representation of the old debate between the feminist and the housewife, where the drama of the narrative is always found in the tension between the professionalization of femininity and the professionalization of feminism, between domesticity and independence.<sup>31</sup> Reichardt's films express a new kind of cultural landscape, based on a different kind of economy. *Wendy and Lucy* is the perfect example. As I will explain in more detail later in the chapter, this film is essentially a remake of the classic neorealist film *The Bicycle Thief*, directed by Vittorio DeSica. In the original, the drama occurs between father and son. In Reichardt's revision, the central relationship is between a woman and her dog. The drama of family has been eclipsed.

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<sup>31</sup>This is certainly the case in Michael Curtiz's classic *Mildred Pierce* (1945), as well as Todd Haynes's 2011 mini-series of the same title. In this narrative, we see a woman draw on her femininity (specifically her ability to cook) in order to better serve her family. Ultimately, her business know-how is her undoing. Mildred is so busy with her businesses that she doesn't notice her husband is having an affair with her daughter. She fails both as mother, and as provider. While the original film made cultural sense in its own time—representing cultural anxieties about the working mother—the 2011 re-make was pure nostalgia.

Reichardt's world is one where nonprocreative femininity is not merely possible, it is normative (as evidenced by the fact that none of the central female characters in any of her major films are mothers). This is a clear departure from the traditional frameworks of femininity I have discussed throughout this dissertation. The professionalization of domesticity—as I discussed it in the last chapter—is inseparable from maternalism. Whether or not she is actually a mother, the entrepreneurial homemaker is defined by her personal organization, by the fact that she is extremely capable of holding herself (as well as those around her) together. Reichardt's filmic universe does contain one woman like this—Emily Tetherow—but she is from a different century. What I am trying to suggest is that this kind of professional domesticity is increasingly tied to social class.

Reichardt presents—in the tradition of neorealist filmmaking—a kind of professionalization wherein gender (whether femininity or masculinity) has been evacuated. In her films, white women may work in factories and white men may work as farm hands. This vision is one that reflects the reality that for many, a job is not called a profession, it's merely a means of subsistence. I am not suggesting that the two poles I have been discussing throughout—professional domesticity and professional feminism—are entirely gone, but merely, that these two ways of thinking about femininity may now be best described as 'historical.'

### *Part One: Film Theory's Historical Repetitions*

#### On Neorealism and Feminist Film Studies

Kelly Reichardt's films have been called "neorealist" because of their cinematic style, which relies on a minimalistic aesthetic. A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* most famously made this declaration in 2009 when he mentioned Reichardt among a group of young American

filmmakers he claimed were part of a "Neo-Neo Realism" (Scott). Scott's invocation of the tradition of Italian neorealism was met with intense debate among other critics writing for New York based publications, but it also had ramifications in film scholarship.<sup>32</sup> Since Scott's 2009 piece, there have been a number of scholarly articles that specifically take up the question of 'neo-neo realism' in relation to filmmakers working in the U.S, sometimes arguing that these films are neo-realist in style, other times arguing for a somewhat opaque moniker, 'slow cinema.'<sup>33</sup>

While most critics understand these two terms in relation to each other, there are important distinctions to be drawn between cinematic neo-realism and what has recently been defined as slow cinema. For Song Hwee Lim, for example, the history of slow cinema goes back not to the Italian neorealists, but to Yasujiro Ozu, Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Chantal Akerman. For Lim, slow cinema's emphasis is above all on temporality (*Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness* 9). Neo-realist cinema, while often slow in terms of pace, is associated with a particular style associated with specific films written and produced in Italy after the Second World War. Lim positions his analysis of slow cinema in relation to a larger slow movement that, he says, has emerged among the leisure classes in Western countries. He writes, "'sustainability' has become a buzzword for the intelligentsia, activists, and middle-class costumers, marking a paradigm shift from quantity to quality, from waste to taste, and from speed to slowness" (Lim, 5). The role of cinema in this larger movement, is, for Lim, a form of

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<sup>32</sup>The most notable response to A.O. Scott came from Richard Brody, of the New Yorker, whose response was published as "About Neo-Neo-Realism." A.O. Scott piece has also been mentioned by academics, notably Justin Horton (2013) Charles L. Leavitt (2013), Elena Gorfinkel (2013), and Geoff King (2014).

<sup>33</sup>For discussions of slow cinema and neorealism, see recent articles by Matthew Flanagan (2008), Karl Schoonover (2012), Elena Gorfinkel (2013), Justin Horton (2013), Charles L. Leavitt (2013). At this time, two book length studies of "slow cinema" have been published, Ira Jaffe's *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action* (2014), and Song Hwee Lim's *Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness* (2014).



resistance, specifically, "what it resists is an accelerated temporality whose material form is mainstream cinema and whose aesthetics is premised upon intensified continuity" (Lim, 42).<sup>34</sup> Neo-realist cinema has historically been understood as a style resistant to the idea that a compelling narrative requires elaborate sets, special effects and movie stars. As A.O. Scott writes of the Italian Realist films *The Bicycle Thief* (1948) and *La Terra Trema* (1948) "their art lies not in their messages but in their discovery of a mysterious, volatile alloy of documentary and theatrical elements. Simple, fable like tales unfold to the beat of quotidian rhythms" (Scott, "Neo Neo Realism"). While 'slow cinema' is a fairly recent categorization (Lim cites the first invocation of the term to a speech given by Michel Climent in 2003), Italian neo-realism has a long tradition in film scholarship, dating back to the work of Andre Bazin and his contemporaries writing in the 1940s (Lim, 13). In order to understand the re-emergence of neorealism in the popular press, and this new description of film, slow cinema, I start with French film critic Andre Bazin, from there, I travel back to the present via feminist film theory.

### Bazin and Italian Neorealism

The term "Neo-Realist" names the cinematic style of a group of Italian films made during the 1940s and 1950s by legendary directors Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini. Italian neorealism-- though short lived-- was a movement characterized by a desire to use film to describe the chaos of daily life in Italy after the war. According to the academic Bert Cardullo, who recently collected Andre Bazin's writings on the subject, the basic tenets of this style of filmmaking were to use nonprofessional actors filmed in natural settings (as opposed to glamorous stars on movie sets), to examine themes that had social significance, and to show

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<sup>34</sup>Lim is careful to contextualize his own study, which focuses on the films of Malaysian-born, Taiwan based film director, Tsai Ming-Liang, as a result, he is unwilling to make blanket statements about all films that have been named as part of 'slow cinema.'

situations as they were lived in everyday life, without the narrative devices usually found in Hollywood (Cardullo, "What is Neorealism?" 22). In 1948, French film critic Andre Bazin, one of Italian neorealism's most enthusiastic supporters, wrote that above all, these films offered a "fundamental humanism," he describes it this way:

They all reject implicitly or explicitly, with humor, satire, or poetry, the reality they are using, but they know better, no matter how clear the stand taken, than to treat this reality as a medium or a means to an end. To condemn it does not of necessity mean to be in bad faith. They never forget that the world *is*, quite simply, before it is something to be condemned. It is silly and perhaps as naive as Beaumarchais's praise of the tears induced by melodrama. But does one not, when coming out of an Italian film, feel better, an urge to change the order of things, preferably by persuading people, at least those who can be persuaded, whom only blindness, prejudice, or ill-fortune has led to harm their fellow man? (Bazin, "Cinematic Realism" 34)

It is for the reasons outlined above that Bazin called Italian Neo-Realist films 'prerevolutionary.'

While they do not wish to accept the reality of the world as it is, they also recognize that, as Bazin says, the world 'is.' It would be in bad faith for cinema to react to the world's realness by posing a representation of a new or better world, or by attempting to preach to its audiences. It is for this reason that Bazin's highest praise is the fact that the Italian film causes him to 'want to change the order of things by persuading people,' that is, by encouraging others to wish to make the world anew. The bulkiness of the language above, I think, is not merely a result of the difficulty of translation, but of the difficulty of putting these ideas into words that are worthy of them.

The intangible quality of the neorealist film is even more clear in Bazin's discussion of de Sica's 1949 film, *The Bicycle Thieves*. The plot of this little film is exemplary of the Neo-Realist style. A man's bicycle is stolen. Without it, he will lose his job. Desperate, he sets out with his young son to find the lost bicycle. After a failed confrontation with the bicycle thief, the desperate father attempts to steal another man's bicycle. He is immediately apprehended by the

police, but the judgment of the police is overshadowed by his young son's face, shocked, ashamed, and disappointed in his father. The film unfolds in Rome where recognizable architectural marvels like St. Peter's Basilica and the Coliseum are notably absent. Instead, the film takes place among unremarkable streets. Here is Bazin on de Sica's 1949 film:

The final gesture of the little boy in giving his hand to his father has been frequently misinterpreted. It would be unworthy of the film to see here a concession to the feelings of the audience. If de Sica gives them this satisfaction it is because it is a logical part of the drama. This experience marks henceforth a definite stage in the relations between father and son, rather like reaching puberty. Up to that moment the man has been like a god to his son; their relations come under the heading of admiration. By his action the father has now compromised them. The tears they shed as they walk side-by-side, arms swinging, signify their despair over a paradise lost. But the son returns to a father who has fallen from grace. He will love him henceforth as a human being, shame and all. The hand that slips into his is neither a symbol of forgiveness nor of a childish act of consolation. It is rather the most solemn gesture that could ever mark the relation between a father and his son: one that makes them equals ("Bicycle Thieves" 67).

Again, Bazin wishes to communicate that the beauty of a film like *The Bicycle Thieves* is that it is not interested in tugging at the viewer's heartstrings. As he writes, "it would be unworthy of the film to see here a concession to the feelings of the audience," the emotional weight of the scene under discussion is a result of the profound change that has occurred in the central relationship of the film. The son can no longer see his father as a God among men, he loves him now merely as a flawed man. For Bazin, it is not melodramatic, because it is true. What has occurred between these two characters occurs between all fathers and all sons. That the film is able to deliver-- in Bazin's words-- this truth, is related to its bare style. The banality of everyday life is, he insists, far more profound and moving than any fictional narrative.

Bazin loved Neo-Realist films because he believed they came closest to achieving what he called "the myth of total cinema." In his famous essay on the subject, Bazin writes that the myth of total cinema has been the dream behind every technological advance in film history. This myth, he writes, is "an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image

unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time" (Bazin *What is Cinema VI* 21). This myth, Bazin wrote, more than any of the individual discoveries of the inventors of film, was the origin of film. He calls it a myth because it is impossible, or if it is, then "cinema has not yet been invented!" (21). Films made in the style of Neo-Realism were those that challenged all "commonly accepted assumptions of the film spectacle" (Bazin "Vittorio De Sica" 78). In particular, Neo-Realist films "call upon the actor to be before expressing himself," utilize natural settings rather than artificial sets, and most importantly, turn the structure of the narrative upside down, in Bazin's words, "it must now respect the actual duration of the event... the assemblage of the film must never add anything to the existing reality" (78). Films that aspired to fulfill the myth of total cinema were those that attempted to show reality as it was experienced. No film could ever achieve such an impossible goal, but Bazin admired films whose style attempted to show reality (documentary, science, and of course, Italian Neo-Realism).

The role of the director was so important to Bazin because it was the director who exerted control over how the narrative was shot and how time was represented in the final cut. In the style of neorealism, cinema was able to express a "sense of the ambiguity of reality;" the truth of neorealism was the capacity to evoke a complex and muddled truth (*What is Cinema? VI* 37). This reality was shaped by the director. Bazin wrote "In the silent days, montage evoked what the director wanted to say; in the editing of 1938, it described it. Today we can say that at last the director writes in film... The film-maker is no longer the competitor of the painter and the playwright, he is, at last, the equal of the novelist" (39-40). In this discussion, Bazin expresses his own understanding of the evolution of what he called 'the language of film' as it moved from silent film, to sound, and finally, to the maturity of neorealism.

When Bazin died in 1958, he left behind him thousands of reviews of films he had written for various publications, especially *Cahiers du cinema*, the French film magazine he helped found. In the years after his death, Bazin (and his elevation of realism) fell out of fashion as film theory became enthralled with theorists of psychoanalysis, structuralism, and post-modernism. Reflecting on an early essay he wrote for *Screen*, film scholar Colin MacCabe says he treated Bazin as "a theoretically naive empiricist, a kind of idiot of the family" ("Bazin as Modernist" 66). MacCabe's position was characteristic of a generation of film scholars who had been "seduced by that Parisian rereading of modernism which reduced the real to sexual difference" (66). The dismissal of Bazin was part in parcel then, of a feminist theorization of sexual difference; as a result, the emerging field of feminist film criticism-- born in the 1970s-- was constructed in opposition to Bazin and the style, neo-realism, he elevated in his writing.

### Feminist Film Theory and the Anti-Realist Critique

Feminist film theory was born with the publication of two important essays, Claire Johnston's "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" (in 1973) and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (in 1975). Influenced by French theory, these essays, writes Alison Butler "rejected the popular feminist notion of replacing distorted images of women with accurate ones, on the grounds that there could be no position outside patriarchal ideology from which this task might be accomplished" (Butler, "Feminist Perspectives" 392). Johnston and Mulvey were not the first feminist film critics, but they were the most influential. Mulvey and Johnston's approach to film soon supplanted earlier critical essays which had tended to focus on the representation of women on screen rather than the inherent structure of film. In her analysis, Ruby Rich deems these two voices of early feminist criticism, respectively the "American, so-called sociological approach," (exemplified by Martineau's 1973 essay "Nelly Kaplan") and the

"British, so-called theoretical approach" (exemplified by Mulvey and Johnston) (Rich, *Chick Flicks* 72). The dominance<sup>35</sup> of what Rich deems the "British approach" helped produce the dominance of a certain kind of filmmaking, exemplified by what Charlotte Brunsdon calls "the modernist, or avant-gardist, 'canon' of 1979," a group of films she describes as "textually difficult," which "can only be successfully approached with some acceptance of the political necessity for interrogating film forms" (Brunsdon *Films for Women*, 54).

Feminist critics who came of age during the 1970s frequently refer to the intense debates over realism that occurred in magazines like *Women and Film*. While some feminists wished to re-make cinema to show realistic representations of women, others insisted that there was no outside of ideology, which is to say, there could be no representation of women that was not inherently patriarchal. Charlotte Brunsdon explains the tension this way:

If women are misrepresented in classical cinema, the answer is a realist one-- to represent women more truthfully, to show real women... However, if the very way stories are told, the way in which the opposition 'man'/'woman' is produced as meaningful, the way in which cutting and mise en scene is organized, always function to reassure and pleasure the masculine spectator, then it is impossible to use the same forms to effect different representations. (Brunsdon *Films for Women* 52)

This debate was animated by what Ruby Rich calls "the unity, discover, energy, and brave, we're-here-to-stay spirit of the early days" (*Chick Flicks* 65). While these debates were exciting, they were also taken extremely seriously. The consequences of these debates would help

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<sup>35</sup>E. Ann Kaplan's collection, *Feminism and Film* (2000), is an illustrative example. The beginning of the anthology, "Phase I: Pioneers and Classics" includes essays by Johnston and Mulvey and others writing in the mode of critical theory, but none of the 'sociological' accounts of women and film. While she mentions in her introduction that this work existed, "some of the earliest feminist criticism, illustrated in the 'founding' texts, used social-role methods similar to those in the first feminist literary studies," (4) she chooses not to include any examples of those essays in the anthology, thereby eliminating certain elements of the feminist film theory tradition from the 'official record' as it were. The other two major anthologies, *Feminist Film Theory* (1999) edited by Sue Thornton, and *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism* (1994) edited by Linda Dittmar, Janice R. Welsch, and Diane Carson, offer more representative samples of the origins of feminist film studies. Nevertheless, it is the *Feminism and Film* anthology that offers the most recognizable story of the discipline, and the one most repeated in *Camera Obscura* and other journals.

determine the future of feminist filmmaking and criticism. Ultimately, the position of feminist theory, defined against the notion of realism, prevailed.

The dominance of the Avant-garde within feminist film theory was predicated on a deep hostility toward cinematic realism (in documentary or feature film). The transition from the journal *Women & Film* to *Camera Obscura* is an important example. The magazine *Women & Film*, originally out of Santa Monica, CA, was the first home for feminist film analysis in the U.S (Rich, 64). *Women & Film*, published from 1972 to 1975, understood itself to be part of the women's liberation movement, as the editors Siew-Hwa Beh and Sandra Sayler claimed in the first issue, it was written with the express goal of "taking up the struggle with women's image in film and women's role in the film industries" ("Overview." 5). In the very first issue of *Women & Film*, the editors make their aim clear:

Our goal is to create a People's Cinema where human beings are portrayed as human beings and not servile caricatures. A cinema that is close to the masses who watch it. We wish to change the process of filmmaking to one of collectivism, and away from a sexist-elitist hierarchy. We wish to change the traditional modes of film criticism dominated by male critics and historians. At best their works are descriptive and interpretive within the confines of traditional criticism which focuses solely on aesthetics and the individualist values of the middle class way of life. Therefore it is up to the women who suffer the bad end of the cinematic image to initiate a form of film history and criticism that is relevant and just to females and males. Aesthetic considerations have to evolve from this end. We cannot afford to indulge in illusions of art for art's sake. (Beh and Sayler 6)

This version of Feminist film analysis resembles much of the philosophy of women's liberation that was circulating at the time. The goal was to counter the allegedly patriarchal nature of classic cinema by empowering women to make their own films, and create their own form of film criticism, which would necessarily involve revising histories of cinema to include the roles women had played in such histories. While there was a general agreement that new modes of filmmaking and new modes of film criticism were necessary, there was a heated debate about what these new modes would look like. The suggestion that "we cannot afford to indulge in

illusions of art for art's sake" at the end of this statement implies a resistance to the kind of 'high art' Avant-garde filmmaking that was popular in many circles at the time. It implies that this magazine's editors wanted to see something closer to a realist aesthetic.

Indeed, Ruby Rich writes that the "originally American, so-called sociological, approach is exemplified by early *Women & Film* articles... although the journal was fruitful in this terrain, the weakness of the approach became the limits of its introspection, the boundaries established by the lack of a coherent methodology for moving out beyond the self" (*Chick Flicks* 72). In spite of the fiery passion of that first issue, *Women & Film* put out its final issue in 1975-- all in all, there were only five issues ever published (Editorial, *Women & Film* 2.7, 3). In 1974, four former members of the *Women & Film* collective left *W&F* to start *Camera Obscura*. In a piece published within *Camera Obscura* in 1979, the editorial collective was explicit about their break with *Women & Film*, writing that "the need to begin a new review arose out of longstanding and seemingly unresolvable controversies within *Women & Film*" ("Chronology" 10). In a recent piece for *Feminist Media Histories*, Clarissa Jacob, an academic working on the history of *Women & Film*, claims that the journal disappeared "due to a shortage of funds, and to some extent, staff burnout" (Jacob 161). Jacob's piece seems to brush over the notion that there were 'longstanding and seemingly unresolvable controversies' at the magazine, but considering the intensity of debates within feminist film theory, it seems likely that these controversies were related to debates over realism, and the feeling by many that the only true feminist film would have to be Avant-garde and/or experimental.<sup>36</sup>

There are signs of this controversy if one carefully reads through the five issues of *Women & Film*. By the time one gets to the final issue, in which Eileen McGarry's fierce

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<sup>36</sup>In a more recent retelling (2008) of the history of *Camera Obscura* and *Women & Film*, *Camera Obscura*'s editors (Hastie et al) explain that their magazine was founded "because they [former members of *Women & Film*] wanted to engage with theoretical issues that were beyond the scope of the magazine" (*Inventing Film Studies* 302).



argument against realism, "Documentary, Realism and Women's Cinema" is published, it is clear that structuralist and psychoanalytic arguments against realism are gaining ground over the early language of a "cinema for the masses." McGarry writes, "Those film theorists and aestheticians like Bazin, Kracauer, Arnheim, Seve, etc., who ignore the codifications of *reality* by infrastructure and superstructure, merely transmit those codes in reality intact under the guise of *the neutrality of reality*" (50). McGarry's language reflects the position of many feminists, that there could be no representation that was not infused by ideology, and thus, no "reality" on screen.

*Camera Obscura*, which released its first issue in 1976, was founded on just these principles. In the opening issue, the editors are clear to establish their position on feminism and film.

In the last few years, there has been for the first time, theoretical work in the area of feminist analysis of film. Some of the most significant contributions have come out of work done in England and published in the journal *Screen*, or in conjunction with it; for example, Pam Cook and Claire Johnston's texts on Tourneur, Arzner and Walsh, and Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". The work of Kari Hanet and Jacqueline Rose has extended methods of textual analysis for the study of film within a feminist context through critical analyses of the structuring activity of films seen as texts and the production of meaning through textual operations. We see our activity on *Camera Obscura* within the context of such theoretical work, and want the journal to provide a locus for other work of this kind. Toward this end we are publishing translations of some of the most important work on film theory currently being done in France. We want to encourage theoretical work on cinematic representation and the signifying function of woman within this system. ("Feminism and Film: Critical Approaches" 3-4)

Later in this first issue, the editors explain the choice of *Camera Obscura* as their name, clearly defining this new journal against realism: "Like the camera obscura, the cinematic apparatus is not ideologically neutral, but reproduces specific ideological predispositions: codes of movement, of iconic representation, and perspective. The notion that "reality" can be reflected in film negates any awareness of the intervention, the mediation of the cinematic apparatus"

("Feminism and Film" 10). In stark opposition to *Women & Film's* goal of creating a cinema that is close to the masses, the editors of *Camera Obscura* were certain that no cinema (no representation) that portrayed people could ever do so without falling victim to hegemonic ideologies. They firmly believed that no realist project could ever be revolutionary.

This was a clear continuation of the principles underlying Johnston and Mulvey's classic essays, which each, in different ways, argue for a post-structuralist approach to film. Mulvey's analysis was marked by a psychoanalytic reading: "as an advanced representational system, the cinema poses questions about the ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking" (Mulvey 35). Johnston's analysis, buttressed by Barthesian semiotics, is similarly interested in the notion of cinema as a representational system:

In rejecting a sociological analysis of woman in the cinema we reject any view in terms of realism, for this would involve an acceptance of the apparent natural denotation of the sign and would involve a denial of the reality of myth in operation. Within a sexist ideology and a male-dominated cinema, woman is presented as what she represents for a man (Johnston 24).

In addition to a clear rejection of the evaluation of film in terms of "realism," Mulvey and Johnston were opposed to what they viewed as 'the sociological approach' to film studies-- the sort of work that appeared in early issues of *Women & Film*.

It would be difficult to overstate the influence of these essays, and the important role they play in the origin stories of feminist film theory. In 2008, Alison Butler wrote, "feminist film studies was founded on the rejection of Bazinian realism and the acceptance of a linguistic semiology" (Butler, "Feminist Perspectives in Film Studies" 394). In such critiques, Bazin's understanding of realism as a style was conflated with a more pedestrian definition of "reality;" whether accurately or not, the hostility expressed toward realism was extended to both narrative

filmmaking and documentary. The very idea of documentary filmmaking was anathema to feminist film theory, which was practically founded upon Althusser's critique of ideological state apparatuses. As Charlotte Brunsdon explains, "The 'documentary idea', of revealing or telling a truth, was seen as most duplicitous, because what had in fact been arranged, set up, edited, was presented as if 'just was', with nothing more than a neutral, recording camera intervening between audience and actuality." (Brunsdon *Films for Women* 11). Instead, the feminist Avant-garde films of Chantal Akerman, Agnes Verde, and a few others were canonized (and preserved), while many documentaries were lost to history. Also lost were many essays written in the pages of *Women & Film*, and elsewhere, about the representation of women in and through film, articles that while recognizing the limits of representation, were also interested in film's relationship to reality. While critical essays were re-printed in anthologies, early film reviews can often only be found in the archives.

Certainly, the feminist film theory that emerged from Johnston and Mulvey's provocative essays is rich and interesting. My point is not to diminish the importance of this work, but rather, to point out that there is a tradition of realist cinema in feminist film theory, it is simply not the dominant one. This is not a new revelation. In her 2010 dissertation, Shilyh Warren re-reads feminist documentaries from the 1970s that have been left out of accounts of the history of feminist film. These films were left out of the official feminist story, explains Warren, because: "British film scholars such as Claire Johnston, Pam Cook, and Laura Mulvey, in particular, elaborated gender-specific frameworks for cinematic analysis that were indebted to the ideological critique of realism." (6) At the time, all representation was understood, following Althusser, to be a reflection of the dominant ideology. In the case of films about women, this was particularly pernicious, as these films would inevitably reinforce the patriarchy. Warren writes,

"In this framework, realism signaled a naive attachment to the belief that reality could be captured by the technologies of cinema directly and transparently; the transmission of reality was supposedly cast by realism as effortless, as simple as looking out a window into the world" (8).

While this critique of realism itself fell out of fashion in the 1990s and early 2000s as film scholars grew weary of apparatus theory, true Bazinian film criticism remains retrograde. New work on realism often relies on a re-reading of Bazin through Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, Walter Benjamin, or Krakauer.<sup>37</sup> I am interested in considering Bazin's notion of the neorealist director in its own terms, in relation to *Women & Film's* 1972 call for a cinema for the masses. It is through these lenses that I will turn to consider Kelly Reichardt as a neorealist feminist director.

#### Andre Bazin's Return & the Feminist Reconsideration of Cinematic Realism

Realism has returned as an important question in film theory, marked as such occasions are, by review essays and anthologies. In 2007, Laura Marcus wrote that the resurgence in phenomenological and ontological realisms reflects "a fascination with the ontology of film and philosophical implications of the cinematic apparatus" ("Cinematic Realism" 190). And in 2008, George Kouvaros marked the return of realism for *The Sage Handbook of Film Studies*, writing, "realism stubbornly insists that we understand cinema not simply in terms of its capacity to reflect on its own internal processes but to also provide us with experience grounded in the

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<sup>37</sup> Bazin and neorealism's re-appearance in popular and scholarly discourse (even within feminist film theory) owes much to the fact that Gilles Deleuze chose to revisit Andre Bazin and Italian neorealism in his two books on Cinema-- *Cinema 1*, first published in English in 1986, and *Cinema 2*, in 1989. As Jon Beasley-Murray put it as early as 1997, writing about Deleuze and Bazin: "In his opposition to semiological analyses of film-- to the 'avatars of the signifier'-- Deleuze returns to a Bazinian notion of film history and a Bazinian conception of the ontology of the cinematic image" (38). Deleuze's re-reading, and re-interpretation of Andre Bazin's work, once translated into English, sparked a revival of Bazinian study, especially with regard to time and ontology, and a re-thinking of Neorealism. For an overview of recent work on Bazin and realism, see: *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema* (2003); *Adventures in Realism* (2007); *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife* (2011); and *Andre Bazin and Italian Neorealism* (2011).

uncertainties and impermanence of everyday life" ("We Do Not Die Twice" 382). In addition to such review essays, there have been a number of anthologies published that seek to consider realism, Bazin, or both. Notable among these many books are Jane Gaines' and Michael Renov's edited collection *Collecting Visible Evidence* (1999), which considers issues of realism in relation to documentary, Ivone Margulies' edited collection, *Rites of Realism* (2003), which contains essays concerned with thinking about Bazin in relation to corporeality, and a number of new books on Italian Neorealism (see Schoonover's *Brutal Vision*, 2012, Haaland's *Italian Neorealist Cinema*, 2012, Gelley's *Stardom and the Aesthetics of Neorealism*, 2012, and Scala & Rossini's *New Trends in Italian Cinema: "New" Neorealism*, 2013).

Among recent work on Bazin and neorealism, there is often a conflation of realism with neorealism. For Bazin, neorealism and realism are two different aesthetic styles. While Realism is a proper noun, neorealism is not. Bazin writes, "Neorealism as such does not exist. There are only neorealist directors-- whether they be materialists, Christians, Communists, or whatever" (Bazin, "In Defense of Rossellini" 169). Feminist reactions against realism (like much of the other anti-realist sentiment circulating at the time) collapsed all of Bazin's writings into one idea, realism. That mis-reading, or absence of reading, amounted to an extreme misrepresentation of Bazin's ideas, in particular, his own distinction between traditional literary realism and neorealism on film.

Bazin elaborates on the distinctions between Realism and Italian Neo-Realism in a letter to the editor of the Italian film journal *Cinema Nuovo* published in August of 1955. There, Bazin defines neorealism in relation to realism (as understood in literature and art) by drawing out a metaphor in which realism is represented by a house or a bridge, a solid structure made of bricks, and neorealism is represented by the rocks that lay scattered beneath the bridge:

the big rocks that lie scattered in a ford are now and ever will be no more than mere rocks. Their reality as rocks is not affected when, leaping from one to another, I use them to cross the river. If the service which they have rendered is the same as that of the bridge, it is because I have brought my share of ingenuity to bear on their chance arrangement; I have added the motion which, though it alters neither their nature nor their appearance, gives them a provisional meaning and utility. In the same way, the neorealist film has a meaning, but it is *a posteriori*, to the extent that it permits our awareness to move from one fact to another, from one fragment of reality to the next, whereas in the classical artistic composition the meaning is established *a priori*: the house is already there in the brick (Bazin, "In Defense of Rossellini" 169).

Neorealism, for Bazin, is an improvisational strategy, and in the neorealist film, the meaning is not determined in advanced, but constructed, made, by the viewer, who puts together the pieces herself. It is the particular quality of the neorealist director that she is able to assemble the film in such a way that the viewer can make her own meaning. Justin Horton (2013) recently glossed the same passage, as he put it, "Whereas the classical cinema guides the viewer along with its 'excessive obviousness,' the neorealist work, at its best, restores ambiguity, which rewards an active, probing spectatorship" (Horton, "Mental Landscapes" 28). This vision of neorealism as style, with its active spectator, is a far cry from the caricature of "realism" presented as Bazin's in the 1970s.

Bazin offers much, but he is not a feminist and as such, does not deal with gender. The vocabulary of gendered identity and feminism, was out of his reach, and also it seems fair to say, not of great concern to him. But his vision of neorealism as a style was a potentially political vision. While he insisted that neorealism itself must necessarily resist being beholden to particular political ideology, the impulse behind the style of neorealism, its openness to interpretation, constituted an attitude well suited for social commentary.

### *Part Two: Contextualizing Kelly Reichardt's Vision*

One of the key goals of the women's liberation movement of the 1970s was to encourage and promote women in the arts, and in particular, women in film. The establishment of the

organization "Women Make Movies" in 1972 sought to help solve this problem, as did the creation of various women's film festivals throughout the 1970s. These various groups sought to teach women the skills necessary to get behind the camera, and to provide them with institutional support they needed to make films, and venues where they could screen their work. There can be no doubt that Women Make Movies and other organizations helped bring women into filmmaking, but in spite of much success, in 2015, women who work in the film industry are still heavily underrepresented in a few key roles: director, cinematographer, editor.

For the past sixteen years, Martha Lauzen, executive director of the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film (based at San Diego State University) has published an annual study "The Celluloid Ceiling" which keeps track of the work women do in the film industry. Her research shows that women remain vastly underrepresented in the film industry, especially among the highest grossing films. In her study of women employed by the top 250 films of 2013, she found 6% were directed by women, and only 3% had women cinematographers (Lauzen, "Celluloid Ceiling" 2). Even in areas where women have historically been more prevalent, the numbers were startlingly low, 25% of producers were women, 17% of editors were women, and 10% of writers were women ("Celluloid Ceiling" 2). Lauzen has found that women are much more likely to work on independent films. In her research on films screening at Independent film festivals in the U.S. From 2014-2015, she found that women made up 18% of the directors of narrative feature films, and 29% of the directors of documentaries (Lauzen, "Independent Women" 1).

Women working in film are heavily concentrated in what amounts to the 'pink collar' sector of the industry: documentary and independent filmmaking. This seems to be common industry knowledge, reiterated over and over by women filmmakers. This issue came to a head in

2009, when Kathryn Bigelow became the fourth woman director in history to be nominated for an Oscar, and the first to win (for *The Hurt Locker*). That December, Manohla Dargis, film critic for the *NY Times*, published a feisty piece about Hollywood's particular brand of sexism. There, Dargis told a familiar story:

Every so often a new female filmmaker grabs the spotlight-- remember Kimberly Peirce, the director of "Boys Don't Cry?"-- only to sputter and fade. If you have ever wondered what ever happened to Susan Seidelman, Penny Marshall, Martha Coolidge, Amy Heckerling, Nancy Savoca, none of whom had the career they should have had, you're not alone. Come back Barbra, we miss you! But does Ms. Streisand, who was never nominated for best director, miss Hollywood? I doubt it. ("Women in the Seats")

One of Dargis's main points was that women are often penalized far more heavily than men when it comes to box office failures. As a result, even the most successful female directors often have a hard time finding funding for their films. This occurs even in cases where a woman has had a box office success. Industry professionals often reiterate the same story. In a recent *New York Times Magazine* profile of director Kimberly Pierce, producer Amy Pascal<sup>38</sup> told the paper, "If female directors are driven and single-minded and want to protect their actors as Kim does, they're problematic. If it's a man, he's passionate" (Schilling "'Carrie is Back. So is Kimberly Peirce").

### Woman Makes Movies

Reichardt's own filmography is not unlike Peirce's. Her first feature, *River of Grass* (1994) was well received, with a successful run in the independent film festival circuit. The film was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance and two American spirit awards (best first feature, best first screenplay) and earned reviews in *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles*

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<sup>38</sup>This issue came to a head again in February 2015, when Amy Pascal, one of the most powerful women in Hollywood, took the fall for Sony Pictures after a North Korean hacking scandal emerged around the film *The Interview*. Though Sony Pictures announced that Pascal would be transitioning to a different role within the company, it has now been widely reported that she was fired (Cieply "Amy Pascal Says Sony Pushed Her Out").



*Times*, the latter calling it "a winner about losers" (Thomas, "River"). In spite of her debut film's success, it was 12 years before Reichardt released her next feature length film, *Old Joy* (2006).

She is not shy when explaining the delay. In 2008, she told *Slant Magazine*

I made a first feature [*River of Grass*] and then after that I spent four years not getting a film made-- living "the dream" in L.A. to get a feature made. It was by far the least satisfying time of my life. Then I came home and made the Super 8 movie [*Ode*] and felt in control. I had this great epiphany when I was standing in a field with friends making an art project. It was like, how do I structure my world around this? This is satisfying. This is the pinnacle. That's why I started teaching, I just said to myself, how can I sustain something like this, where I have some money to make some films? And it is nice to be able to shoot on 16 and it's beautiful to shoot on Super 16 and have it be blown up, but to me the key is that I personally don't have a personality with the flexibility to make that system that does exist work for me. (Stewart, "Redefining Success")

When Reichardt talks about filmmaking, she talks a lot about sacrifices she is unwilling to make, while it would be nice to make films with a larger budget, she isn't willing to give up the creative control that usually accompanies big investors.

The long delay between a first and second film that Reichardt experienced is common among female filmmakers (and for that matter, all minority populations working in Hollywood), something that Manohla Dargis frequently mentions in her reporting on the lack of women directors for *The New York Times* ("Lights, Camera, Taking Action"). Articles by Dargis have publicized research being done by Martha Lauzen, who conducts the annual "Celluloid Ceiling" study at San Diego State University, and Stacy Smith, whose research at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism explores the representation of women in mainstream Hollywood film as well as barriers female directors face in getting their projects funded (Lauzen, 2014; Smith et al, 2014). Buttressed by this research, a number of new initiatives seek to make visible (and in some cases fund) the work of female directors, notably Gamechanger Films (founded in 2014) and the blog Women Directors in Hollywood (founded in 2012). There seems to be a general consensus among researchers, critics, and activists that women directors face a

complex set of barriers, some of which are material-- for example, what Smith's study characterizes as "male dominated funding networks," and some of which are ideological-- what Smith's study calls "stereotyping on set" and "work and family balance" (Smith et al, "Exploring" 47).

Reichardt, as a woman working in the film industry, is certainly aware of her marginality. But she also frequently points out, in interviews and lectures, that her position as a professor of film at Bard College who makes independent films on the side is hardly a status of which to be ashamed, and that, all things considered, this is the only way she is willing to make movies. In an illustrative example, *Slant* magazine's interviewer pushes Reichardt to admit that she would like to be able to make films with less constrictive budgets, she hints that after a certain level of success, most directors would like to have more artistic freedom, the interview continues with Reichardt's response:

KR: Well, what's your definition of success? I find that to be a fucking annoying question, I have to say.

Slant: Why is that?

KR: This constant implication that success has one picture is so limited-- and talk about American! I'm constantly asked this, as if teaching is some loser profession, or an uninteresting place to be. (Stewart, "Redefining Success")

Pressed further by the interviewer, who claims that Reichardt could probably do amazing things with a Woody Allen style twenty-million-dollar budget, Reichardt challenges her further: "Give me an example of a woman who can do that." The "that," in question, neatly sums up some of the ways that gender still matters in Hollywood. Reichardt is unwilling to give up creative control, and so is unwilling to make big budget films. As the interview progresses, Reichardt goes further:

I'll also say that I can't think of a woman who has this benefit either: Lars von Trier and Terrence Malick can put out films and not have to go out and talk about them. If I want to think about what real success would be, it would be to be able to make a film without

anyone breathing down my back and then not have to go out and talk about the film after you've gone to great lengths in your film to not over-explain everything. To not have to go out, that would be true success. (Stewart)

The female director, perhaps because she continues to be an anomaly, must continue to answer questions about these kind of issues. Though most female directors working in Hollywood are strongly influenced by the tradition of American independent cinema of the 1970s, there femininity inevitably becomes a central discussion point in the mass media.

Reichardt has been asked in many interviews about her influences. There are many cinematic influences, Italian Neorealism, new German cinema, the angry man films from England, and American independent cinema of the 1970s; but she insists, "the main influence was just living in America and watching the divide between the rich and the poor grow so huge. It's hard to miss" (Stewart). Before turning to how Reichardt's films reflect that particular influence, I want to briefly discuss some of the events in the background of Reichardt's filmmaking since 9-11: *Old Joy* (2005), *Wendy & Lucy* (2008), *Meek's Cutoff* (2011), and *Night Moves* (2014).

The terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, were, in retrospect, merely the first in a series of events that shook the U.S., and the world, marking the first decade of this new Millennium as a period of constant war and prolific homelessness (both at home and abroad). In September of 2005, Hurricane Katrina swept through Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi. Katrina decimated New Orleans, as well as countless other small towns in and around the deep southern parts of the U.S. The great storm left thousands of people with no place to call home, and few possessions left to remind them of their former lives. This natural disaster, which occurred in the second year of President George W. Bush's second term in office, inevitably called to mind that other event that had taken the lives of over 3000 U.S. Citizens. The terrorist

attacks that occurred on 9-11 consolidated an official "war on terror," manifested partly in an invasion of Afghanistan and a war in Iraq. As of March 2015, both conflicts are officially over, and the death toll has reached 6840 ("Faces of the Fallen"). The third significant moment to round out this triumvirate must be the 'great' recession, which officially began in 2008. The recession did not kill, but rather, exposed an extraordinary number of people to financial misfortune, unemployment, and economic precarity. Looking back on the first decade of the twenty first century, these three events, one natural, one political, and one economic, stand out as important historical markers. This chapter is written in relation to these events-- the very recent historical circumstances that haunt everyday life in the contemporary United States.

Alongside these major events, there has been a constant dialogue about the role of women in the contemporary United States. Here, I want to briefly talk about two contradictory stories being told about American women. The first is the end of men story, most coherently articulated by journalist Hanna Rosin, who argues that the U.S. Economy has become feminized to such a sharp degree that women will inevitably become the dominant figures within their families, and within the larger political culture. The second story, which points to those elements that Rosin glosses over, is the story of the feminization of poverty, which considers the growing population of families led by single mothers alongside the persistence of the gender wage gap. This narrative has been persuasively demonstrated through published research by policy groups like the National Women's Law Center.

### Story One: The End of Men

Hanna Rosin's *The End of Men* (2012) is representative of the broad swath of popular press journalism that considers the consequences of the transformation of the U.S. Economy, where traditionally masculine industries (manufacture, construction) are being displaced by

traditionally feminine industries (service).<sup>39</sup> Rosin claims that the middle class is turning into a "matriarchy," where women are increasingly making more money than their male counterparts, and in turn, making more decisions (5). Our service and information economy, she and others suggest, rewards qualities that have been traditionally coded as feminine, "social intelligence, open communication, the ability to sit still and focus;" as a result, women are that finding success comes fairly easily (5). Rosin's book makes use of two dominant metaphors, "the plastic woman" and "the cardboard man," figures that describe the characteristics that Rosin attributes to the rise of women. Where the plastic woman is adaptable to various workplace contexts, the cardboard man is stiff and incapable of change. Rosin claims that this phenomenon is in fact global-- with distinct effects on particular national cultures.

The value of Rosin's book is that she connects "the rise of women," to class identity, and to social institutions like marriage, child rearing, and family. She writes that as a result of economic changes (the rise of the service and information economy), the U.S. is "splitting into two divergent societies, each with their own particular marriage patterns," one group is composed of Americans who have a college degree, the other group is everyone else. Individuals in the first group are likely to be married, people in the second group are not. This research is buttressed by a 2010 study put out by The National Marriage Project<sup>40</sup>, which claims that "marriage is an emerging dividing line between America's moderately educated middle and those with college degrees... in recent years, moderately educated Americans have become less likely to form stable, high-quality marriages, while highly (college) educated Americans (who make up

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<sup>39</sup>See Louis Uchitelle, "Once Made in the USA" (2011), Greenstone & Looney, "The Problem with Men" (2010), Don Peck, "Can the Middle Class be Saved?" (2011), Adam Davidson, "Making it in America" (2012).

<sup>40</sup>The National Marriage Project, based at the University of Virginia, is affiliated with the Institute for American Values, a think tank based in New York City. The Institute for American Values is committed to renewing civil society and ending the culture wars. Though the group is committed to the institution of marriage, in 2012, IAV president David Blankenhorn published a piece in the New York Times about his newfound acceptance of gay marriage (Blankenhorn "How My View on Gay Marriage Changed").

30 percent of the adult population) have become more likely do to so" (Wilcox "When Marriage Disappears" ix). Consequently, Americans with more money and more education are part of relationships that Rosin deems "seesaw marriages;" in such relationships, partners take turns seeking out professional opportunities. Such marriages are, according to Rosin, very good for men, she points out that "excellent studies, from dozens of countries, show that married men are happier, healthier, and live longer than their single counterparts" (*End of Men* 68). But happiness aside, these marriages are powerful economic unions, because they are increasingly formed among the sorts of people who have high earning potential.

On the other side of the aisle are those Americans who are increasingly less likely to marry-- who tend to have less education, and less earning potential. As the 2010 National Marriage Project study puts it, "as marriage-- an institution to which all could once aspire-- increasingly becomes the private playground of those already blessed with abundance, a social and cultural divide is growing" (Wilcox, xii). Rosin interprets these changes positively, writing that "marriage has disappeared because women are now more economically independent and thus able to set the terms for marriage-- and usually they set them too high for the men around them to reach" (Rosin 93). In her interviews, she speaks to women who have opted not to marry their boyfriends because they lack drive and ambition. She attributes the "end of men" to a socially constructed inflexibility (the cardboard man) , which makes it difficult for men to thrive in a service economy. If they wish to excel, says Rosin, they will have to adapt, to acquire formerly feminized skills-- people skills. Writing against Rosin's thesis, sociologist Stephanie Coontz attributes this same phenomenon to a "masculine mystique," she writes, "Just as the feminine mystique discouraged women in the 1950s and 1960s from improving their education or job prospects, on the assumption that a man would always provide for them, the masculine

mystique encourages men to neglect their own self-improvement on the assumption that sooner or later their "manliness" will be rewarded" (Coontz "The Myth of Male Decline").

While Coontz and Rosin agree that the U.S. Economy has changed drastically since the 1960s, they offer different perspectives on these changes. Rosin views the contemporary situation positively, seeing high profile debates about reproductive rights, sexual violence, and the gender pay gap as the last "battle cries" of the patriarchy. She insists that someday soon, women in the U.S. (and in other parts of the western world) will overtake men as the most powerful gender, making femininity, rather than masculinity, the privileged form of gender expression and performance. Rosin reads the statistics about the incredible strides women are making in education at every level to signal an inevitably positive change. But she admits that lower and middle class women are exhausted by their efforts to improve themselves.

Rosin writes that the image that "epitomizes the contradictions of the new striving middle-class matriarchy" is a woman she saw on an elevator at Metropolitan Community College in Kansas City, who "still in her medical-assistant scrubs, fell asleep between the first and fourth floors, so tired was she from studying, working, and taking care of her kids by herself" (*End of Men* 154). Speaking to critics of her book, Rosin wrote in *Slate Magazine*,

Yes, the richest of the rich are still almost exclusively male, or their wives. And yes, we have not yet remotely figured out how to make most American workplaces family-friendly. But zoom the graph back a few decades and you can see how far we've come--and that the lines all point one way: Men's wages have been stagnating, and by some measures declining, as women's economic fortunes continue to rise. The wage gap has been slowly closing for women, but the education gap has not been closing for men. We can focus only and eternally on the fact that those lines have not yet crossed or even converged in many professions. But isn't that vantage point a bit narrow? ("Male Decline is No Myth")

Ultimately, Rosin argues that she has written a book that describes how changes unfolding in the U.S. Economy are altering how marriages and families are structured, and how men and women

understand their gender roles. She's interested in looking at these changes from a broad historical view, and she claims that when one does that, it becomes clear that women are indeed on the rise. But there is another way to tell this story.

### Story Two: The Feminization of Work & Poverty

While women are certainly working incredibly hard to support their families, many are being left behind. Here, I look at research on marriage, life expectancy, and the gender wage gap, to show a different narrative to describe the contemporary U.S. economy, rather than the rise of women, this is a story about the feminization of work and poverty. While Rosin interprets changing patterns in marriage as indicative of women's increasing power and control over their own lives, there is strong research to suggest that these marriage patterns are also helping to perpetuate massive inequality at all levels.

In September 2014, Pew Research and Reporting published a study tracking the phenomenon of declining marriage rates using both census data and public polling. The new study finds that heterosexual men and women are looking for different qualities in a potential partner, positing that the decline in marriage rates may have something to do with the availability of suitable partners. In particular, the study finds that "never-married women place a great deal of importance on finding someone who has a steady job... for never-married men, someone who shares their ideas about raising children is more important" (Wang and Parker 6). As a result of economic and workplace changes, the number of employed men per 100 women has dropped significantly, from 129 in 1960 to 91 in 2012 (Wang and Parker 7). As the *Slate* headline reported the story "There Aren't Enough Marriageable Men in America" (Weissmann 2014).<sup>41</sup>

What most media outlets did not report on was the fact that eighty five percent of new marriages

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<sup>41</sup> At present, there is little research to show what the marriage market looks like among gay couples, but it seems likely the trend of high-income earners teaming up in heterosexual marriages will extend to gay marriage.



occur between people of the same race and ethnicity. Very few survey participants said that it was "very important" for them to find a spouse who shared their racial or ethnic background, and yet, the statistics tell a story of a marriage market that is increasingly stratified among racial and ethnic lines. If this trend continues, communities in the United States will over time, become more, and not less, segregated, and more, rather than less, unequal.

As Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist who researches marriage and family writes, "Schooling has become the great sorting machine of the marriage market, and college graduates are separating themselves from the rest of the population. The winners in the new economy are marrying each other and consolidating their gains" (*The Marriage-Go-Round* 179). While the winners, highly educated upper middle class Americans, "consolidate their gains," what happens to the losers? If the vast majority of women (regardless of race or ethnicity) are looking for a partner with a "steady income," and if the vast majority of marriages take place between people of the same race and ethnicity (suggesting that this factor is more important to Americans than they are willing to admit), perhaps marriage rates are declining in African American communities simply because the market of "eligible men" is most competitive in these communities. Marriage in the U.S. is increasingly becoming a province of white, middle-class people, who, when they marry, are able to join together their assets, and strengthen their economic position.<sup>42</sup>

Rosin discusses this, but she tends to romanticize how actual people are experiencing this trend. She focuses on young women-- a nursing student, a pharmacy student, who are striving to make it, and often, supporting partners and children along the way. She does not focus on the many women who, in spite of lofty goals and hard work, are not able to rise above their

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<sup>42</sup>Survey and census data also shows that while marriage rates are declining, "never-married" people are not necessarily single, many co-habitate with partners and raise children together.

circumstances. In a 2013 study "Breadwinner Moms," Wang, Parker, and Taylor, point out that among the rising number of breadwinner moms, there is a major income difference between married mothers with a higher income than their husbands (37% of breadwinner moms), and single mothers (63%) ("Breadwinner Moms" 1). The median total family income of the first group, married mothers, was close to \$80,000 in 2011; the second group, the single mothers, had a median total family income of \$23,000. The second group, single mothers, are "younger, more likely to be black or Hispanic, and less likely to have a college degree," while the first group, married breadwinner mothers, are "slightly older, disproportionally white and college educated" (1). These statistics are critical because they paint a portrait that reveals the way education is increasingly tied to marriage and future income.

Rosin's analysis never touches on the question of poverty, but the statistics show, without question, that U.S. women and children are disproportionately affected by poverty. The National Women's Law Center reports that in 2013, "more than half (51.9 percent) of poor female-headed families with children lived in extreme poverty" and that 12 percent of single mothers who worked full-time, year round, lived in poverty (Entmacher et al "Insecure & Unequal" 4). While Rosin acknowledges that there is class stratification among the "rise of women," she chooses not to emphasize this point in her research. But the fact is that while highly educated (mostly white) women are rising to power and prominence, other women are working as hard as they can and nevertheless, living in poverty.

Inequalities perpetuated by marriage patterns and the persistence of poverty among single mothers are buttressed by a series of recent studies that show a decline in life-expectancy among certain female populations in the U.S. As a 2013 *Atlantic* headline told the story, "U.S. Women are Dying Younger Than Their Mothers, and No One Knows Why". The studies that journalist

Wyller sites are inconclusive, but they point to the fact that as life expectancy increases for most of the U.S. Population, in certain geographic regions and among certain groups, longevity is decreasing (Wyller "U.S. Women"). The data suggests that Lauren Berlant's theorization of 'slow death,' the gradual wearing out of bodies under conditions of late capitalism, is far more accurate than anyone had previously thought.

The most provocative academic research on trends in life expectancy, published in 2014 by sociologist William Cockerham, draws on multiple studies to make the argument that there is an emerging crisis in the U.S. Cockerham writes, "for the first time in modern history, the life expectancy of a particular segment of the American population-- namely non-Hispanic white women with low levels of education and income living in certain rural counties-- is declining" (Cockerham 220). Cockerham cites many recent studies that support his argument, especially Olshansky et al (2012), Wang et al (2013), and Chang et al (2014). These three studies are some of the most recent published papers to show in detail how life expectancy relates to age, education level, and race. As public health researchers Olshansky et al write, "it is now reasonable to conclude that at least two Americas have formed, with notably different longevity prospects" (1806). These researchers point out that campaigns to reduce the frequency of smoking or to encourage exercise or more nutritious diets among 'at risk' populations may not be enough to change these trends around longevity. One of the few studies to look at the specific decline in life expectancy among poor white women found that within this community, longevity was just as influenced by employment status as it was by smoking. This study, published by public health researchers Montez and Zajacova (2014), suggests that employment itself (regardless of type of employment) provides multiple benefits that may affect health, it offers

"social networks and supports a sense of purpose; it enhances self esteem; and it offers mental and physical activity" ("Explaining the Widening Education Gap" 175).

These studies suggest that while educated women are living longer than ever before, women without education, who often have meager job prospects, are not merely living in poverty, they are living shorter lives. While at least two researchers, epidemiologists Jennifer Dowd and Amar Hamoudi, have voiced concerns about the results, many of these studies have suggested that some women living in the twenty first century may have lower life expectancies than their grandmothers ("Is Life Expectancy Really Falling"). Poverty clearly takes a toll on the bodies of the most vulnerable people in the U.S. The story of the feminization of poverty is a story of stratification along economic and educational lines. While some women, leading figures in the media, usually white and upper middle class, and nearly always college-educated are rising to new heights, other women, often non-white, poor, and with little education, are living shorter, less full lives.

Italian neo-realism was a style of filmmaking that ultimately sought to describe post-war Italy. Bazin writes that Italian cinema's "perfect and natural adherence to actuality" is distinct because in Italy,

the Liberation did not signify a return to the old and recent freedom; it meant political revolution, Allied occupation, economic and social upheaval. The liberation came slowly through endless months. It had a profound effect on the economic, social, and moral life of the country... when Rossellini made *Paisa*, his script was concerned with things actually happening at the time (Bazin *What is Cinema V2*, 19-20).

The style of Neo-realism was bound up in these particular historical conditions, and in the necessity at the time to describe these conditions in cinema. Writing in 2012, Elena Gorfinkel talked about this in terms of "the capacity of neorealist cinema to describe the cruelly prosaic conditions of mundane privation, the simple absurdity of scarcity, and the frayed, even if

assiduous, attachments that nevertheless persist within such lack," (Gorfinkel "Weariness" 325). It is a style of filmmaking that emerged as a result of particular material conditions. When A.O. Scott talks about Reichardt's work as part of a Neo-Neo Realism, he is extending Bazin's ideas to different national contexts. He writes that neorealism "might be thought of less as a style or genre than as an ethic that finds expression in various places at critical times," he cites Indian cinema in the 1950s, Brazilian cinema in the 1960s, Senegalese cinema in the 1970s, and Iranian cinema of the 1990s. Ultimately, he determines that at present, "American film is having its Neorealist moment" ("Neo-Neo Realism"). The reason Scott would make such a claim is related to the issues I have been tracing in this section, issues related to the economic reality faced by men and women living in the United States.

### *Part Three: Reichardt's Vision*

Throughout the first seven minutes of Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2011), the only word uttered is "LOST." In the word, which is carved into a tree trunk by one of the party's three adult men, one is given an apt description of the characters in *Meek's Cutoff*, as well as all of Reichardt's films. Reichardt has described her films as road movies, and it is true, her characters are always on route to somewhere else, moving through the landscapes of the pacific northwestern United States. But it is also true that the emotion that propels the journey in these films, as perhaps in all road movies, is loss. Reichardt's first feature, *River of Grass*, (1994) the story of a young woman seeking escape from her small town life, is about being lost in your home town. *Old Joy* (2005) is about two old friends trying to return to a time in their lives when they were different, and realizing that they can't go back. *Wendy & Lucy* (2008) is a film about a woman (Michelle Williams) who loses everything she has (her car, her dog, her sense of bodily security). The settlers in *Meek's Cutoff* (2011) are lost in the desert, trying to find water and their

way to a new home. Most recently, Reichardt presents us with three young misguided environmental activists in 2014's *Night Moves*. Reichardt's vision of the contemporary U.S., is of a nation of people either literally or figuratively lost.

The theme of literal and figurate "loss" in Reichardt's films is fairly straightforward (some have lost their way geographically or figuratively, others have lost the thing they love the most). What is more subtle is the manner in which loss is negotiated via gender identity and sexuality. For the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss Reichardt's two most recent films (*Meek's Cutoff* and *Night Moves*) in relation to this notion of 'being lost,' and gender identity. These two films are telling stories related to popular press narratives of 'the crisis of masculinity' and 'the feminization of poverty' that I spoke about above. Because of Reichardt's sparse neorealism (the slow pace of her films, the performances she inspires in her actors, the bare bones narratives), the political implications are never the most obvious element of the filmmaking. Here I am arguing that Reichardt's style of filmmaking is a distinctly feminist kind of neorealism. I am necessarily taking liberties with Bazin's definition, which was situated in a particular place and time.

Reichardt uses neorealism as a directorial style, which allows her to play with genre cinema in a particularly interesting way. She borrows from Italian neorealism an attention to pacing and a resistance to studio sets. This is most visible in *Wendy & Lucy*, a film with three major characters, which Reichardt filmed on a street in a small town near Portland, Oregon, where Michelle Williams was unrecognizable as Wendy, sitting on the curb or sleeping in a car with a small film crew nearby. In her early films, Reichardt made good use of non-professional actors, a feature of Italian neorealist film, the unnamed Walgreen's security guard, for example, in *Wendy & Lucy*, had never acted before the film, nor had the teenagers who appear in the fire-

lit scene in the woods. In her more recent films, Reichardt seems to be adopting a predilection for performers who have the ability to disappear into a character, making themselves unrecognizable, but also, calling up unconscious associations with the viewer. Will Patton and Michelle Williams appear in both *Wendy & Lucy* and *Meek's Cutoff*, and in both films, play similar sorts of characters. In *Wendy & Lucy*, Patton plays the mechanic who has to break the news to Wendy that her car is not worth saving; in *Meek's Cutoff*, Patton is Mr. Tetherow, husband of the headstrong Mrs. Tetherow (Williams). Similarly, Michelle Williams's performance in *Meek's Cutoff* trades on her performance in that other nontraditional western, *Brokeback Mountain*, and Jesse Eisenberg's Josh of *Night Moves* draws much from his much lauded role as Mark Zuckerberg in *The Social Network*. These are all actors whose faces call up other faces, and who are consciously using these other associations in their performances.

In *Meek's Cutoff*, Michelle Williams plays a woman who could be Wendy's ancestor, Emily Tetherow, the strong-willed wife of Mr. Tetherow. The details of the plot are simple. The settlers are lost in the desert, desperate for water and a sign that they are moving in the right direction. The group, three couples and one child, are led by Stephen Meek, their hired guide, who has proven to be inadequate to the task of leading the group through the mountains. The film has been called a feminist western because of the ways that it rewrites the genre to demonstrate the incredible dullness and fear that would have characterized early journeys West. I am reading it as a neorealist western, a western that uniquely attends to the banality and the maddeningly slow pace of life on the Oregon Trail.

Reichardt presents this film almost entirely from the point of view of the three women in the group, who are often shown watching the men talk from a distance. In these scenes, the audience hears the men's conversations as if muffled by the wind, in the same way that the

women hear them, and sees them talk through the square gaze of the women's bonnets, which severely limit their sight lines and peripheral vision. The audience is placed in the position of the women, positioned as casual observers of male conversation. Only Mr. Tetherow discusses these conversations with his wife, in whispered evening discussions while the others are sleeping. And thus, Emily Tetherow (Michelle Williams) alone among the women, has the ability to influence the decisions of the group. In keeping with the tradition of neorealist filmmaking, the major 'event' is the discovery and capture of a Native American man. The captive inspires much debate among the men of the group, who argue over whether he should be kept or killed. Mrs. Tetherow insists that he should be kept, as he is the group's best chance to find water, and perhaps even, to get through the mountains.

In the climax of the film, Reichardt revises the classic Western showdown scene. Instead of the familiar encounter between men, Reichardt presents us a showdown hinged around a woman. When Stephen Meek points his shotgun at the Indian captive who he accuses of disrespect, Emily Tetherow raises her rifle upon Mr. Meek, inserting herself into the confrontation between the armed Mr. Meek and the unarmed Indian captive. The camera settles on Michelle Williams' face, set in a countenance of consternation and self-righteousness, as she holds her position. Mr. Meek does not speak directly to Emily, but rather, speaks about her to her husband. He says, "Your wife's got some injun blood in her." Mr. Tetherow responds, "She sure got something." It is Mr. Meek who lowers his gun first. By the time Emily has lowered her rifle, a mere thirty seconds later, the group dynamic has shifted. It is Emily Tetherow (backed by her husband) who will determine the group's next move. When the group has to determine whether to follow Mr. Meek or the Indian captive, the group does not hesitate to follow Mrs. Tetherow, who follows her captive. Mr. Meek speaks the final line of the film "We're all just playing our



parts now." It's an interesting final line to a film in which a woman leads the route toward westward expansion.

*Night Moves* follows the planning, execution, and aftermath of a major environmental action-- the explosion of a dam in the Portland metro area. This act will make a statement, so the three protagonists believe, about the offensive waste of power by humans. But the film itself is not that interested in the big 'political' event at its heart. Rather, it is interested in the three people who commit this act, their motivations, their inhibitions, and their failures. The tension between the three characters, Dakota Fanning as Dena, Jesse Eisenberg as Josh, and Peter Sarsgaard as Harmon, is palpable, and Reichardt wants us to know that the characters themselves don't know whether their tension is of a sexual or nervous nature.

The film opens on the dam itself, and specifically, the enormous pipeline through which water runs after it has been made into energy in the dam. In the first shot, we see the pipeline, and we hear the loud rush of water coming, and then, we see the release of the water. The second shot, of Josh (Jesse Eisenberg), looking out over the water, introduces us to the brooding man at the center of the film. The third shot returns to the pipeline. And the fourth shot introduces Dena (Dakota Fanning) presenting us with the other protagonist, the woman, who stands facing us, looking out over the water, her legs splayed out in a posture of comfortable security. The first time I watched this scene, I didn't think much of it, but on a second viewing it was impossible not to see the burst of powerful water as an obvious illusion to the sexual frustrations and satisfactions that are bound to occur among these two characters, presented, as they are in this first scene, as a heterosexual couple. This presentation though, occurs at the outset from a distance. The shot early on of these two walking toward the camera is indicative of the way the camera relates to its subjects throughout.

We soon learn who these people are: Dena is a college drop out with a trust fund who works at a spa, and Josh is a farm hand who lives in a yurt on the farm where he works. The fact that these two are not lovers becomes clear almost immediately, though they are doing the things that lovers do (looking out over large bodies of water, running errands, watching films, exchanging gifts). The film establishes the environmental activism of these characters through a convenient film-within-a-film screening of an unnamed documentary which concludes with the vague declaration: "let the revolution begin, all around the globe, an army of individual citizens must rise up and take a stand, for the future, for the people, and for the planet." At the film screening we learn that Dena and Josh are both tired of talking about impending climate change, and anxious to take action. In the next scene, Dena and Josh are on their way to purchase a boat, called Night Moves, that they will use to carry explosives that will blow up one of the dams that power the Portland metro area.

After they purchase the boat, Dena and Josh drive to meet the third member of their team, Harmon, at his small trailer in the woods. Harmon is older than Dena and Josh, a hardened military man, trained by the Marine Corps. These three are only on screen together for about fifteen minutes, but it is their relations as a trio that make the rest of the film possible. Though there is much discussion between the men about whether or not Dena really needs to be present, she proves to be essential, not just because she has access to cash, but because she is capable of being persuasive when she wants to be. Harmon provides the weapons 'know-how,' he sets up the bomb that will explode. Josh provides the strategic skills. But it is Dena who secures all the materials necessary to make this action possible. In a particularly tense scene, she convinces a local shop owner to sell her 500 pounds of ammonium nitrate fertilizer, even though she does not have the necessary documentation. While the men in this group possess technical skill and the

motivation, it turns out that they do not possess the "soft skills" required to convince people to trust them.

The film is not interested in the particulars of any love plots, but Reichardt does show us, voyeuristically, that Dena and Harmon 'fool around' at his trailer in the woods. The camera follows Josh return from running errands with dinner (pizza), to find that Dena and Harmon are getting on fine with out him. Josh stops at the door of Harmon's trailer when he hears giggling (or is it grunting). His face tells us he understands that something is happening, and the camera follows as he takes a walk in the woods while he waits for that scene to end. In the next scene, the three pals are back to their task at hand, preparing to drive out to the scene of the impending crime.

Reichardt's highlights the total visibility of the three activists as they prepare to blow up the bridge, and she shows us that they too, are increasingly aware that they are being seen from all sides. Dena looks up to see a camera when negotiating the deal for the ammonium nitrate. Reichardt films Josh approaching "Night Moves" through the window of a lodge at the state park, showing us that he might have been seen by any of the patrons there that day. As they make their way deeper into the woods, they see children playing and are confronted by a hiker looking to chat.

The visibility of their crime is further reinforced when it is revealed that there was a man camping in the woods near the dam explosion. This man is missing, presumed dead. Josh listens to the news over breakfast at work, and registers visible alarm on his face. Josh is concerned, but Dena is devastated. She begins developing hives, brought upon by anxiety. She breaks the fundamental rule of her cover activist organization and calls Harmon. Harmon, clearly uninterested in dealing with the problem himself, calls Josh.

Harmon tells Josh that it's just a matter of time before Dena tells someone what happened. Josh begins watching Dena from afar, trying to gauge her state of mind. Josh too, is worried about the camper situation. He visits the public library to use the Internet, where he quickly reads the story about the camper's death, and immediately deletes his browsing history. At this point, Josh too, begins to panic. He drives by Dena's house and watches her on her computer through her bedroom window. As he watches Dena, he begins to feel that he too is being watched. At the farmer's market where he sells produce, Josh catches the eye of various people, a woman selling flowers, a man reading a newspaper, and a dread-locked man holding a cat. As he drives, he is afraid of being followed, the camera zooms in on his rear view window.

The pressure builds. Josh is fired from his farm because his boss suspects he is involved in something illegal. Dena, it appears, has spoken to the boss's wife. Josh packs up his meager belongings, goes to a party, and eventually ends up at the spa where Dena works. He hides in a closet and watches her before he confronts her. Dena is frightened, she fights Josh off, but he finds her in the steam room of the spa and strangles her to death. After, we see Josh's face, illuminated by a soft orange glow of spa lighting.

This surprising climax is only believable because of the sexual tension between the central characters and the general atmosphere of paranoia that has been cultivated by the camera. When Josh kills Dena, he tells himself (and Harmon) it is because Dena is a liability. But it immediately becomes clear that there are other reasons. Dena's feminine vulnerability has threatened Josh's everyday life, both in terms of his ability to stay at the organic farm where he works, and his relationship with Harmon. Because she is the woman, Dakota Fanning (Dena) at first appears to be the center of the triangulated desire, but over the course of the film, it becomes clear that Harmon is in fact the object around which desire is circulating. It is Harmon who both

Dena and Josh call when they need a friend, and it is Harmon who is ultimately moving the others around like chess pieces.

Shaking in desperation after he has done the unthinkable, Josh drives south. The next morning, in the light of day, he calls Harmon. Panicked, he tells Harmon what has happened. He continues:

"I don't know like I was thinking maybe you and I could go away somewhere.. Like kind of quiet like just like, out in the middle of nowhere or something. I gotta lot of stuff. I could come and get you. I can come and get you now. I don't know where you are. maybe we could go away for a while, to the woods."

Josh's vision of living off the land with his friend is to be a dream deferred. Hammond doesn't even acknowledge Josh's invitation, he simply says "You gotta get real lost now. Real Lost. Stay lost." Josh says "OK." Harmon says, "That's it." Josh says "Yeah I know. OK." And Harmon hangs up. Josh removes the hard drive from his cell phone and puts it in the back of a stranger's truck.

Resolved, he walks into an outdoor supply store. He glances at the binoculars, the sleeping bags and asks to fill out a job application. As he begins to fill out the form, he glances up to see yet another surveillance device. This is where the film ends. In the final shot of the film, Josh stares into the surveillance mirror above the register of the store, almost winking at the camera. What will happen next is unknown.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have considered Reichardt's films in relation to neorealism, feminist film theory, economics, and femininity. I have structured this chapter in this way to highlight how Reichardt's films fit into narratives that circulate about femininity in contemporary U.S. Culture. Bazin's admiration for neorealism is impossible to disconnect from the historical situation in which it emerged as a cinematic style. After the Second World War, Italy was a chaotic, violent,

and strikingly changed place, it was this reality that neorealist cinema captured. In the same way, Reichardt's films are neorealist in the sense that they are able to capture something about the strangeness of post 9-11 U.S. culture. These films do not reference the catastrophes that have influenced the characters at the center of their narratives, but they still manage to communicate the general atmosphere of precarity that characterizes daily life in the contemporary U.S. In the last section, I wrote about two different stories being told in the popular press about femininity in the U.S. The first, represented in my analysis by Hanna Rosin, is about the rise of women. Rosin's story, I claim, is true to the extent that she is interested in upper middle class women. This population has seized the opportunities brought about by the legal gains of second wave feminism and put them to use in the increasingly service-based economy. Rosin is right that such women are "on the rise." The second story is about the feminization of poverty-- in this narrative, women and children are increasingly suffering at the hands of a social system that rewards people of means and punishes people born with less. These women are often tethered to the very same demographic of men that Rosin has caricatured in the title of her book *The End of Men*. These men are less likely to be able to find the stable blue-collar work that used to exist in the U.S., and as such, have less money to contribute to their families. While some women are on the rise, I point out in that section, many more women in the U.S. may actually be living shorter lives than their grandmothers, put upon, as they are, by the material and psychic struggles of unemployment. These are dramatic stories, but they are also, at least to some extent, true. These narratives are based on research published in peer-reviewed academic journals and highly respected public policy think tanks.

The truth that Bazin claimed film might achieve had to do with communicating something about the world through a different medium than statistics or social science, what he

called 'the language of cinema.' This truth would be determined in the relationship between the audience and the film on the screen. In the best films, the director would assemble the film in such a way that it would be open to interpretation by the viewer. This is what Bazin talks about in his discussion (referenced earlier) of the distinction between the bridge and the rocks that the hiker must ford as she crosses the stream. Data driven stories about the world in which people live are like the bridge-- they tell us what the world is. The neorealist film is like the rocks-- it suggests a route but allows us to fill in the details with our own experience.

In feminist film theory's vocal resistance to realist film in the 1970s, a conflation was made between Bazin, neorealism, and "reality." And in this resistance to the style of neorealism, something was lost. I have shown in this chapter that Bazin's vocabulary for thinking about film is extremely productive, and that this vocabulary ought to be used in feminist film analysis. All films—even Feminist Avant-garde films from the 1970s like Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*—have a relationship to reality. Rosler's short film—in spite of its philosophical title—is an extremely visceral film. Anyone who watches this film will understand Rosler's message, that the kitchen has the capacity to be a place of violence. Any viewer will understand that she is watching the short film of a woman who feels trapped in her kitchen, and is beginning to see the cooking tools around her as mechanisms of escape. It is the juxtaposition between what the viewer expects and what she sees that creates the power behind this piece (this is even more true when one considers Rosler's wider work, especially her photomontages about Vietnam). And yet, the viewer is left to determine what the piece means on her own, by relating her own experiences of the kitchen to what is presented on screen.

In this sense, Rosler is a key figure in thinking through the relationship between Bazin's theories of neorealism and feminist filmmaking. Her work, in "Semiotics of the Kitchen" and

elsewhere, is about politicizing traditionally realist aesthetics. Her method is to place something chaotic within familiar scenes of domesticity. In “Semiotics of the Kitchen” the chaotic is Rosler herself, using kitchen tools as weapons. In her photomontage “House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home,” released from 1967-1972, Vietnam is the chaos placed in the midst of scenes of domesticity. In one striking image from this collection, titled simply “Cleaning the Drapes,” a well dressed woman vacuums the drapes that hang in front of a floor-to-ceiling window. As she pulls the drapes away from the window she reveals a scene in which two soldiers stand between boulders in Vietnam. This work reveals multiple realities that exist within all living rooms in the U.S.—the work of war, the work of home.

And yet, the world that Rosler depicted in 1975 is extremely different than the one Reichardt depicts in her recent films. Indeed, the tension Rosler explored, between feminism and domesticity, is no longer relevant in the same way that it once was. Reichardt’s films show this in the marked absence of these themes. Instead, she returns to the style of De Sica, the simplicity of narrative and relationships between a few people.

In *Wendy & Lucy*, Reichardt captured the desolation of the great recession and hurricane Katrina without making direct reference to either. In showing the viewer the impact of unemployment and homelessness on one particular woman, she allows her to fill in the gaps about how this story relates to both her own life, and the lives of others. *Night Moves* offers a more sinister take on everyday life, suffused as it is with images of surveillance. The film was released in the summer of 2014, just a few months after the Snowden revelations revealed the depth of the NSA's surveillance apparatus. Reichardt couldn't have known of this story when she wrote and shot the film, but it's indicative of her ability to capture the particular structure of feeling of the times that this film speaks so clearly to that set of issues. In that film, the viewer is



faced with a sense that reality itself is becoming increasingly like a film, in which each of us stars, all day, every day.

Contrary to recent declarations that we are living in a postfeminist society, or that women are on the rise, Reichardt depicts a world in which modern women have little power over the course of their own lives. Femininity, that illusive genre that encompasses so many different forms of gendered performance, seems irrelevant to the story Reichardt is telling. The most feminine woman she depicts in all of her films is Emily Tetherow, the 19<sup>th</sup> century pioneer woman. In *Meek's Cutoff*, Mrs. Tetherow's (Michelle Williams) subject position as a true woman allows her to take charge of a situation. She utilizes characteristics associated with her white femininity (morality, maternity, domestic know-how) to take her place as moral leader of her party. But this story itself is a kind of fantasy (since it allows us to see westward expansion from the perspective of the women who toiled alongside pioneering men). No such power is available to Reichardt's modern women, Dena (Dakota Fanning) and Wendy (Michelle Williams), both of whom seem incapable of controlling their own fates.

Reichardt has now made three successive films about women. None ended conclusively, and the most optimistic among them has been set in 1845. Conventional femininity, in Reichardt's universe, is a privilege. Wendy's femininity is represented merely as vulnerability. Asleep in the woods, she is awoken by a drunk rummaging through her belongings. In the scene that follows, Wendy flees from the intruder. She runs away from the woods, back toward the safety of a twenty-four hour gas station with a public restroom. In the safety of the fluorescent lights, she breaks down in audible sobs. Femininity here offers no power, only a fundamental weakness that makes Wendy feel out of control. Dena, of *Night Moves*, is better off than Wendy in some ways. She has a bed to sleep in, a job, and she appears to enjoy her sexual freedom, but

she too, is vulnerable. Josh and Harmon see her as an emotional wreck who will inevitably tell the cops about their crime. Josh is annoyed that she has developed a relationship with Harmon. Harmon seems to find her phone calls irritating. Though Dena fights for her life, Josh (Jesse Eisenberg) is able to kill her with his bare hands. We never learn precisely why Dena had to be killed, but the suggestion is that it has something to do with her emotional precariousness, in other words, her femininity.

At the end of each of Reichardt's films (with the exception of *Meek's Cutoff*, set in 1845), we are presented with an image, almost like a photograph, of a lone figure facing the world, in *Old Joy*, it is Kurt wandering the streets of Portland, a man who may or may not have a place to sleep. In *Wendy and Lucy*, it's Wendy curled up on in the train car, without Lucy. And in *Night Moves*, it's Josh, as seen from a surveillance camera, a man on the run. If there is one image that encapsulates Kelly Reichardt's realist vision, which is expressed through her particularly gendered style, it is this one. The world she reveals in her films is one of constant surveillance, in which both femininity and masculinity have become, for her characters, overwhelming burdens to bear. This is because Reichardt makes films about people living outside of mainstream representations. In this too, she is like the Italian Neorealist directors, who were famously drawn to tell the stories of the downtrodden.

In the final, wordless scene of De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, father and son walk, reluctantly with the crowd, toward their uncertain future. The boy has just seen his father attempt to steal another man's bicycle. This is an act of uncommon cruelty in this film. In this universe, owning a bicycle is a prerequisite to full employment, and thus, taking another man's bicycle is equivalent to taking his job. Moreover, the father at the center of this film is himself the victim of another bicycle thief. That his search for his lost bike has led him to become his own worst enemy is an

incredibly low blow; that his son has seen his fall from grace is crushing. The son, though he is only a small boy, understands this, and the father knows that his son knows, which explains his own stone cold countenance. As father and son walk together in the crowd, the father doesn't seem to notice that he grazes the sides of a large truck moving through the crowd. Every few seconds, the son looks up at the father seeking some kind of explanation. Finally, the father looks down at his son, grips his hand tighter, lets out a gasp, and begins to cry, almost imperceptibly. The son too, is overcome with emotion, but no tears stream down his face. And then the camera is behind the central characters, who dissolve amid a large crowd of other desperate men and boys, all walking together toward uncertainty.

It's impossible, after watching that scene, not to see the parallels between this film and *Wendy and Lucy*. The loss of Wendy's car in the United States in the year 2008 marks her as immobile, as unemployable as she would have been had she lost a bicycle in Italy in the year 1948. But it is the differences rather than the similarities between the films that are crucial. The central character of *Wendy and Lucy* is a woman. She has no husband, no girlfriend or boyfriend, no children, no family whatsoever. While DeSica's central character has been victimized by another man (the bicycle thief), Wendy is the victim of a natural disaster. She is seeking work in Alaska because a flood has destroyed her home in the Midwest. Her car is not stolen, it merely breaks down. And the loss in this film, of a trusted companion, is a loss of Wendy's own making. The film suggests that Wendy decides to leave Lucy behind because her dog will have a better life in a stranger's backyard than on the road. In the final words of the film, Wendy apologizes to Lucy for her own failures, "I'm sorry Lu," she continues: "I lost the car. You be good. I'll come back. I'm gonna make some money, and I'll come back. Lu, be good" (Reichardt *Wendy and Lucy*). As she says these words, Michelle Williams' (Wendy) face contorts into tears, after her

final, “Lu, be good,” she turns around and walks away from the house toward the railroad tracks, as she walks, we hear her gentle sobs. She doesn’t look back. She walks and walks, with Reichardt’s camera behind her, and when the cargo train starts moving, she jumps on with her two small bags. The final image of Wendy is of a woman sitting on a train, knees bent in, watching the landscape pass by. And then the camera too, turns toward the scenery—forests of tall trees and the sound of the train. This is where the film ends, in an image of the natural world, rather than the mess of the crowd at the end of *Bicycle Thieves*.

Reichardt's films update the style of neorealism to suit our own times, notably different than post-war Italy. Reichardt follows lost women and men who are visibly struggling within the bounds of mainstream masculinity and femininity. In *Old Joy*, Reichardt shows this through her sensitive portrayal of a relationship between men that falls outside of convention. The film itself - set over the course of a one-night camping trip-- offers these characters a reprieve from their everyday lives and identities. These are men whose fraternal love for each other does not cohere with mainstream masculinity. This idea is reflected again in *Night Moves*, in the impossible relationship between Harmon and Josh. Josh kills Dena because he is afraid she will talk, but the film also suggests he killed Dena because he perceived her as a threat to his relationship with Harmon. Josh's plea to Harmon to go away and live in the woods with him is, coming from Josh, a kind of love letter. But it is a love letter than will remain unanswered and unacknowledged. In *Wendy and Lucy*, Reichardt shows us a woman whose relationship to femininity is completely burdensome. Wendy's gender is something she actively tries to negate through androgynous clothing and by her choice to avoid large groups of people. In the world represented by Reichardt, gender itself is increasingly becoming, like other categories of difference (class,

education level, marital status) a difference that is only beneficial for those who are privileged enough to enjoy it.

The heartbreaking thing about Reichardt's films is that the characters often fail to find the kind of companionship that we see at the end of *Bicycle Thieves*. *Bicycle Thieves* is a film about one man who is representative of a whole class of men. The thieves referred to in the title are plural because all the desperate unemployed men of Italy have the potential to become thieves. Each of them will do anything for his wife and children, even if it means going against his fellow man. This is a dark message, but it does leave space for the possibility of some kind of community, even if it is just within the family. *Wendy and Lucy* depicts present day U.S. Culture as far more lonely, far more desolate. What makes this universe so dire has to do with economics, but also, with gender. It has to do with the reformation of the social ties that bind people together. The final shot of *Bicycle Thieves* is devastatingly sad, but it is not entirely hopeless. Though father and son seem to be wandering aimlessly, we know where they are going. They are going to find mama. Though they have little money, they will deal with their problems as a family. *Wendy and Lucy* offers no such solace. The character of Wendy is a foil to this old formation of femininity, she carries with her not a child, but a pet, an animal whom she abandons. Wendy heads toward a totally uncertain future, where her gender is irrelevant. She is a creature constructed by economic realities that are radically transforming formations of both femininity and masculinity.

Reichardt's characters never have the kind of moment we see in *Bicycle Thieves*. Only *Meek's Cutoff* presents us with a community-- but this is a community that is likely to die in the wilderness. The rest of Reichardt's films end with one character facing the world alone, with no friends, lovers, or confidants. It's a dark vision, but one that points toward a problem that speaks

back to the issues I have discussed throughout this dissertation, and will discuss further in the conclusion: the lack of community (imagined or otherwise) that characterizes the contemporary feminist movement.

The characters in Reichardt's films are not entrepreneurs of femininity, nor are they professional feminists. They follow narrative paths that are not about self-fulfillment, but survival. And this is the point. In chapters one and two, I explored forms of professional femininity that have been utilized by white heterosexual women for most of U.S. History. There, I talked about writing (Didion the journalist and fiction writer), blogging (Drummond the pioneer woman), teaching, and research (through home economics and women's studies). In those chapters, I was talking about middle and upper class women who made use of traditional notions of femininity in pursuit of careers. Domestic advisors wrote books counseling women on proper forms of feminine comportment—including everything from household budgeting to proper parenting. Women writers wrote books largely about and around the love plot—describing appropriate and inappropriate styles of femininity with regard to romance. Home economists took a scientific approach to these questions, considering femininity and domesticity as skill sets that could be fostered and improved by social science research. In all cases, how to be a woman involved how to put femininity into the service of daily life. But this chapter considers a different set of questions.

In this chapter, I have been writing about women with no economic safety net, for whom work is a form of survival, not a form of self-fulfillment. And yet, my analysis is made possible by the professional work of Kelly Reichardt, a white middle class filmmaker who teaches filmmaking at Bard College. This is to say that Reichardt's relationship to these issues is more complicated than the other figures I have discussed in this chapter. Ultimately, what I have tried

to show is that Reichardt's films point toward a historical shift in this terrain. They show the crumbling of the old debate about the relationship between domesticity and femininity, because increasingly, domesticity is no longer attached to femininity, and traditional "professionalism" is no longer attached to masculinity. This is to say, the structure within which this old debate came to be has shifted, and we need new ways of talking about these issues that take into account these changes.

## CONCLUSION: ON PROFESSIONAL FEMININITY, POST-FEMINISM, AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Since Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, one of the most prominent feminist victories within American life has been the rapid influx of women in the workplace. The legal gains brought about by the women's liberation movement were legion—but chief among them was the mandate that women should have equal opportunities in educational institutions and in workplaces. While the reproductive rights victories of the 1970s have eroded in recent decades, a woman's right to educational and workplace opportunities has become common sense. In this sense, feminism has come to be equated (in important ways) with the idea of the professional woman. Unfortunately, the legal gains that have brought women into the workplace have not been coupled with support for housework and care-work undertaken by (mostly) women in the home. The Family Medical Leave Act of 1993 allows eligible new mothers twelve weeks of unpaid family and medical leave. Working parents do not have access to any universally accessible child-care subsidies, nor is there a structure in place to provide for elder care.<sup>43</sup>

There is the sense, on television, in film, in print media, and especially online, that issues of work-life balance in the U.S. have been exacerbated in recent years. One of the goals of this dissertation has been to determine whether or not the contemporary obsession with work-life

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<sup>43</sup>Importantly, FMLA only applies to “eligible,” workers—those who have been employed by their company for a full twelve months, and those who work for businesses with more than fifty employees. While many employers supplement FMLA with paid leave, the law itself does not require that employers offer any paid leave to employees eligible for FMLA. As a result, many workers in the U.S. are simply ineligible for these sparse benefits, especially those that work in the service sector, where turnover is notoriously fast.



balance that characterizes U.S. media culture was based on any real historical shifts. I sought to answer this question by considering the cultural figures of the feminist and the housewife as well as the subjects of each of my chapters as models of professional U.S. Femininity. The goal has been to trace out tensions between feminism (understood here as a complex term that sometimes refers to the pursuit of gender equality, and other times, to the dismantling of all inequalities of any kind) and domesticity (understood here as the cultivation of home life either for professional or personal fulfillment) throughout recent history by thinking through the ways in which the subjects of my dissertation have themselves modeled professional femininity, and also, how they have given rise to new models in their capacity as media workers, as writers, bloggers, and filmmakers. The value of my framework of “professional femininity” is that femininity allows me to speak about both domesticity and feminism, and about how these two elements of femininity relate to both “work,” and “life.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, it allows me to speak to the whole media environment in which femininity relates to domesticity, feminism, and also, various media objects.

The first chapter, on Joan Didion, is the clearest example of this, because there, I discuss Didion explicitly as both a person and as a professional. As I outlined in the first chapter, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Didion was photographed and written about extensively by the press in both New York and Los Angeles. Even now, at eighty-years-old, she remains the kind of person one might find discussed in what used to be called “the society pages.” She is famous and also revered in part because she has never seemed to be seeking the attention lavished upon her. Her talent and her style have made her famous, but she herself has never aspired to be ‘known.’ This is at least how she presents herself (and often, also, how she presents her characters).

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<sup>44</sup>This distinction has historically been understood in terms of the 19th century doctrine of separate spheres. It is interesting to consider the ways in which separate spheres have continued to haunt representations of the working woman and the housewife.

Somewhat surprising, considering their historical contexts, Didion is a much more public figure than either Drummond or Reichardt. This is in part because Didion is a celebrity, and also, because Didion has a different relationship to media culture than either Drummond or Reichardt. Drummond and Reichardt are different kinds of professional women, for separate reasons.

In chapter two, I describe Drummond as an “entrepreneurial homemaker,” because of the ways in which she puts her domestic skills into the service of her profession as domestic blogger. Her job is to present a carefully curated version of everyday life. Every photograph of her house, her children, and her food is staged so as to appear both perfect and candid. Drummond herself is quite open about this on her website, offering tutorials to other bloggers about the camera equipment she uses, her lighting techniques, and sometimes even revealing all of the photographs she took in a given day— demonstrating how much work goes into creating the seemingly effortless blog posts on her website. This gets at the ways in which she models professional femininity through her own performance of self and also, through the web content she produces, which at times, literally instructs readers in how they too can become lifestyle bloggers, and at other times, offers domestic advice (in the form of recipes, parenting tips, etc.) meant to help her readers excel at the domestic work they perform in their own homes. As a model of professional femininity, Drummond’s performance is extremely curated. The pioneer woman is the perfectly cultivated professional woman— utilizing her domestic know- how in the service of her small media empire— and all the while performing her duties as wife and mother with panache.

The final chapter, on Reichardt, offers a model of professional femininity in crisis. Reichardt has essentially rejected the expectation (by the media especially) that her status as a professional woman should be the subject of public discussion. When she does a press tour for

one of her films, she often explicitly talks about how much she resents having to do such interviews. As she told *Slant Magazine* in 2008, “If you could make films and then put them out and not have to reveal anything about yourself, that would be, for me, total dream success” (Stewart, “Interview: Kelly Reichardt”). Is this because Reichardt is, or appears to be, gay? In the wake even of Jodi Foster’s mode of performing while not performing this aspect of her identity (as well Kristen Stewart’s) and given what I have shown here, this does seem to be related to the ways in which Reichardt is modeling a different sort of professional femininity, and especially, how she does so through the tone and style of her films. Just as she personally seems to resist the expectations of professional femininity, her films too, push back against viewer’s expectations with regard to genre (e.g. the relationship between *Meek’s Cutoff* and the western, between *Wendy and Lucy* and Italian Neorealism, or between *Night Moves* and horror).

By considering Reichardt as a model of professional femininity, I am gesturing toward a different sort of femininity entirely. Reichardt has spoken in public about where she grew up (Florida) and what her parents did for a living (police officers). She has told reporters that she enjoys shooting films in the middle of nowhere, and that she frequently drives cross-country because her dog (Lucy of *Wendy and Lucy*) doesn’t fly. She shares these sorts of details, but never discusses the contours of her actual private life. She is a model of professional femininity in crisis in so much as she has rejected the traditional model of professional U.S. Femininity. This is to say, she refuses to answer the kind of questions that reporters are accustomed to asking professional women (who are you dating, do you have any children, how do you manage work life balance), and in so doing, presents a new model of professional U.S. Femininity. And she does this not only with regard to herself, but also through the characters she presents on screen.

The dissertation is also framed around “media culture,” to signal the broad way in which I attend to media. In the first chapter, I talk about the essay, the novel, the feminist tract, and the celebrity profile. In the second chapter, I discuss the blog, the domestic advice manual, the academic conference, and the academic journal. And in the third chapter, I write about film criticism, film theory, and of course, film as an object in and of itself. Throughout these chapters, I also utilize interviews, newspaper articles, and various other ephemera as evidence for the claims I make. As such, I have tried to attend to what Raymond Williams might have called ‘the structure of feeling’ of a given historical moment. By speaking about media culture, I am not just talking about the effects such representations of women (as models) may have as they circulate. I am also talking about the genres of media culture (new journalism, blogging, neorealist American moving image fiction and photography) that these women have crafted and contributed to as cultural producers, as well as the entanglements that inevitably emerge between such genres with the former (their images as role models).

Because this project involves so many different forms of media and so many different disciplines, each of the chapters is written in relation to particular debates occurring within the contemporary academic landscape. The first chapter, on Joan Didion, is concerned with history and literature, and specifically, with making the case that Didion herself ought to be read as a theorist of femininity in U.S. Culture, alongside figures like Betty Friedan. The second chapter, on blogging and home economics, intervenes in at least two academic conversations, the first concerns women’s studies and home economics (Elias 2008; Matchar 2013) and the second concerns the status of blogging (Duffy, 2015; Pham, 2012; Morrison; 2015). In the third chapter, on Reichardt and cinema, I am in conversation with contemporary feminist film studies

(Gorfinkel, 2013; Schoonover, 2014), as well as film critic Andre Bazin, and popular press discussions of the U.S. Economy (Rosin 2012).

Each chapter is concerned with its own set of issues, but overall, this dissertation has sought to describe models of professional femininity in U.S. Media culture. Historically, the transition from Didion, to Drummond, to Reichardt is a significant one. Each of these figures is connected to a whole host of scenes relating to the historical, political, and cultural changes that have unfolded since 1963. Didion's early work reflects a world in which the professional woman was an anomaly, a figure of curiosity and public interest. Through her writing (and her capacity as a role model) she produced new models conceptualizing what kinds of capacities successful working women possessed—in her words: “What is it like to be the little princess, the woman who has fulfilled the whispered promise of her own books and of all the advertisements, the girl to whom things happen? It is hard work” (“Bosses Make” 37).

From this depiction of professional femininity as true grit, I move to Drummond, whose vision of professional femininity responds to the emergence of Internet culture, and the new forms through which people relate and connect with each other online. The Pioneer Woman—whose title itself re-configures the sort of femininity Didion tracked in the 1960s—was born in 2006, just as blogging was being invented as a new media form. The emergence of blogging brought about new digital economies and new forms of professional femininity, but it also brought about different channels through which people could discuss the limits of such economies and their dissatisfaction with work culture in relation to the Internet. Drummond's blog and also her position speak to all of these issues (both directly and indirectly); after all, she lives on an extremely isolated ranch in a sparsely populated region of Montana. Drummond's capacity to upload scenes from her everyday life in real time is a remarkable feat that has only

been made possible by wireless Internet connectivity. Finally, I consider Reichardt, who charts the stories of those who remain outside of the rapid technological changes represented by something like blogging. Reichardt shows the ways in which the world of a Joan Didion (of print media and before the immediacy of digital telecommunication) continues to linger even as rapid transformations are seemingly happening everywhere.

And as a whole, this dissertation is constructed in relation to at least three distinct (if at times overlapping) strands of discussion in contemporary feminist studies, first, discussions of neoliberal and/or post feminism (McRobbie 2015; Negra 2014; Rottenberg 2013; Banet-Wieser 2012), second, work on Marxist feminism and social reproduction (Federici 2012; Weeks 2011), and third, work on ‘mompreneurs’ (Ekinsmyth 2011; Luckman 2015a). In what follows, I describe the general arc of this dissertation in relation to these three areas of contemporary academic research, positioning my own work in relation to these two conversations.

### *Professional Femininity, Post-Feminism, and Neoliberal Feminism*

One of the reasons I felt compelled to develop this framework of “professional femininity” is that I wanted to avoid the using the term “postfeminism.” Much (if not all) recent work in feminist media studies relies on the concept of ‘postfeminism,’ or ‘postfemininities.’ For two illustrative examples, see Diane Negra & Yvonne Tasker’s 2014 anthology *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity* and Rosalind Gill & Christina Scharff’s 2011 anthology *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*.

I find the theoretical framework of postfeminism to be problematic for at least two reasons. First, because of the ways in which this work itself is frequently inattentive to historical genealogies. By which I mean, this kind of work tends to call upon historical formations of femininity exclusively for the purposes of offering points of contrast to contemporary

formations. In contrast, I have tried here to think through converges among and between media and femininity as they have occurred through history. Second, because it often relies on the assumption that audiences of women are in danger of being “duped” by “anti-feminist representations.” This is to say that this kind of academic work tends to operate under two false assumptions, on the one hand, that cultural works are either feminist or anti-feminist (and that academics are uniquely qualified to determine which label applies), and, on the other hand, that if a representation is deemed to be ‘anti-feminist,’ it has the capacity to transmit its ideological content into its readers/viewers. Such assumptions inevitably pose women who consume media as dupes or victims. Certainly, some women are dupes/victims, but it seems to me that by assuming something like *Lean In* is damaging women, academics themselves are being duped because they are simplifying what is going on when a book becomes a bestseller (which, after all, means only that many copies have been purchased, not that people have read it, liked it, or agreed with it).

For example, in the introduction to *Gendering the Recession*, Negra and Tasker note that “the new domestic economies of recessionary media showcase a permutation of postfeminism in which women adeptly monetize domestic skills and resources” (“Introduction: Gender and Recessionary Culture” 8). One of the arguments I made in the second chapter of this dissertation is that there is a long tradition of women “monetizing domestic skills” within U.S. Culture—I call this tradition “the professionalization of domesticity” and argue that it can be traced as far back as 1828, the year that Lydia Maria Child published her advice manual, *The American Frugal Housewife*. I also see this tradition as related to the invention of a discipline of home economics—which would monetize the study of the American home (in fact, I see it as deeply related to the invention of women’s studies as a field, though I have set that aside for the time

being as it is mostly beyond the scope of this dissertation). While I agree with Negra and Tasker that the monetization of domesticity in recession-era culture is noteworthy, I think the notion of “new domestic economies” names a historical break without sufficiently considering whether there may be historical continuities. In their rush to name the perverse ways in which feminism has been co-opted by global capitalism, academics like Negra and Tasker frequently opt against considering a long historical view— when they mention previous historical moments it is always in passing and as a point of comparison. There is no rigorous engagement with the past in its own historical context.

Indeed, this kind of work frequently seems to operate by identifying a cultural text, describing the ways in which it is part of postfeminist landscape, and determining that the text in question is dangerous because it helps to perpetuate the production of “postfeminist” subjectivities. The problem with this kind of argument is that one usually knows what she is going to find before she begins her analysis. Looking at recessionary media culture in their introduction to their anthology *Gendering the Recession*, Negra and Tasker write “though there are notable exceptions (some of which we mention here), the popular culture of the ongoing recession has most often cast women as passive and personal responders to the economic downturn” (4-5). In what follows, the authors mention a plethora of media examples to prove their thesis. The assumption they make is that any and all media objects that circulate within popular culture are worthy of academic discussion (from the television show “Undercover Boss,” to Steve Harvey’s book *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man*, to Aaron Sorkin’s *The Social Network*). The sheer volume of media in the world at this particular historical moment (because of a variety of factors, especially the explosion of media content via traditional network/cable television, screening platforms, and share sites like youtube and vimeo) necessitates that the



media critic choose her objects carefully. Negra and Tasker, on the contrary, seem to assume all media are equally worthy of analysis, and this assumption weakens their arguments. In this dissertation, though I have considered many different sorts of media, I have tried to engage in different kinds of attentivity to different kinds of context. The importance, for example, of Ree Drummond's blog posts is not necessarily the content of the posts, but the manner in which they are read—ritualistically, by a regular population of users, and, the fact that she is participating in the invention of a new form of new media—and “writing” the contradictions of her situation, or of any woman like her, into that new form, and thus into the culture at large—or at least the processes of that culture, as people use such forms ritualistically by both making them and using them.

In a related piece from 2014, titled “Claiming Feminism: commentary, autobiography and advice literature for women in the recession,” Negra considers a set of popular press books written by women with “high cultural profiles and vast marketing juggernauts behind them,” many of which I have also discussed in this dissertation (278). The books under consideration in Negra's piece include Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (2013), reality TV star Bethenny Frankel's *A Place of Yes: 10 Rules for Getting Everything You Want Out of Life* (2011), Tina Fey's memoir *Bossypants* (2010), Caitlin Moran's *How to be a Woman* (2011), and Hanna Rosin's *The End of Men and the Rise of Women* (2012). In spite of the differences between these individual texts, Negra writes that this literature

largely manifests a studiously structurally unconscious relation to patriarchal constraints or adheres to the notion that these can be transcended through self-belief and perseverance, and affective compliance with the codes of postfeminism. Relatedly, it exhibits intense approbation for female entrepreneurialism in a neoliberal cultural environment and a postfeminist celebration of the self that for some constitutes solipsism (278).

Negra determines that this set of popular press best-sellers are all part of the same ideological matrix, one which either represses the existence of patriarchal constraints (is unconscious of them) or assumes that these constraints can be transcended through hard work and a proper performance of postfeminism. In either case, these books (and their authors) are understood as actively perpetuating gender inequalities, either consciously or unconsciously. This matters, crucially, for Negra, because this literature does all this in the name of feminism. As she puts it, “these books seek to associate powerful celebrity women with feminism” (278). For Negra, this is a corruption of feminism itself, because this literature “presupposes an aspirational female subject who is exhorted to know herself and her desires but is under no obligation to have any particular social awareness” (278). It is a version of feminism that is unaware of class privilege, and unconcerned with social hierarchies.

In contrast to Negra and Tasker’s methodology, my interest in a book like *Lean In* is in the ways in which it offers readers a model of professional feminism. The definition of feminist espoused by Sandberg in *Lean In* is, I would argue, a legitimate form of feminism, with a long historical trajectory. To say Sandberg is “claiming feminism,” as Negra does, seems to me to miss the point. Sandberg, as a groundbreaking professional woman, understands herself as a feminist. Whereas the postfeminist perspective seeks to understand Sandberg’s rise as indicative of a “focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment” characteristic of what Rosalind Gill has deemed “postfeminist sensibilities,” I am interested in considering the ways in which Sandberg conforms to certain historical forms of individualistic feminism (however distasteful I may personally find them) (Gill, “Postfeminist” 149).

In her related 2013 essay, “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism,” Catherine Rottenberg suggested *Lean In* was “symptomatic of a cultural phenomenon in which neoliberal feminism is

fast displacing liberal feminism” (2). For Rottenberg, while classic liberal feminism was articulated in terms of its critiques of liberalism’s hypocrisies (especially with respect to proclamations of universal equality), neoliberal feminism, “offers no critique— immanent or otherwise— of neoliberalism” (2). For Rottenberg, Sandberg’s *Lean In* is different from earlier feminist tracts (like Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, 1963 and Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*, 1990) because of a “shift in emphasis: from an attempt to alter social pressures towards interiorized affective spaces that require constant self-monitoring” (7). Rottenberg claims that *Lean In* is indicative of a decisive historical shift from liberalism to neoliberalism, and as such, has helped to instantiate neoliberal feminism.

The world has certainly changed since 1963, but in this dissertation I have opted not to frame my arguments in relation to neoliberalism because to do so would have put the emphasis on change rather than continuity. Though Rottenberg makes a compelling argument about *Lean In*, I wonder whether it might be more useful to think of *Lean In* as an updated version of *The Feminine Mystique*. *Lean In* posits that there is a new problem haunting middle class white women whose mothers suffered from ‘the feminine mystique,’ while Friedan’s solution was that women leave the domestic sphere and find professional work, Sandberg suggests that today’s women should ‘lean in’ even further to their professional work. If one understands *The Feminine Mystique* as modeling the process of moving from professional domesticity to professional feminism, *Lean In* seems like a sequel, modeling, with much more detail, forms of professional feminism. My point is that both Friedan and Sandberg are writing for a hyper-individuated subject, and there seems to me to be more value in understanding the continuities between these two women’s forms of feminism than the distinctions.

Angela McRobbie's 2015 essay, "Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times," discussed in the introduction, offers a more nuanced view of neoliberalism in relation to femininity. Like Negra, Tasker, Gill, and Rottenberg, McRobbie is invested in describing the contours of contemporary forms of white femininity. Of interest to McRobbie is the extremely punitive manner in which discourses of perfection play out on the lives of young women. Considering instances of virtual bullying among schoolgirls that have ended in suicide, McRobbie posits, "a key issue for feminism would be to attempt to understand the consequences for girls and young women of this heightened visibility which they themselves so actively promulgate" (6). The visibility McRobbie is referring to occurs within a variety of media formations and is both consumed and produced by young women, who ingest images of celebrity culture and participate by sharing images of themselves in which they simulate the same poses and postures as their favorite celebrities. This is a kind of visibility made possible by virtual media culture (Facebook, instagram, snapchat, pinterest, etc.) which depends on users who will upload a steady stream of images of themselves for circulation on the web.

Because of the hyper-visibility promulgated online, young women are increasingly subject to discourses of 'the perfect.' McRobbie's piece theorizes that 'the perfect'

is not so much a totally new dimension of female punishment (albeit seemingly self-chosen in that it is relatively easy to opt out of the sociality of Facebook), but more a matter of older, reprehensible features of traditional female culture being reactivated and having new life breathed into them. The compulsion to compete for perfection and the requirement to self-regulate are forms of violence, and also an anti-feminism masked by meritocratic ideals which reflect the new practices of gendered governmentality or the feminine 'code of conduct.' (17)

McRobbie's thoughts on 'the perfect,' were first published this past summer, and will eventually be published in a book titled *Feminism and The Perfect: The Pathologies of Contemporary Femininity*.

McRobbie's notion of "The Perfect," is related to what I have called professional femininity (especially in relation to the domestic blogosphere). Perfection becomes internalized, according to McRobbie, in relation to all aspects of the self, it produces "a highly standardized self-assessment, a calculation of one's assets, a fear of possible losses," both in relation to one's personal and professional life (10). In my analysis of Didion's writing in the first chapter of this dissertation, I talked about how Didion herself functions for her readers in relation to something like perfection, in spite of her own deep relationship to failure. In the second chapter, my analysis of the emergence of the lifestyle blog in relation to professionalized domesticity aimed to show tensions around "having it all" as they are manifested within the space of home, in particular, how images of perfectly organized domesticity circulate on the web. In the third chapter, I look at forms of femininity that have abandoned perfection in search of survival. In my analysis, I think about contemporary femininity in terms of what McRobbie refers to as "traditional features of female culture;" that is to say, I do not mark a clear break in neoliberalism. But my discussion is motivated by similar concerns. In particular, I have tried to gesture toward the fact that 'having it all,' is an impossible goal because it relies on the achievement of what McRobbie would call 'perfection.'

There are a few key distinctions between my work and McRobbie's. First, I am interested in objects marketed toward (and produced by) women rather than girls, second, I specifically analyze historical events and texts alongside my contemporary objects, and third, I consider (especially in Chapter three) forms of femininity that are not middle class. Overall, while I find the research being done by the above academics to be interesting and generative, in my own work, I have tried to avoid using the concepts of 'postfeminism and neoliberalism' because such

words are so commonly used in the literature that they seem to have lost their capacity to be useful and precise.

### *Marxist Feminism and Social Reproduction*

The academic work that has been most fruitful as I thought through the issues regarding professional femininity has been work on social reproduction. As discussed in the introduction, this dissertation has been most influenced by feminist work on ‘wages for housework’ and caring labor (Federici 2011; Weeks 2011; Hochschild 2001) and the growing archive of academic work that links social reproduction to issues relating to both feminism and domesticity (Jarrett 2014; Mountz et al 2015). This is an area of research that is, even as I write, expanding rapidly. Especially, there seems to be a resurgence of interest in the Movement for Wages for Housework, marked by new collections of essays by three of the movements founders: Silvia Federici’s *Revolution at Point Zero* (2011), Selma James’ *Sex, Race & Class* (2012) and the forthcoming title, *Family, Welfare, and the State*, by Mariarosa Dalla Costa.

My framework of “professional femininity” was inspired by Silvia Federici’s *Revolution at Point Zero*. There, Federici writes passionately that “work is not liberation.” As I outlined in the introduction, Federici’s analysis in 1984 was that the feminist movement had been weakened by its attention to professionalization. In her essay “Putting Feminism Back on its Feet,” she writes that “Feminism has become equated with gaining equal opportunity in the labor market, from the factory to the corporate room, gaining equal status with men, and transforming our lives and personalities to fit our new productive tasks” (56). Over thirty years ago, Federici was critiquing feminism for having become synonymous with professionalism. She goes on, writing

that “leaving the home” and “going to work” is a precondition for our liberation is something few feminists, already in the early ‘70s, ever questioned. For the liberals the job was coated in the glamour of the career, for the socialists it meant that women would “join the class struggle” and benefit from the experience of performing “socially useful,

productive labor.” In both cases, what for women was an economic necessity was elevated into a strategy whereby work itself seemed to become a path to liberation. (56)

This essay is remarkable because it shows that for Federici, a radical feminist, mainstream feminism was— even in the 1970s— problematically attached to professionalism, both in terms of (what I call) professional feminism and professional domesticity. Federici’s critique is an early manifestation of what I am trying to gesture toward within this dissertation. She is clear in her pronouncement that ‘work is not liberation,’ and within the terms of her argument, it is difficult to argue with this notion.

What Federici does not go into is the ways in which this attachment to work is deeply lodged in certain forms of feminist identifications. For Federici, the solution lies in a revolutionary movement to wage housework— to acknowledge that the work of home is productive and thus should be compensated. I find this argument extremely compelling, but not necessarily for the reasons that Federici might wish. This dissertation is not a call for revolution, but it does seek to describe the ways in which professionalization has deflated some of the radical potential of feminist thinking. Especially, I have tried to show the ways in which women’s studies itself— as an institution of feminism— has lost some of its edge. This dissertation has attended to these issues with regard to domesticity, but has only gestured towards the ways in which feminism itself is increasingly understood as a professional position.

A recent essay, “For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University,” forthcoming in *ACME, International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, by Members of the Great Lakes Feminist Geography Collective, gets at precisely these issues. There, the authors argue that their call for slowing down academic work “represents both a commitment to good scholarship *and* a feminist politics of resistance to the accelerated timelines of the neoliberal university” (3). They “inject a feminist ethics of care into

the notion of slow scholarship, and do so as a means to promote collective action to resist neoliberal and elitist pressures within the academy” (4). This call for slow scholarship as feminist politics is important because it acknowledges that all academic disciplines (including women’s studies) have come under the influence of what these academics call acceleration and what others (Sharma 2014) call speed up culture. Thus, the mere description of the ways in which the neoliberal university is particularly exploitative of “care” work is an important step. While feminist critics readily identify what they see as neoliberal politics outside of the university, it is rare for feminist academics to turn the gaze (in public) upon their own disciplinary formations. My analysis of home economics as a disciplinary formation has been my attempt to think through the status of women-led academic institutions.

Social reproduction, then, in this dissertation and in the work of its interlocutors, refers to questions about the work of reproducing individuals and populations. I have discussed domesticity in this regard because I am interested in the ways in which the world of home must be made and remade every day. My point of departure from Federici’s framework is the sense I have that the work of home-making might actually be more fulfilling than other forms of professional femininity. If I have this sense, I assume this is indicative of a number of things—and is some kind of historical evidence. As I outlined in the second chapter especially, the work of maintaining a household, it seems to me, is increasingly viewed as precious time away from the work of one’s actual career. Work is not liberation, either at home or in the professional sphere, but I’m interested in thinking about how the work of social reproduction is different than the work of economic production, and may in fact offer an increasingly rare kind of freedom (from one’s email account or her mobile phone).



Federici might say I was romanticizing housework, but cooking, cleaning, and caring for one's home appears to me to be work that is done for oneself and his/her family. And in part this is precisely because, as the boundaries between home and work have eroded in response to our ever-present digital connectivity (via email, text, Skype, etc.), the domestic space becomes a bastion against 24/7 work. There is no doubt that domestic work is, as Federici would argue, productive. But my point is that it is important that what domestic work produces is not monetary value, but value that falls outside of traditional economies.<sup>45</sup>

### *Mompreneurs & Feminism*

There is a growing body of literature that seeks a different set of terms to understand domestic work. In contrast to the Marxist feminist tradition, some academics (Ekinsmyth 2011, 2014; Adkins & Dever 2014; Luckman) are increasingly utilizing a new term, “mompreneur” to describe what I have called the professionalization of domesticity. In 2011, geographer Carol Ekinsmyth defined ‘mompreneurship’ in 2011 as “a form of entrepreneurship driven largely by the desire to achieve ‘work-life harmony’ through an identity orientation that blurs the boundary between the roles of ‘mother’ and ‘businesswoman’” (“Challenging the Boundaries of Entrepreneurship” 104). Academic work on ‘mumpreneurs’ has originated largely in the UK context, but is rapidly spreading to different national contexts. As Ekinsmyth rehearses in her 2011 essay, the first British conference on Mumpreneurs was held in Birmingham in 2009, and digital networks for mumpreneurs have multiplied online in recent years. In July of 2015, the Canadian press announced that the Canadian government would be funding a new project led by “Mompreneurs Momentum Enterprise of Canada,” an organization “here to support, educate, and

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<sup>45</sup>Some might talk about this value that exceeds capitalist economies as ‘love,’ but I am weary of mobilizing that word in this way.

empower moms in business across the country” (homepage). In light of these new developments, it seems likely that research on mompreneurs will only increase in the next few years because of the integration that has already occurred of this kind of economics into women’s studies.

Related studies of craft-based online work are also proliferating in the academy. Duffy (2015) has recently discussed the work of fashion blogging in terms of “aspirational labor,” a term that seeks to point out the ways in which the work of blogging is characterized by aspirations of success. Bloggers who wish to be successful must invest time and money into their work before they see any profits. Along a similar vein, Susan Luckman (2015) has written about the hidden labor involved in online craft marketplaces like Etsy. Luckman writes,

the labour performed in these seller blogs on Etsy especially— but also elsewhere where female sellers predominate— is the labour required precisely to collapse the work-life spacial and ontological divide; namely, the hidden labour of presenting perfect families and beautiful spaces while keeping a workplace as well as a home (“Women’s Micro-Entrepreneurial Homeworking” 148).

The pressures that Luckman and Duffy highlight are related to what McRobbie calls “the perfect,” the work of cultivating a home-life (in terms of fashion, interior decor, food, or family) that is, for lack of a better word, photogenic.

Lynn Spigel’s work uniquely (and explicitly) connects this kind of attention to the relationships between and among media objects, to both media history and media content. What Spigel is interested in is the way that everyday life becomes reconfigured around and through media. This work is especially interesting to me because of the ways this approach diverges from much of the prominent work in feminist media studies. Whereas others (like McRobbie and Negra) inevitably critique the ways that media content reproduce and perpetuate anti-feminist ideology, Spigel approaches media from an entirely different direction, looking broadly at the ways in which media reorganize social relations.

Spigel's new work, which looks at snapshots taken by ordinary people with their television sets in the 1950s and 1960s, is indicative of this approach. As she puts it, her goal is to look at the camera and the television set as "companion technologies" for assembling family life in post-war culture. Though this sort of analysis, she attends to the relationships between media objects, humans, and the space of everyday life. As she puts it, she attends to the "circuit of objects and subjects in the house that's not necessarily about the act of watching TV but includes it, and is transformed by it in someway" (Spigel "TV Snapshots"). Media in this context, "becomes a backdrop for the presentation of family, self, and gender" ("TV Snapshots").

This approach to media culture encapsulates what I have tried to do throughout this dissertation. I have been trying to attend to media objects and historical evidence in the way that Spigel does, by thinking of my various models of professional femininity (including what these people model and how they model it) as one kind of evidence (alongside all of the other kinds of evidence I attend to). Following Spigel, this kind of co-enfolding of the medium and everyday life is what I am seeing in what Didion represents vis-à-vis literature and journalism, in what Drummond represents with regard to blogs, the internet, and historical forms of domesticity like home economics, and in Reichardt and all that she represents as a figure with regard to the visual and cinematographic—since neorealist as well as American independent aesthetics.

Of all the things I have touched on in this dissertation, the matrix of the domestic sphere, digital media culture, and femininity seems increasingly prevalent in academic discussions. New essays on these issues are published everyday, and book length studies connecting blogging and work life balance are beginning to arrive on the shelves (see Kara Mary Van Cleaf's 2014 dissertation, "Blogging Through Motherhood: Free Labor, Femininity, and the Digital (Re)Production of Maternity," Maureen Ryan's 2014 dissertation "A Better Everyday: Lifestyle

Media in American Culture,” Susan Luckman’s 2015 *Craft and the Creative Economy*, Minh-Ha Pham’s 2015 *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet: Race, Gender, and the Work of Personal Style Blogging*, and Michele White’s 2015 *Producing Women: The Internet, Traditional Femininity, Queerness, and Creativity*). While there is a plethora of new work being done in multiple disciplines (including Communication, Cultural Studies, Literature, History, Sociology, Geography, and Art) in relation to the issues discussed in my dissertation—my work here is distinct in that my definition of media cultures includes institutions (home economics, women’s studies) alongside cultural objects (lifestyle blogs, novels, films, feminist film magazines, etc.). In attempting to push more toward something like the sorts of enfoldings of these media, media culture, and women’s everyday lives—as Spigel understands and can get at them (with television) in her most recent work, rather than just the way Negra, Tasker, and McRobbie approach the same field of issues—this dissertation is doing something different.

### *Conclusions*

I have been troubled by contemporary re-imaginings of the relationship between the feminist and the housewife, in the first instance, where domesticity is understood as an escape from work—on the domestic blogosphere, and in the second, where femininity is evacuated of all characteristics besides vulnerability—in Reichardt’s cinema. Such representations are symptomatic of a cultural moment in which life unencumbered by the economics of work is in danger of becoming unimaginable. Certainly, life has always been burdened by work—but this problem is now increasingly one faced by both men and women. The consequences of these rapid historical changes (which often are made visible in and through media culture) are only now beginning to show themselves.

With the influx of white middle class women into the workplace throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the U.S. seems to have lost (as workers) many people who in former decades might have engaged in social reproduction on behalf of a larger community.<sup>46</sup> Concerns about these changes are manifested on the right in political discourse all the time, and interestingly in the work of someone like Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone* 2000; *Our Kids* 2015). This dissertation has sought to describe these changes, and to take seriously their consequences, while also taking into account the history of feminism as such. This is imperative because only a feminist approach has the capacity to take into account the ways in which technological changes that have enabled people to work at any time (and in any place) converge with both the influx of middle class women in the workplace and precarious situations in which so many poor women do (and do not) engage in waged work.

There are ways of organizing society so that institutional structures are built in to support social reproduction—not merely in terms of raising children, but also, in terms of caring for those that are struggling with illness or aging. The Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1972 is an interesting case study, because it so clearly brought together the work of feminism and the work of home economics. The coalition of groups arguing on behalf of the CCDA was extremely diverse, including radical feminists as well as child psychologists (many of whom were likely members of the American Home Economics Association). This legislation clearly linked together the concerns of professional feminism and professional domesticity. Even though it ultimately failed, this legislation provides a useful model for the kind of policy that could transform structures that make work life balance a constant obsession for middle class people, and increasingly, a sheer impossibility for working class people. This dissertation, in its analysis

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<sup>46</sup>Home economics as a disciplinary formation tried to do this—while this was (perhaps) rightly seen as retrograde by radical feminists, it may have also been necessary.

of professional femininity, has described recent U.S. History in terms of these debates. While work-life balance has been an issue since at least 1963 (and probably well before), the terms of the debate, the struggle to “have it all,” have become exhausted in recent years.

This dissertation moves to Reichardt because her work reflects the ways in which contemporary history is marked by economic precarity and the feminization of poverty. In contrast to styles of generic filmmaking that offer audiences the experience of taking pleasure in emotional responses like horror, sadness, and arousal (as explored by Linda Williams), Reichardt is interested in a banal kind of cinematic realism. Her films offer not escape, but, like the tradition of Italian neorealism, a chance for viewers to confront ordinary conditions of vulnerability. Reichardt expresses the experience of a different sort of white heterosexual femininity— that of the woman who is not middle class. The stakes of the work-life balance debate are high for all women, but for those without access to money or resources, they are life-threatening—and they do not even appear as the stakes of work life balance per se.

Reichardt’s is a deeply depressing view of U.S. Culture and politics. But because this view is communicated through film, it also has the capacity to show something about history that is right now mostly ineffable about contemporary conditions of economic impossibility. I do not wish to romanticize the power of art to speak back to the world, but at the same time, it would feel disingenuous to make the opposite claim. I do not know what power Reichardt’s films may or may not have in or on the world, but they have helped me to understand and articulate the shape of the history I have tried to describe. And they have done so by continuing to remind me of the importance of the work of making a home in the understanding of everyday life— differently entangled as that is with women.

This dissertation has focused on three women working in the U.S.; while my subjects were chosen deliberately, there were many things I would have liked to discuss in greater detail, and still other subjects and objects I would have included had I had more time and space. Both Martha Rosler and Wendy Wasserstein, for example, could have been the subjects of separate chapters, as each is certainly modeling professional U.S. Femininity in both her work and in her performance of public self. Additionally, there are a number of feminist filmmakers working today whose works would have been fascinating to analyze within this dissertation— especially the Canadian actress/director Sarah Polley and the American actress/director/artist/writer Miranda July. I could have written a chapter on comedian Joan Rivers and another on writer/director Nora Ephron.

Recent history is littered with models of professional U.S. Femininity. And in recent years, the terrain has become even more interesting as baby boomers have begun publishing their own personal accounts of history since 1963 in their memoirs— I’m thinking particularly of Patti Smith’s celebrated 2010 memoir *Just Kids* and Carole King’s 2012 memoir *A Natural Woman*. Such works are helping to construct the forms in which women’s liberation is understood historically. In a similar vein the Italian novelist Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan novels (the English translations of the four novels were published respectively in 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015) historicize the relationships between women, feminism and domesticity from the mid 1950s to the present in the Italian context. I bring up the Ferrante novels to gesture toward the fact that the shift I have discussed in this dissertation in the United States has transnational echoes around the Western world. Surely the success of the Ferrante novels in the U.S. has something to do with the way these books configure the tension between feminism and domesticity in daily life, both

at the level of a friendship between two women, and also, between and among various social, political, and cultural movements.

This dissertation is, then, itself part of a group of ideas that are currently circulating with regard to feminism, the home, work-life balance, and the greater culture. I hope that this work can contribute to the conversation within feminist media studies that seeks to describe the features and distinctions of this current cultural moment (what some call neoliberal feminism, others call postfeminism, and still others call backlash culture), and also, to the conversation within feminist studies more broadly, concerning, as Kathi Weeks has written, “the problems with work” (2014). I especially hope that other researchers find the connections I draw between home economics and work on social reproduction to be fruitful for thinking about solutions to the many problems facing women in the U.S. Both within and outside of academia, there seems to be a resurgence of interest in social reproduction and in the importance of institutional policies that support and promote work-life balance. The U.S. may in fact be ready for the kind of institutional changes that home economists wished for back in 1909, as they founded their professional organization, but if such changes are to occur, they will require a coalition of groups, including women and men of all identities and political affiliations.



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