

Feminist Imaginaries, Accumulation by Dispossession and the "New Sexual Contract"

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Introduction

Proclamations of feminism's demise and of the advent of an era after or "post" feminism are as old as feminism itself. However, since the mid-1990s declarations of the end of feminism have abounded in advanced liberal democracies. From *Time* magazine's 1998 cover, which asked "Is Feminism Dead?," to Tony Blair's 2003 claim that he "cannot abide the f word" (McRobbie 2004) to the 2006 decree by Beverly Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage) that Canadian women are equal now and that any reference to gender equality be excised from the Status of Women Canada's mandate, the language of feminism is increasingly being removed from the lexicon of public policy and popular discourse throughout the Anglo-American world (Brodie 2008). As Mary Hawkesworth (2004, 2006) notes, despite the deterioration in women's conditions across the world since the 1970s and the persistence of gender inequality within and between nations, women's equality and freedom are now said to be achieved in the West. Feminism is therefore portrayed as passé.

Most feminist research in the 1980s and 1990s read such declarations of feminism's demise as a "backlash" against the feminist gains achieved by the second wave of the women's movement, and linked them to the emerging politics of the new right within advanced capitalist states (Gordon and Hunter 1987; Faludi 1991; Heywood and Drake 1997). Susan Faludi's (1991) *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* argued that attacks on feminism were rooted in neo-conservative movements that sought to revitalize the hetero-patriarchal family and traditional norms of masculinity and femininity oriented around the figures of the male breadwinner and the economically-dependent wife and mother. More recently, however, feminist media critics, particularly those working within the British cultural studies tradition, have suggested that the "backlash" metaphor no longer sufficiently accounts for the often ambivalent and contradictory forms of resistance and containment with which feminism is met within popular, consumer culture (Tasker and Negra 2007). Rather than "backlash," which implies "achievements won then subsequently lost" (Tasker and Negra 2007, 1), they instead use the term "postfeminism" to refer to a complex cultural politics in which (limited) feminist successes are celebrated and taken for granted so as to repudiate the continued need for feminist politics.¹

Angela McRobbie (2009) describes the "cultural space of post-feminism" as operating through a "double entanglement" with feminism: it "actively draw[s] on and invoke[s] feminism as that which can be taken into account in order to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, a spent force" (6, 4-5). While some elements of backlash politics are preserved within and operate alongside it, postfeminism functions less as a frontal assault on feminism than as a complex diffusion of feminist categories across the cultural and political terrain (Ringrose 2007). This "taking into account" of feminism makes postfeminism much more insidious and difficult to contest than backlash politics (Gill 2009).

In this paper, I read feminist cultural studies analyses of postfeminism alongside feminist political economy literature on the changing nature of global capitalism to theorize postfeminism as a crucial dimension of "accumulation by dispossession." Feminist critics of capitalism, such as Nancy Hartsock (2006), argue that the current moment of neoliberal militarized globalization is marked by an acute phase of accumulation by dispossession – a set of processes through which land, labour,

¹ When I use the term "postfeminist" in this paper, I am not referring to that field of feminist theory influenced by poststructuralist-inspired reconsiderations of the subject, identity, and politics, but to a socio-political conjuncture that takes itself to be after or beyond feminism. For a discussion of the various meanings of postfeminism across media, popular culture and feminist studies, see Genz and Brabon 2009.

resources and social relations that were previously outside the market are brought into the structure of capitalism – and that these processes are deeply gendered. Extending these critiques, I suggest that contemporary processes of enclosure also involve the postfeminist appropriation, political neutralization, and disavowal of feminist imaginaries that were the products of political struggles against oppressive relations. My reading of postfeminism as a mode of enclosing feminist imaginaries suggests that accumulation by dispossession involves not only the economic and political processes of “divorcing the producer from the means of production” (Marx 2007, 786). It also operates within and across a number of other sites – including the imagination and subjectivity.

I suggest that postfeminism is at the heart of the contemporary capitalist logic of enclosure because it constitutes a central way in which women in Anglo-American states have been incorporated into neoliberal capitalism. Postfeminism functions by co-opting selective aspects of the liberal feminist imaginary and harnessing them to the neoliberal project of privatization, decentralization, and individualization. Following Angela McRobbie, I suggest that this appropriation has produced a “new sexual contract” that permits young women minimal forms of visibility on the condition that they remake themselves according to the new modes of feminine subjectivity consonant with neoliberalism and distance themselves from a critical feminist politics. This postfeminist “new sexual contract” works across the domains of popular culture, the state, education, employment, sexuality and reproduction to construct the West as a site of gender equality and to constitute Western girls and women as subjects of neoliberal success. Furthermore, I argue that this postfeminist enclosure of feminist imaginaries has radically reconfigured the terrain of gender politics in advanced liberal democracies, producing a crisis of political citizenship for Western feminism in general and for liberal feminism in particular, and constraining the possibilities for feminist politics to those premised on the superiority of the West’s gender order.

Gender, Accumulation by Dispossession and the Imagination

In the *New Imperialism*, David Harvey urges a return to Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation to account for how the contemporary moment of capitalist globalization operates through a series of coercive and often violent processes whereby lands, resources, populations, and social relations are opened up for capital investment. Marx used the term “primitive accumulation” to describe the methods through which capital became concentrated in fewer hands and a population of propertyless wage labourers was created during the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe. Primitive accumulation, which served as the historic foundation for the emergence of capitalism, was “anything but idyllic,” according to Marx (2007, 785). It instead involved the expropriation of agricultural labourers from the land, the enclosure of the commons and its transformation into private property, forced labour (often through legal sanctions on vagrancy and the creation of work-houses for the poor), robbery, the slave trade, and colonial conquest. While Marx saw primitive accumulation as the “pre-history” of capitalism, a stage in the development of capitalism that has long been superseded, Harvey (2003) suggests it is instead an ongoing and recurring feature of capitalist accumulation. Harvey coins the concept of “accumulation by dispossession” to highlight the new forms of dispossession that characterize the latest phase of capitalism. These forms include the credit system, speculation, and financialization; the enclosure of the global commons through intellectual property rights; environmental degradation; the privatization of previously common resources, such as water; and the roll-back of welfare state provisions.

Taking up this account of accumulation by dispossession, Nancy Hartsock (2006) suggests that the new mechanisms of dispossession outlined by Harvey rest on a decidedly gendered terrain: not only do they have different consequences for men and women, but they also draw upon gendered ideologies for their reproduction. Echoing a generation of feminist political economy research demonstrating that capitalist globalization has drawn women into waged labour, producing them as the optimal and preferred cheap and flexible labour force, Hartsock argues this feminization of labour is a constitutive feature of capitalist accumulation today. Women increasingly have become the models for the “feminized, virtual workers demanded by contemporary globalized capitalism” (178) and men are compelled to work under conditions of part-time, low paid employment that were previously enforced only for women. Alongside this feminization of work, Hartsock identifies four other processes of dispossession that she argues are marked by a gendered logic. The first is the “breaking of the previous social contract,” the dismantling of the welfare state and its collectivist ethos, and the realignment of the boundary between the public and private through the privatization of what were once considered public services and their transfer to the private realms of family and/or the market. The second process involves the growth of religious fundamentalisms and neoliberalism, a philosophy of governance that seeks to restore the primacy of market forces over and within the state. Third, Hartsock identifies the growth of inequalities within and between nations as a gendered aspect of accumulation since it results in the increased exploitation and disempowerment of women. The fourth process of dispossession involves the transformation of social reproduction precipitated by the downloading of the costs of caring and emotional labour onto the unpaid work of women in the home as a consequence of cuts to social spending.

Hartsock demonstrates that the contemporary moment of primitive accumulation is “at its very core a gendered set of processes” (183). However, I suggest that, in order to fully understand its gendered dimensions, her theory of accumulation by dispossession must be broadened to encompass other scales, sites, and practices, including the imagination and subjectivity. For instance, the restructuring of the social contract, the rise neoliberalism, the inclusion of women into paid employment on “greatly unequal terms” to men, and the downloading of social reproduction onto the family cannot be divorced from larger cultural processes that seek to reshape the desires and subjectivities of women so that they align with these processes.

In “Spaces of Enclosure,” Alex Vasudevan, Colin McFarlane, and Alex Jeffrey (2008) outline a more expansive theory of primitive accumulation that accounts for this interaction between and among current forms of enclosing the commons, neoliberal norms, processes of subject formation, and representational practices. While space does not permit a full account of their theory of enclosure, I want to focus on two innovations they introduce to Harvey and Hartsock’s theory of “accumulation by dispossession.” First, Vasudevan et al. (2008) propose that neoliberalism supports a form of predatory capitalism because it is productive of new political imaginaries and new subject positions that are consonant with its market logic (see also Brodie 1995, 2008; Duggan 2003). Neoliberalism is not simply an economic project of opening up new avenues for capital investment through privatization and the deregulation of the market. Its privileging of the market over the public sphere, and shrinking of the realm of the political, also involves the institution a new political imaginary that breaks with the more robust notion of social citizenship at the heart of welfare liberalism and instead valorizes and normalizes personal responsibility, private competition, self-sufficiency, and independence as the key pillars of citizenship (Duggan 2003).

Calling for a rapprochement between Marx’s account of primitive accumulation and Foucault’s (2000) theories of subjectification (of how the subject is constituted through its subjection to the

normalizing gaze of power), governmentality, and biopolitics, Vasudevan et al. (2008) suggest that neoliberalism operates as a cultural project of self-making or subject formation that ties individuals to market-based conceptions of citizenship. While Vasudevan et al. (2008) do not explicitly engage with issues of gender, there is substantial feminist literature that maps the ways in which neoliberalism operate as a form of what Foucault called governmental power that constitutes individuals as subjects who recognize themselves first and foremost in the model of the autonomous and self-governing market citizen: a citizen who relies on the market for subsistence needs, does not require state assistance and protection, eschews any group-based identities, and overcomes structures of inequality that might constrain action (Brodie 1996; Berlant 1997; Brodie 2002). Moreover, as Nickolas Rose (1999) notes, neo-liberalism's individualist ethos serves to normalize not only the activities of individual bodies but also the collectivity or population itself: neo-liberalism is premised on the idea that the collective health, wealth, and happiness of the population occurs only when individuals are able to exercise choice in the market as investors and consumers.

Second, Vasudevan et al. (2008) suggest that, in addition to producing new political imaginaries and forms of subjectification, contemporary processes of accumulation by dispossession also close off space for political contestation of neoliberal representational practices, and are thereby able to portray neoliberalism as the only viable political imaginary. The legitimacy of neoliberalism, they argue, requires the foreclosure of alternative political imaginaries that envision new forms of sociality, collectivity, and alliance premised on the principles of radical democracy. I want to suggest that, alongside this outright erasure of the histories of alternative political imaginaries, neoliberalism also operates through their appropriation and cooptation. As Raymond Williams (2005) explains, the dominant culture become hegemonic and "common sense" only because it continuously incorporates and accommodates alternative (those that seek to exist alongside the dominant) and oppositional (those that seek to replace the dominant) meanings, values, and visions of the world.

What are the implications of Vasudevan et al.'s more expansive theory of enclosure for an analysis of the gendered dimensions of the contemporary moment of accumulation by dispossession? While Vasudevan et al. (2008) do not explicitly address this question, feminist accounts of the changing position of women and social reproduction during the transition to capitalism provide a provisional framework for addressing the relation between and among gendered subjectivities, the imagination, and primitive accumulation. Silvia Federici's (2004) *Caliban and the Witch* is particularly instructive here. Federici (2004) argues that Marx's account of primitive accumulation misses the extent to which the privatization of land, enclosure of the commons, and creation of wage labourers for the emerging capitalist market required the reorganization of women's reproductive labour according the demands of capitalism. Such a transformation in reproductive labour was no small feat and involved: changes in women's control over their sexuality, the devaluation of their reproductive and caring labour and knowledge, their exclusion from waged work and their forced reliance on the male wage for survival, the production of new forms of gendered subjectivities, and the erasure and appropriation of alternative and oppositional political imaginaries.

In particular, Federici suggests that this transformation was forged through the imposition of what Carole Pateman calls a new "sexual contract" that legitimized men's power and control over women's bodies, labour, and childbearing. In her study of social contract theory, Pateman (1988) suggests that original social contract, which created civil society, actually constituted a new form of patriachalism and thus was also a sexual contract. Social contract theory offers an account of the origins of modern civil/political society in which either the state of nature or monarchic rule is replaced by a civil government, which should theoretically function as if it were a freely-entered

contract established by individuals who consent to being ruled. Yet, as Pateman notes, the free individuals who offer their consent are exclusively men, since only men are seen as having full ownership of the property in their person which would allow them to enter contracts freely. Moreover, Pateman argues that men's civil freedom is premised not only on the exclusion of women from the original pact, but also upon a sexual contract which grants them control over women: "the original pact is a sexual as well as a social contract; it is sexual in the sense of patriarchal – that is, the contract establishes men's political right over women – and also sexual in the sense of establishing orderly access by men to women's bodies" (2). Pateman argues that although the social contract was created in opposition to the paternalism of monarchic authority, it also covertly established a modern form of patriarchal power as central to the functioning of the modern political order through its doctrine of the public and private as separate spheres. This doctrine justified and naturalized women's exclusion from the public sphere and their subordination in (hetero)sexual relations within the private, domestic sphere.

Following Pateman, Federici argues that the sexual contract also involved the creation of a new sexual division of labour that separated reproductive labour from productive labour and relegated women and reproductive work to the private sphere of the family. It is within this new institution of the family that the female body and reproductive function was subjugated to the reproduction of male labour power for the new ruling class. According to Federici, this expropriation of the female body, which served as the precondition for the production of surplus value under capitalism, occurred alongside the construction of a new patriarchal order that policed women's reproduction through prohibitions on abortion and contraception and inaugurated new ideologies of bourgeois femininity that idealized a narrow role for women as "housewife" while simultaneously devaluing and naturalizing women's unpaid labour. Moreover, Federici argues that this new patriarchalism was instituted through maximal violence against women, epitomized in the witch-hunt in Europe, and the demonization of women who were believed to exercise control over female sexuality and reproduction (most notably midwives and healers) and who resisted the enclosures and/or were involved heretical movements that promoted a more egalitarian version of gender relations than the Church.

If the original phase of primitive accumulation involved the disciplining of women's bodies, the creation of new ideologies of female subordination and inferiority, and the foreclosure of alternative political imaginaries and collective relations, does the current moment of accumulation by dispossession, as outlined by Harvey and Hartsock, involve similar processes of enclosing female bodies, subjectivities, and political imaginations? While one must be wary of the danger of presentism, of reading the past through the present-day categories or concerns, can we nevertheless discern certain parallels between the original moment of primitive accumulation that Federici outlines and the current moment? Can we read this current moment as involving not only the production of novel forms of gendered inequalities, as Hartsock suggests, but also the creation of a new sexual contract, new modes of gendered subjectification, novel forms of disciplining women's reproduction, and the harnessing of the imagination to the requirements of capital accumulation?

Postfeminism, the "End of Equality," and the "New Sexual Contract"

These are big questions and cannot be fully explored here. I want to make a modest start toward addressing them by considering how the postfeminist appropriation and cooptation of feminist imaginaries is an important feature of the current moment of accumulation by dispossession, in general, and of the restructuring of the post-war welfare state settlement in Anglo-American states,

in particular. In what follows, I consider the mechanisms through which postfeminism serves to fasten and subordinate aspects of liberal feminism to the neoliberal imaginary, and thereby legitimates neoliberalism's market logic by dressing it up in the garb of gender equality, while simultaneously closing down space for alternative political imaginaries and critiques of social inequalities. McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism* outlines several dimensions of postfeminist cultural and political discourse that reveal its imbrication with neoliberalism's logic of decentralization, privatization, and individualization. Using McRobbie as a departure point, I focus on three such dimensions: 1.) the postfeminist appropriation of certain aspects of liberal feminism in order to declare gender equality achieved; 2.) its new sexual contract; and 3.) its production of new modes of feminine subjectivity consonant with the imperatives of neoliberalism.

McRobbie defines postfeminism, not as a period after feminism, but rather as a complex political and socio-cultural terrain through which aspects of liberal feminism are "engaged with," "incorporated" and reworked within neoliberal popular culture and politics in ways that both celebrate feminism's success – the political demands of second wave feminism have been met – and assign its relevance to the past (McRobbie 2004a, 5-6). McRobbie suggests that this double movement involves both the substitution and displacement of feminism. Postfeminist discourse points to the entry and participation of women in all aspects of public life as evidence that the (liberal) feminist demand for women's equality has been reached, the old sexual contract that excluded women from full personhood has been broken, and women can now take their place alongside men in the public sphere. At the same time, postfeminism hails this supposed success as a signal that feminism is now redundant and women should instead re-make their lives according to the model of the self-reliant market citizen. McRobbie (2009) therefore argues that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, postfeminism operates not as an explicitly conservative backlash against feminism that seeks a return to a pre-feminist era, but instead as a new regime of gender and racialized power in which elements of liberal feminism are resignified or translated into the individualistic language of market-based "empowerment" and "choice" characteristic of the privatized and self-disciplining forms of citizenship celebrated by neoliberalism (1). It is this neoliberal promise of empowerment that is offered as a substitute for a more radical feminist politics.

McRobbie focuses on two domains in which this postfeminist appropriation and political neutralization of liberal feminism is most evident: culture and the neoliberal state. Postfeminist culture commodifies feminism, deploying seemingly feminist language, such as "girl power," to sell commodities. At the same time, women's genres of TV and film such as *Sex and the City* celebrate the image of the Western woman taking her place in the public and in a "man's world" of employment and able to reinvent herself through consumption (Tasker and Negra 2007, 2-3). The freedoms and choices of this affluent elite woman are held up as confirmation feminist goals have been achieved.

While postfeminism is most clearly cultivated in popular, consumer culture, it also has been adopted by neoliberal states to justify their cuts to social and welfare programs. As Janine Brodie (2008) suggests in her study of the changing relationship between the Canadian women's movement and the neoliberal state, the ascendancy of neoliberalism led not only to the dismantling of the social liberalism of the welfare state and to its replacement by a voluntaristic and individualistic conception of citizenship, as mentioned above. This hollowing out of the welfare state also resulted in the erosion of the political identities and public spaces that empowered the second-wave of women's movements in the Anglo countries (Brodie 2008; Fraser 2009). While various forms of gendered and sexual exclusion were written into welfare state policies, welfare liberalism's promise of substantive

equality and its promotion of state intervention to mediate social inequalities provided women's movements a vocabulary with which they could make legitimate claims for the social and political entitlements of full citizenship which they had been actively denied under the social-sexual contract outlined by Pateman (Fox-Piven 1990; Lister 1995; Brodie 2008). Neoliberal policies of privatization and deregulation, however, have closed off the state as the primary site of claims-making for feminists, and have erased the language of gender from the policy agendas of advanced democracies (Brodie 2008; Summers 2003).² As Lisa Duggan (2003) argues, the construction of neoliberal hegemony in the U.S. and other Anglo-American countries was a decades-long project. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the closure of the state to mainstream feminism was legitimized through the neoliberal recasting of feminists a "special interest group," whose demands for redistributive social and economic policies were opposed to the interests of the market-reliant "ordinary citizen." Yet, this repudiation of feminism soon gave way to a more conciliatory postfeminist appropriation of the discourse of mainstream feminism by the neoliberal orthodoxy, as backlash politics shifted to an emergent "equality politics." Duggan (2003) defines this neoliberal "equality politics" as advocating a "stripped-down, non-redistributive form of 'equality'...compatible with continued upward redistribution of resources" and cut off from material life and class politics (xii). Postfeminist discourse is part of this new neoliberal equality politics. While feminism is no longer disparaged as self-interested, neoliberals now claim that the issues raised by liberal feminism have been responded to, that formal gender equality has been achieved by the state, thereby obviating the need for gender-based policy machineries or programs (Brodie 2008; Eisenstein 2009; McRobbie 2004).

Yet while postfeminist discourse is deployed to close off the articulation of gender-based equality claims on the state and to diminish "political space for women, metaphorically and literally" (Dobrowolsky 2004, 188), McRobbie (2009) argues that this erasure of feminism from the lexicon of governmental agencies is largely accomplished through a "new sexual contract" targeted primarily at young women. This new sexual contract presents young women with a "notional form of equality" (they may take their place in the labour market, education, and consumer culture) on the condition that they abandon feminist critiques of hegemonic masculinity, relinquish feminist demands for social policies that might challenge the gendered division of labour and instead assume individual responsibility for work and home life (2). Unlike the sexual-social contract theorized by Pateman, which excluded women from the political because they lacked the full ownership of the property in their person necessary for entering contractual agreements, the postfeminist new sexual contract instead hails women as "subjects of capacity," who are no longer constrained by traditional modes of patriarchal authority. As McRobbie (2007) notes, a significant change has occurred in contemporary notions of young womanhood: "from being assumed to be headed toward marriage, motherhood and limited economic participation, the girl is now a social category understood primarily as being endowed with economic capacity" (722). Girls are now invited to make use of the social, political, and economic freedoms once demanded by the feminist movement (McRobbie 2009; Adkins 2010). Young women are thus inscribed with capacity, success, attainment and social mobility, and these newly individualized subjects are called upon to gain educational qualifications and make use of opportunities to work as the condition of their freedom.

² One notable exception to this trend is sexual violence initiatives, which have become one the main areas in which the neoliberal state still plays a protectionist role, often with detrimental consequences for survivors of sexual violence. As Kristin Bumiller (2008) proposes in her analysis of the neoliberalization of sexual violence initiatives in the US, the neoliberal state remains interested in sexual violence largely because it fits with its law and order agenda, the targeting of men of colour as a criminalized population, increased incarceration rates, and the surveillance role increasingly granted to social service bureaucrats.

McRobbie suggests that despite the transformations in gender relations that this new sexual contract highlights, it represents not so much a break with the old sexual contract as a securing of a new regime of gender and sexual regulation for women. Since this new sexual contract is often hidden behind the individualistic language of choice and personal freedom, women's compliance with it may appear as non-coercive (McRobbie 2007). However, as McRobbie (2009) observes, this new regime of power is unique precisely because it operates through dynamics of regulation and discipline that are "less about what young women ought to do and more about what women can do" (56). Hence, the postfeminist celebratory discourse of female success, while seemingly affirmative, actually defines the limits of contemporary modes of feminine citizenship, respectability, and entitlement in the twenty-first century, circumscribing the field of possible desires, agencies, and political responses available to women. McRobbie argues that this new sexual contract, in particular, is productive of new modes of female subjectivity and citizenship that accommodate neo-liberal economic and social arrangements. Young women are permitted minimal forms of visibility on the condition that they make themselves over into citizens that are flexible and self-reliant, and these new demands of citizenship have come to define what it means to be socially intelligible as women in the present day (McRobbie 2007). Redefining notions of womanhood according to the image of the market-based citizen, postfeminist discourse therefore draws upon liberal feminist demands for equality of opportunity and for the mainstreaming of women into the corridors of power in order to address the population of young women as "top girls," as subjects of neoliberal success no longer in need of feminism (McRobbie 2009, 54).

McRobbie argues that the new sexual contract, and its incitement of young women to become subjects of capacity, is particularly evident in the areas of education, employment and the control of fertility. This postfeminist narrative of female success is most apparent in the realm of education. Jennifer Rignose (2007) notes that, in the aftermath of liberal feminist struggles in the 1970s and 1980s to promote girls' educational attainment, the 1990s witnessed a neoliberalization of feminist educational policy agendas across the UK, Australia, Canada and the U.S., as discourses around "successful girls" and "failing boys" proliferated (Arnot and Mac an Ghaill 2006). Pointing to girl's newfound success in education, these discourses claim that girls' educational achievements have outpaced those of boys. While this narrative of the "successful girl" has given way to a new "battle between the sexes" mythology in education (Davies and Saltmarsh 2007), it is also responsible for the celebration of girls as emblems of female progress, social mobility, and social change in the present day (Harris 2004; Ringrose 2007; Baker 2010). Girls and young women have come to be associated with the gaining of educational qualifications and with the motivation and aptitude necessary for success in neoliberal times (Walkerdine and Ringrose 2006; McRobbie 2007). Post-feminist discourses of female educational success obscure continuing class and racial relations that structure both girls and boys experiences of success and failure in literacy and schooling, relying instead on the assumption that both girls and boys are homogenous social groups (Ringrose 2007; Baker 2010). As a consequence of these elisions, however, post-feminist discourse is able to take the high educational achievements of a small group of affluent young women as evidence that neoliberal educational policies are working, individual success is possible, and all girls can "just do it" against the odds (Ringrose 2007).

Critical ethnographies of girl's and young women's experiences of schooling in Anglo-American states reveal that young women are increasingly encouraged and expected to understand their lives as unburdened by the old structural inequalities that concerned feminist pedagogy and to remake their lives in line with neoliberalism's individualist ethos and its emphasis on performance targets, external ratings, and standardized testing in education (Baker 2010; Gonick 2007; Walkerdine and Ringrose

2006). Underpinning this neoliberal decree that young women can be and do anything is therefore the requirement that young women “do careful and painstaking work on themselves” (Gonick 2007, 439) and learn how to continually re-adapt and reinvent themselves according to the demands of the market. Taught in ways compliant with values of neoliberal imperial capitalism, pushed firmly in the direction of independence and self-sufficiency, young women have thus become what McRobbie (2009) calls the “intensively managed subjects of postfeminist, gender-aware biopolitical practices of new governmentality” (59).

This biopolitical construction of young women as subjects of educational capacity and attainment appears positive in contrast to more overtly patriarchal ideologies that defined women as passive, irrational, and subordinate, ideologies which Federici argues were produced during the transition to capitalism. However, McRobbie (2007) proposes that the “new movement of women” into the educational mainstream is also linked to changes in capitalist accumulation and to the requirements of the new global economy whose demand for a feminized workforce overlaps with the liberal feminist demand for women’s equal participation in paid employment (7). In most industrialized countries, neoliberalism’s reconfiguration of the “gender order” that characterized the post-War welfare state led to a change from the male breadwinner model of social citizenship to a neoliberal model that is less reliant on fixed gender identities (McDowell 1991; Brenner 1993; Young 2005). As Brenner (1993) notes, under this neo-liberal gender order, many women are no longer constrained in their ability to participate in the capitalist market. While this participation in the market offers women the semblance of liberation from the patriarchal family structure, it does so in a way that integrates them into an unequal capitalist economic system (Fraser 2009). Women have always been wage labourers, but the promotion of young women as subjects of economic capacity occurred during a period of economic restructuring that led to the growth flexible and part-time labour in which women predominate and to the decline in male wages, which has made female participation in the formal economy necessary. As Brigitte Young (2005) suggests, this transformation in gender relations is therefore not a result of patriarchy’s erosion. Rather, it is the consequence of neoliberal capitalism, which relies upon women’s labour market participation. Yet, as Nancy Fraser (2009) observes, the rhetoric of feminism, particularly the critique of patriarchal constraints, of women’s exclusion from institutional life, and of the “family wage now supplies a good part of the romance that invests flexible capitalism with a higher meaning and moral end point,” which is “needed to motivate new generations to shoulder the inherently meaningless work of endless accumulation” (110, 109).

Neoliberalism’s association of paid employment with gender empowerment means that the young woman is heralded by postfeminist discourse not for her reproductive role, as she was during the original stage of primitive accumulation, but for her productive capacities. She is therefore called by postfeminist discourse to take her place alongside men as citizen-workers and to approximate the “Universal Breadwinner” (Fraser 1994, 601) model of citizenship (also referred to as the “adult worker” (Lewis 2001) or “dual-earner” model). Yet, although women are encouraged to engage in equal rates of paid labour as men and are hailed as market-based citizens, post-feminism has not challenged the gendered division of domestic labour and social reproduction.

Nor has postfeminism signalled the end of a patriarchal politics of sexuality and reproduction oriented toward the control of women’s bodies, desires, intimate and erotic practices, and labour. Indeed, postfeminism involves a substantial, if nevertheless veiled and thus perhaps more insidious, reconfiguration of relations of reproduction that re-stabilize and re-intensify both gender and racial hierarchies by equating female success with the control of fertility and sexuality. While young

women are promised unfettered sexual freedoms by postfeminist popular culture, this freedom comes at a reproductive price: they must postpone childbearing until they are economically secure and self-sufficient so that they and their children will not be a burden on the state. Those who are “successful,” according to postfeminist discourse, are able to carefully plan parenthood and manage this double burden of paid and unpaid labour, often through employing the low-paid labour of women of colour and foreign domestic workers (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004). Single mothers who deviate from these new norms of successful postfeminist femininities by virtue of their class and/or racialized social location are labelled welfare queens, failed citizens who are unable to sexually self-discipline, and are presented as threats to the national body, defined as white and middle class (Little 2003; Roberts 1997; Smith 2007; Flavin 2009; Silliman et al. 2002). Cuts to social assistance and welfare reform policies punish single mothers for bearing children, while workfare or work-first programs (which requires women to work for welfare) seek to discipline women into the model of the market citizen and to construct the welfare mother as a “childless flexible worker...available for extreme forms of exploitation” (Smith 2010, 2).

Within the postfeminist celebration of girl’s and young women’s sexual agency, the promise of sexual freedom is decoupled from reproductive justice – from the right to not only have access to abortion and safe contraception, but also to have a child and rear a family (Silliman et al. 2002). Following Foucault, we can therefore conclude that reproduction and sexual desire continue to constitute a “dense transfer point for relations of power” (Foucault 1990, 103) within the postfeminist imaginary. The micromanagement and disciplining of women’s bodies, erotic pleasures, affective relations and intimate desires, what Foucault refers to as the anatomo-politics of the human body, is linked to the control of the population, a raced and classed “biopolitics” or “neo-eugenics” (Smith 2010) that restricts the reproductive freedoms of some women to ensure the reproduction only of those who are self-sufficient neoliberal subjects.

By constituting young women as neoliberal subjects of success, the postfeminist sexual contract serves to incorporate young women into neoliberal capitalism, albeit on unequal terms depending upon their location in racial and class hierarchies. The feminization of labour that Hartsock argues is at the heart of primitive accumulation today rests on this postfeminist discourse, which simultaneously celebrates women’s gains in education and employment and shifts responsibility for social inequalities from the welfare state to the private realm the family and market. The new visibility of the successful girl functions not so much to obscure the inequalities produced or exacerbated by neoliberal reforms as to construct them as the consequences of individual failure to make good on the promise of gender equality offered by the new sexual contract.

Wither Liberal Feminism?

My argument thus far has been that postfeminism represents the means by which neoliberalism has instrumentalized, neutralized, and de-politicized the demands of the second wave of liberal feminism by harnessing them to its own agenda of decentralization, privatization, and deregulation. Its new sexual contract produces modes of feminine subjectivities consonant with imperatives of capitalist accumulation, while also constructing the West as a site of gender equality. What has this postfeminist gender settlement meant for liberal feminism, which now finds in postfeminist discourse “a strange shadowy version of itself, an uncanny double that it can neither simply embrace nor wholly disavow” (Fraser 2009, 114)? How has the postfeminist enclosure of the liberal feminist imaginary – particularly its desire for women’s equal access to education, entry into paid

employment, and reproductive self-determination – constrained the political terrain for liberal feminism today?

Postfeminist discourse has produced a crisis of political citizenship for feminism in general and liberal feminism in particular. As I have suggested, the postfeminist celebratory discourse of “top girls” has been adopted by Anglo-American governments in order to reshape liberal feminism’s relationship to the formal arena of political citizenship and to close off one of the most important spaces within which post-war liberal feminists sought to advance gender-based policies of redistribution: the state. Yet, more than simply revoking the political institutions and idioms of equality and collective welfare through which liberal feminists pursued claims for gender equality, postfeminism also undercuts the very idea of gender harm upon which liberal feminism is based. By constituting Western girls and women as subjects of success and gender equality as achieved, postfeminism forecloses the political identity of the Western woman as a victim of gender bias and discrimination that served as the foundation of post-war liberal feminism and its “wounded attachment” to the welfare state (Brown 1995).

In her famous genealogy of the history of identity politics in the US, Wendy Brown argues that the new social movements of the 1960 and 1970s, such as feminism and the civil rights movement, emerged as protests against exclusion from liberalism’s promise of universal equality and justice, and made claims for state recognition of the suffering and injuries caused by this historic exclusion. The paradox of this form of identity politics, according to Brown, is that while politicized identities strived to end the pain or injuries caused by marginalization, identity politics ultimately became “attached” to and invested in their own history of pain and suffering. Not only did these injuries serve as the condition of their politics, but they also served as the foundation of their relation to “the state as appropriate protector against injury” (Brown 1995, 27). Yet, while forms of identity politics, such as liberal feminism, relied upon this attachment to pain and injury in order to make claims on the liberal state, postfeminist discourses of female success and of Western gender exceptionalism renders a politics of injury not only untenable but also a target of derision. If, as neoliberal reformers claim, we are all “self-determining, then no one need be a victim” and those who claim victim status are stigmatized as manipulators whose demands for social justice victimize the state (Cole 2008, 117).

How has liberal feminism responded to its appropriation and disavowal by postfeminism? Rather than work through the loss of political space precipitated by postfeminism and develop new political strategies to challenge capitalism’s new series of enclosures, I suggest that liberal feminists have sought to reenter political citizenship largely by taking the sphere of international politics as their legitimate domain. In particular, liberal feminists have reasserted the injured identity of woman as the foundation of their politics by focusing on the suffering of “third world women” and deploying this figure as a way to reenter the neoliberal/neoimperial state. One example of this strategy is the liberal feminist attention to the “imperilled Muslim woman” in the post-9-11 context (Razack 2008, 5). Many feminists have pointed to the continuities between the ahistorical and culturalist discourses of Western superiority and Eastern backwardness that informed both the U.S.-based Feminist Majority Foundation’s (FMF) campaign to end “gender apartheid” in Afghanistan and the U.S. administration’s deployment of the suffering of Afghan women to justify the Afghan war and the global war on terror (Alexander 2005; Hunt 2006; Russo 2006). Yet, few have examined how Western international feminism and human rights activism aimed at women in the “third world” is a product of state restructuring and postfeminist politics in the West that shuts down space for feminist activism. As Wendy S. Hesford and Wendy Kozol (2005) note, the international focus of

the FMF must be read as an outcome of the constraints imposed on liberal feminism by neoliberal state restructuring. After 9-11, the FMF saw an opening to reenter the state apparatus by claiming the right to represent the interests of Afghan women to the U.S. government and by pointing to the role feminists could play within the war effort, not only by bringing humanitarian relief to Afghanistan, but also by helping to rebuild the economy and infrastructure of Afghanistan along neoliberal lines (Russo 2006).

This re-entry into the state has required liberal feminists to accede to postfeminist claims about the success of Western feminism, to remain silent on the U.S. militarism and state violence, and to situate patriarchy exclusively in the non-West, thereby producing the West as the originary site of women's freedom (Alexander 2005; Arat-Koc 2005). Liberal feminism's melancholic attachment to injury has not only rendered it complicit with postfeminist discourses of Western gender exceptionalism. By resurrecting its renewed politics on the basis of third world women's injury, liberal feminism relegitimizes the role of the state and law as protectors of women while simultaneously resecuring the stable identity of the injured woman as the moral grounding of its politics (Brown, 2003a, 2003b). Moreover, to the extent that liberal feminist internationalism aligns itself with the promise of bringing Western "freedoms" (such as entrepreneurialism and access to credit and consumer culture) to the injured third world woman, it is not only circumscribed by the postfeminism but also actively contributes to the processes of accumulation by dispossession that Harvey and Hartsock outline, which seek to bring women in the third world into the orbit of capitalist accumulation.

In turning to the international and to the plight of suffering third world women as a way of re-entering the state and re-establishing the validity of liberal feminist politics in postfeminist times, contemporary liberal feminists have adopted a strategy used by their first wave predecessors. During the nineteenth century, when women were excluded from political citizenship at "home" by the "social-sexual contract," British feminists fought for citizenship rights by making use of what Charles W. Mills (1997) calls "racial contract." Just as the sexual contract of liberal-patriarchalism involved a pact between men to control and dominate women, Mills suggests that the political-economic system of white supremacy and imperialism was similarly based on a "contract" between "those categorized as white *over* the nonwhites, who are thus the objects rather than the subjects of the agreement" (12, *emphasis in original*). While white women were subordinated within and by the sexual contract, they were privileged participants in the racial contract. As Antoinette Burton (1994, 1998) suggests in her history of the British women's suffrage movement, British women used the doctrine of racial and civilizational superiority that undergirded the "racial contract" to argue for women's suffrage. In particular, suffragists argued that women deserved the vote because of their unique capacity to represent the interests of those whom they perceived as helpless colonized women back to the British government. First-wave Western liberal feminists thus relied on a gendered identification with suffering others, and with women's gendered roles as caretakers, to legitimate their struggle to enter the public sphere. Following and extending Brown, Burton (1998) suggests that this relationship to suffering women elsewhere served as the basis for British feminists' "wounded attachments" to the "British imperial state" (355).

Burton's (1998) research demonstrates the extent to which British feminists "historically relied on the injuries of 'others' to re-focus the attention of the state on their own desire for inclusion in the body politic" (339). The old "sexual contract" left few options for feminists to claim citizenship than through participation in empire and thus through complicity with its civilizing mission. Excluded from the definition of the autonomous individual celebrated in social contract theory, which

conflated the masculine with the human, white women could claim political status as autonomous individuals only in relation to the West's "others." The postfeminist sexual contract, and its return to classical liberalism's division between the public/private spheres, similarly offers Western feminists the possibility of a public role and the promise of re-admission into universal citizenship only through the international and in relation to the suffering third world woman. While today's liberal feminists may not explicitly appeal to the sentimental logic of women's nurturing and caretaking roles, as did the suffragists, both first wave and third wave liberal feminisms have claimed entry to formal citizenship through positing their unique capacity to speak for and represent suffering women abroad back to the West. This continuity thus demonstrates that, just as the original sexual social contract was resisted through the racial contract, contemporary liberal feminist negotiation of the postfeminist sexual contract is also brokered on the backs of those who are culturally- and racially- marked by imperialism as outside civilization. The postfeminist sexual contract is therefore very much tied to an imperial/racial one as well.

Conclusion

This paper began with the question of how to understand postfeminism, which uses feminist aspirations and wishes for women's liberation to undo feminism as a viable politics. Tracing the imbrications of postfeminism in capitalist process of accumulation, I have shown that postfeminism operates as a technology of neoliberal governance that seeks to reshape the desires and subjectivities of women so that they align with the requirements of market-based citizenship, to close off the state to gender-based equality claims making, and to shift the terrain of gender politics in advanced capitalist societies such that only a feminist politics premised on the superiority of the West's gender order is granted political currency and legitimacy. While it would be a mistake to confuse postfeminism's claims of female success with the reality of women's lives, postfeminist discourse serves as a powerful device for closing down alternative political imaginaries and forms of collective life that challenge neoliberal capitalism.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno (1977) aporistically wrote that "philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed" (3). Feminism's premature death also signals the continuing need for a radical anti-capitalist feminist politics in the present day. This paper has attempted to contribute to this revitalization of feminist critique by demonstrating the extent to which celebratory discourses of female success and empowerment constitute new modes of regulation and discipline that work to divide women through the logics of race, class, and empire. At "home," postfeminism pits successful girls against poor and racialized mothers on welfare; at the same time, Western women are encouraged to understand their liberation against images of suffering third world women. Feminism after postfeminism must challenge this politics of disarticulation by highlighting those points of connection among women produced by the multiple patriarchies and international economic hegemonies that are simultaneously disguised and reinforced by celebrations of feminism's success.

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