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what a girl wants: fantasizing the reclamation of self in postfeminism

Diane Negra, Routledge, London and New York, 2009, 191pp., ISBN: 0-415-45227-9 (Pbk), £19.99, ISBN: 0-415-45228-7 (Hbk), £70.00

Diane Negra provides an interrogation of the versions of female selfhood that postfeminism makes possible and explores how these are represented and promoted through cultural material. Her argument is constructed through an examination of American-made television and film produced in the last 15 years, as well as secondary analysis of those news items and consumer goods, which speak particularly of the contradictions inherent to postfeminist selfhood. Through connecting cultural depictions of womanhood to trends in women's employment, motherhood and consumption, Negra demonstrates the impact of an ideology, which 'reinforces conservative norms as the "best choices" in women's lives' (p.4).

While Negra's focus is the United States and the American cultural marketplace, the ubiquity of the products she examines across western culture makes her text widely relevant. Like McRobbie (2008), Negra argues that postfeminism simultaneously declares feminism to be successful and unnecessary: it promotes the notion that second-wave feminism achieved its aims and has thus been rendered redundant. The arguments made by second-wave feminists regarding men's sexual objectification of women (and the role of this in determining how women are made in/visible and intelligible) are 'taken into account' by postfeminism, such that conformist constructions of feminine personhood are reinterpreted as a matter of *personal choice*. The implication may also be that the strength of the rhetoric of *personal choice* is such that it has virtually negated the possibility of a sustained public critique of the connections between capitalist production, those versions of selfhood, which it makes available and to whom they are accessible.

Negra is particularly concerned with the apparent disordered relationship to time, continually represented as a central problem facing women who make 'unwise' investments in work and/or do not adequately maintain their appearance. Negra provides a convincing and readable analysis of a number of examples in which the 'time crisis' is resolved for women through a variety of discursive mechanisms that make recidivism to a prefeminist state desirable. For example, since the late 1990s, films such as *Sweet Home Alabama* and *Hope Floats* have returned their high-flying urban-based female protagonists to their hometown, family and/or childhood sweetheart, allowing feminine priorities to return to their 'natural order'. The labour market and the city are presented as viable only as temporary diversions

before a more authentic female adulthood can be achieved through the linear ideal of heterosexual partnership, motherhood, domesticity and care work.

Similar forms of retreatism have been written about by other authors with reference to (for example) long running American television shows such as *Friends* and *Sex and the City*. What is particularly compelling about Negra's argument is the way in which she unpicks the commodification of this retreatism to expose how the version of female empowerment produced is underscored by a limited form of female participation in the political arena. She shows how the fetishization of luxury domesticity (and associated self-care industries that thrive on directing women towards this version of the domestic) is central to a formulation in which the maintenance of the home (and in the home, the self) problematises alternative routes towards a coherent feminine identity. Negra goes on to describe how consumption targeted at the production of the luxury domestic space becomes a viable route, for those women with the financial means, to make the kind 'individualised' choices that are palatable to the conservative agenda. It is worth noting that those women who have made successful careers of 'postfeminist homemaking' (Nigella Lawson in the UK and Rachel Ray in the USA) also provide the cultural answer to the 'incapable' mothers of the working-class whose consumption choices are criticised in programmes such as *Wife Swap* and *You Are What You Eat*. (Skeggs, 2004).

Negra writes particularly insightfully about a 'postfeminist celebration of mothering' (p. 65) in which it is common to read accounts that present a childless state as anathema to personhood. She draws upon representations of a 'New Momism' (p. 31) (in which the performance of a proactive mothering identity becomes a central to maintaining cultural intelligibility) in a way, which resonates with sociological work that examines the position of single and working-class mothers in the USA. Negra's insights about the implications for the kind of mothering identity produced as a version of postfeminist selfhood – and its connections to conservative ideals – were made wholly tangible by Sarah Palin during the vice presidential campaign in 2008 (presumably after this book had gone to print). It is though such shrewd observations and a compelling examination of connections between cultural material, social trends and conservative ideologies, that Negra has provided an enormously constructive inquiry into western female selfhood in the early twenty-first century.

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references

McRobbie, A. (2008) *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, London; California: Sage.

Skeggs, B. (2004) *Class, Self, Culture*, London; New York: Routledge.

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