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Politics of/and Backlash

By Ann Braithwaite¹

Abstract

Since the publication of Susan Faludi's book in 1991, the terms "backlash" and "postfeminism" have come to be widely used in many feminist analyses to critique—and then usually dismiss—representations of both women and feminism throughout media and popular culture. This paper revisits both of these concepts, exploring some of the debates about the definition, meaning, and scope of feminism that both of these terms (often unwittingly) raise and then shut down. It argues that while seemingly useful ways to talk about popular representations, these concepts also replay many of the central (and often contentious) debates in feminist thinking, especially around what gets defined as 'feminism,' under what contexts, and for what purposes. Ultimately, it argues that these terms, as they are now most commonly used, deny the possibility of multiple meanings and layers of feminist theorizing and politics, refute the saturation of feminist ideas throughout the broader culture in ways and places in places not originally thought possible, and refuse the changes in feminism that are the locus of so much contemporary dispute. If women's studies and feminism is to successfully make the transition to other generations, other times, and indeed this other millennium, then the ubiquity of concepts such as these, and the exclusive thinking they ultimately point to, must be re-examined and challenged.

Key Words: Backlash, Postfeminism, Popular culture

Introduction

Since the publication of Susan Faludi's book of the same title in 1991, the term "backlash" has become a popular and oft-used term in many feminist analyses to critique the perceived political implications of almost any issue having to do with women, and especially to denounce a range of current representations of women throughout popular culture. Indeed, references to a 'backlash' against feminism increasingly dominate feminist and/or women's groups' commentaries on how women are presented in a variety of media forms. In its most typical appearances, this term emphasizes the idea that those representations simply replicate long standing patterns and images, with women again being presented in an unrealistic and negative light that these critics read as signaling a reaction to—and rejection of—the many changes in women's lives brought about by feminist social movement. Examples of this kind of use of the term can be found in both feminist scholarly critiques of popular media, as well as in a number of feminist social and political groups' commentaries on media, such as in those of NOW and Mediawatch.² In one particularly paradigmatic example of the popularity of this word, for instance, in 2000 ex National Organization for Women president Patricia Ireland derided the "sorry status" of women described in NOW's "prime time report" of TV images of women. Commenting on the report's findings, which classified network television

according to four criteria—violence, gender composition, sexual exploitation, and social responsibility, and which found all four major networks overall inadequate in meeting these criteria—she concluded that she was struck by the "mean-spiritedness towards women and people of color" displayed in the "*backlash* shows" that currently dominate network television.³ And in another, albeit more scholarly example that is nonetheless in much the same vein, in *Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory*, Suzanna Danuta Walters entitles her chapter exploring representations of women in contemporary popular film, "Postfeminism and Popular Culture: A Case Study of the *Backlash*," and focuses on "those media representations that were and still are so much a part of this *backlash*..." (116).⁴

Increasingly (and as the example of Walters's chapter title indicates), the term "backlash" has come to be used almost interchangeably with that other ubiquitous late 90s/early twenty-first century word, "postfeminism." Both of these terms are most often wielded as a kind of shorthand to identify and denounce examples of what are perceived to be anti-feminist (and in some arguments, even anti-women) emphases throughout popular culture. How these words—and the larger political statements they are being used to make—are defined and understood, though, is always more than simply a question of semantics. What is perceived as constituting either 'backlash' or 'postfeminism,' has political implications both for the kinds of critical analyses or claims about pop culture that get made using those terms, and for the kinds of 'rectifications' then proposed. Even more importantly for this paper, however, is that assumptions made about the definitions of those terms also shape how one understands definitions of feminism(s) and current feminist debates, and frame perceptions of differences within feminist viewpoints. The major problem with defining backlash and postfeminism as 'anti'—either of feminism or women—then, is that it usually leads to a dismissal or rejection of the complexities and nuances of both contemporary feminist theories and popular culture overall, rather than a critical engagement with the many changes in both of these fields. It thus also overlooks—indeed, it cannot see—how those examples of a supposed backlash against feminism might alternately be seen as illustrations of how much something about feminism has instead saturated pop culture, becoming part of the accepted, 'naturalized,' social formation. Thus, while both of these terms are useful to open up discussion about pop culture and the media (although not for the reasons usually understood and not in the ways they are usually employed), to make them simply the conclusions reached about that culture is to ultimately limit the possibilities of analysis, and thus the politics of responding to those examples. Indeed, I would argue, the current usage of these terms in many self-identified feminist critiques of media too often instead points to an impoverished view of both feminism and popular culture; it glosses over the many current contradictions and conflicts that dominate both of these fields of inquiry, often quite productively, in favor of all-encompassing statements that both smooth out difference and present a homogeneity that is not and never was there.

What I want to do in this paper, then, is revisit these two terms, in order to reflect on how their recent popular usage in much feminist writing about pop culture enters into and perpetuates a number of dilemmas and debates that dominate many feminist discourses today. While much can also be said about the assumptions the usage of these

terms makes about popular culture and media, in this paper I will limit myself instead to what they reflect about contemporary feminist theorizings and political possibilities. If, as I will argue, multiplicity and plurality dominate contemporary women's studies and feminist thinking in the late twentieth/early twentieth-first centuries, then the use of terms such as backlash and postfeminism must be drawn into and rethought in light of these emphases, and such a rethinking argues for a more complex understanding of both of these terms than those too often captured by their more prevalent usages. I want to begin to do this here, then, by returning to and playing out, through a fairly close reading, some of the nuances embedded in these two terms, especially as they are formulated in Susan Faludi's 1991 book *Backlash*. Revisiting these terms opens up the possibility of seeing how they in fact articulate continuities in feminist thinking and the current status of feminism throughout popular culture, rather than (as they are commonly thought to do), signaling that which has succeeded or come after feminism, marking both its end and a break or rupture with it. My goal here is thus to explore how these often called upon terms of critique and dismissal in much current feminist theorizing might instead offer us ways to open up debate around a series of pressing questions about what in fact constitutes feminism or feminisms—for whom, when and why, under what circumstances, and to what end. Instead of either simply rejecting many of the use of these terms as somehow 'wrong,' or arguing that the examples they point to aren't really instances of the kind of 'anti-feminist' focus they supposedly illustrate, I want to use them to alternatively suggest that feminism(s) is not so much external to media and popular culture as it is thoroughly imbricated in it, as it has indeed become 'popular' (in many definitions of that word) in ways that too often remain unacknowledged and unseen.

The term "backlash" of course achieved its current notoriety with the publication of Faludi's book in 1991, and the term has been widely taken up and acknowledged in both feminist and non-feminist discourses since then.⁵ According to Faludi, and to a number of popular, oft-cited feminist media critics after her (including the above mentioned NOW, Mediawatch, and many other commentators on pop culture), since the early 1980s a 'backlash' against feminism has been evident everywhere throughout popular culture—in film and other media, in advertising, in popular psychology, and in any number of political platforms. The evidence of this backlash, these critiques maintain, is especially evident in the renewed emphasis on images of women that replay and celebrate more traditional definitions of femininity, definitions that were the locus of earlier feminist thinking, commentary, and action. Faludi, for example, spends a large part of her book exploring how, in the 1980s (an argument that others such as Walters and Whelehan also see continuing throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century), elements of pop culture such as advertising, the fashion industry, and popular news media were all dominated by a preoccupation with a particular definition of femininity, presenting an image of woman in which she was engrossed either with her appearance and being attractive—always to men, or with motherhood, children, and a desire to retreat from the workplace in favor of the 'mommy track'—in short, with being 'a woman again.'

For Faludi (and many of these later commentators), these (renewed) emphases are especially prominent examples of this media backlash.⁶ This return to a focus on the more standard or traditional elements of (white, middle-class) femininity is now perceived as diminishing the accomplishments of women, reverting them instead to those traditional and limiting definitions of 'femininity' that an earlier feminism had worked to challenge and change over the past 25 or so years. From this viewpoint, everything from TV characters such as Ally McBeal to female pop music superstars (think Britney Spears, or 'Girl Power' and the Spice Girls) to women's fashion magazines (think *Glamour*) to any number of current advertisements, are all part of this backlash; because they do not reflect the 'reality' of women's lives today, because they do not promote 'positive' images of women, because they instead present women who fulfill a stereotypical image of beauty and femininity, they are 'not feminist.'⁷ In many, if not most, of its more familiar uses, then, the word backlash has now simply become synonymous with anything deemed anti-feminist, or with that which appears to be about revoking the many gains and social changes made by women because of and through feminism.

As initially articulated by Faludi, though, this term is actually more interesting and nuanced—and thus also potentially productive—than the above outline suggests.⁸ In the introduction to her book, Faludi outlines what she terms the 1980s backlash as more than simply an attempt to roll back gains made for women's social and political equality; rather, she argues, it is actually a more complex series of seemingly mixed messages about feminism and the women's movement, and contemporary women's rights or equality issues. According to Faludi, as opposed to simply being an anti-feminist reaction—such as the refusal to consider any change wrought by feminism would be—the current backlash is instead characterized by both an endless celebration that the struggle for women's rights is won and a recurring insistence that women today are really miserable. As she puts it, "[B]ehind this celebration of the American woman's victory, behind the news, cheerfully and endlessly repeated, that the struggle for women's rights is won, another message flashes. You may be free and equal now, it says to women, but you have never been more miserable" (ix). This double message thus maintains that women have achieved full legal and social equality, but that they have never been so unhappy with almost every aspect of their lives because of that. In itself, the idea of a reaction against feminism, or indeed against any social movement subsequent to some change brought about in its name, is not new. Faludi, for example, points to other earlier moments of a 'backlash' against feminism—for example, in the early twentieth century and during the post second world war period, arguing that "[P]ost-feminist sentiments first surfaced, not in the 1980s media, but in the 1920s press" (50). What is so notable for her about this most recent backlash, though, is the incorporation of feminism's successes into it, and the series of tensions and paradoxes this inclusion leads to. Thus, along with the more usual and expected reactions such as the "ludicrous overreaction to women's modest progress" (64)—(as evidenced in oft-heard anti-Affirmative Action rhetoric such as 'women are taking over' or 'women are getting special privileges,' for instance), there is an insistence that it is in fact feminism's success that is itself to blame for women's apparent current miseries.

In Faludi's initial conceptualization of this term, then, the rhetoric of the current backlash period isn't one of a simple anti-feminism or of being against 'women's rights,' such as in more traditional statements about women's (natural) inabilities or (essential) differences from men. Instead, the current ('new') backlash highlights women's supposed unhappiness precisely with and because of feminism's successes, arguing that those successes were too often predicated on excesses that have made women too unhappy. As Faludi sarcastically summarizes this view, "...[I]t must be all that equality that's causing all that pain. Women are unhappy precisely *because* they are free. Women are enslaved by their own liberation" (x). What this new backlash rhetoric has done so successfully, then, is make a distinction between contemporary feminism or the 'women's movement' on the one hand, and women's social and political equality on the other, aptly disconnecting the reason for the latter as having anything to do with the former, and thus refusing/refuting the argument that feminism was (ever) about attaining that equality. In this articulation of backlash, current attempts that appear to roll back or alter social or individual changes brought about by prior feminist struggle do not deny either women's struggles or the right to and necessity for change; instead they maintain that these rights have now been won, and that it is now time to offer women what feminism, in the process, ostensibly took away from them.⁹

In this most recent incarnation, backlash thus works not by rejecting ideas about equality and women's 'rights,' but instead by acknowledging those at the same time as identifying feminism as the cause of women's current miseries.¹⁰ Women today, the theory goes, are more miserable precisely because of those changes that 1970s feminism brought about, and everything that feminism demanded for and in the name of women—for example, being able to 'have it all'—only succeeded in making them more miserable than ever. Thus, it is feminism or the 'women's movement' that has now become women's worst enemy (and not all those other things in women's lives that were and are the target of feminist struggles that still haven't changed); as Faludi pinpoints this articulation of backlash, "[T]he women's movement, as we are told time and again, has proved women's own worst enemy" (x). And thus the paradox of this backlash.... Feminism succeeded wildly, so wildly that women no longer need it; and yet, it also failed, again wildly, because it pushed—and continues to push—women into trying to do too much in the name of that equality, and they deeply resent that.

In Faludi's argument, one of the most significant elements of this most recent backlash has been the central role of pop culture in its creation and perpetuation. Her particular emphasis is repeatedly on the process of this cultural attack on feminism—and by extension on women—rather than on women's acquiescence to this attack, which she in fact maintains they refuse. Throughout the 80s and 90s, she argues, the media, pop culture, and advertising in particular have been instrumental in articulating this doubled backlash message, and have been its major promoters and publicists. These three areas have hence also become the focus of much feminist thinking for what has become almost a cottage industry of observations about endless examples of backlash throughout pop culture—as in my example about NOW's primetime report above—although usually without explorations of the central paradox just outlined. According to Faludi, through popularizing terms and supposed crises such as 'the man shortage,' 'the biological clock,'

‘the mommy track,’ and (my particular interest in this paper), ‘postfeminism,’ fictional and non-fictional media alike have powerfully shaped the way people think and talk about both “the feminist legacy,” and the ailments it supposedly inflicts on women (77). In fact, for Faludi, the origins of all this female misery, these supposed “female crises,” are “a closed system that starts and ends in the media, popular culture, and advertising—an endless feedback loop that perpetuates and exaggerates its own false images of womanhood” (xv).¹¹

The most powerful presentations of this latest backlash, then, according to Faludi, occur in media and pop culture in general, which repeatedly generate and ‘report’ the news that women are miserable by: 1) identifying all those things that are supposedly causing women's current unhappiness; 2) stressing the importance of those things to women's lives, arguing that they want and miss, or are simply (essentially?) unable to resist, them; and 3) chalking women's resulting misery over this lack up to feminism, as the ‘costs’ of changes it brought about. In these media generated and circulated images, feminism in the last 25 years—in spite of everything else it accomplished—has also meant that women have had to give up a range of other interests or activities such as motherhood, family, relationships, fashion, beauty culture, sexuality, sexiness, fun, pleasure, even (and ostensibly most importantly to them), men—in short, all of those trappings of traditionally defined ‘femininity’—because these things didn't go with, and even impeded, ‘having it all.’ In the rush to attain equality with men, feminism told them that they must stop being ‘women,’ that they must reject these interests of femininity—in short that they must be more like men—in order to achieve feminist change.¹² In this way, then, feminism is both defined and delimited, and is ultimately deemed inadequate to meet the complexities of women's desires and lives. And thus also, it is the media that appear as that which is focused on women's best interests and as that which really cares about women; feminism, on the contrary, because of its ‘excessive demands’ on women, is depicted not only as ultimately not in women's interests, but sometimes even as hostile to the vast majority of women, because women themselves are unhappy about everything they have been ‘forced’ to give up.

This particular manifestation of ‘backlash,’ Faludi goes on to note, intersects—indeed overlaps—with that other ubiquitous word of late 20th century feminist commentaries on/denouncements of media and popular culture—‘postfeminism,’ a word that has also taken on a trendy and independent life of its own. Like backlash, though, postfeminism is also a much more complex—and, I want to argue, ultimately productive—concept than many of its widespread uses suggest. The term ‘postfeminism’ made its contemporary debut in the popular consciousness in 1982, in a *New York Times Magazine* article by Susan Bolotin. Its most popular understanding was further aided by subsequent articles on feminism's apparent (and recurring) ‘death’ in *Newsweek* and in *Time* magazines, and it now appears in a variety of venues, especially all over the Internet, in both self-identified and explicitly feminist and non-feminist sites (albeit for very different purposes).¹³ In its more common invocations, postfeminism is generally understood as a way to describe both the end of feminism, and its supposed rejection by younger women; its use “... most often describes a moment when women's movements are, for whatever reasons, no longer moving, no longer vital, no longer relevant....”

(Siegel, 75). In this everyday usage, postfeminism refers both chronologically and semantically to that which comes 'after' feminism; much like backlash, then, its use is usually perceived as denoting a critical reaction to (an earlier) feminism. Indeed, as Sarah Gamble maintains about the term postfeminism, "... its triumph lies in its ability to define itself as an ironic, pseudo-intellectual critique on the feminist movement, rather than an overtly hostile response to it" (45). In making this point, Gamble also notes the conjuncture of these two central terms for Faludi, arguing that "for Faludi, postfeminism *is* the backlash," and that its success lies in its presentation of feminism as "unfashionable, passé, and therefore not worthy of serious consideration" (45). The meaning of the prefix 'post' in this later or next feminism thus becomes equivalent to both 'anti' and 'after'; postfeminism is that which both comes after and rejects that earlier feminism—it is the successor "feminism" to a now surpassed, and now unnecessary, prior feminism.¹⁴

In its self-proclaimed definition as successor, postfeminism also becomes the perfect example of the above description of backlash. In its reaction against what it defines as an earlier feminism, it allows for, indeed it (often joyously) promotes, all of those things that that earlier feminism ostensibly denied; while it sometimes acknowledges the gains of past struggles, its more customary insistence is that 'we' are now past all that, and 'it's time to have fun again.'¹⁵ As critic August Tarrier humorously (and sardonically) notes, postfeminism is self-described as being about everything feminism wasn't;

In contrast to the strident, earnest feminist, the "postfeminist" is fun, indifferent to, or even critical of, "politics," cheerfully apathetic, sexy and independent. She has no need for liberation or solidarity with other women and she's far too busy having orgasms to worry about such issues as comparable worth, daycare, or abortion. In contrast, feminists are viewed in much the same way one might view one's parents: as arbitrary despots clamoring about insignificant, petty concerns, as *un-evolved*. Uncool. Hopelessly "pre" and clueless about "post" (*electronic book review website*)

or, as Heywood and Drake further elaborate, postfeminism is "a groovier alternative to an over-and-done feminist movement" (1).¹⁶ Here, in this more common mobilization of the word, second wave feminism is seen as an anachronistic and completely unfashionable politics and worldview—and one where 'thank goodness we're past it' is the only possible response.¹⁷

To varying degrees, then, this understanding of postfeminism acknowledges earlier feminist accomplishments and changes, but argues that feminism has now evolved into postfeminism—a new and improved period after feminism, and more able to respond to all those things missing from women's lives because of feminism itself. And the emphasis of this newer 'more fun' and 'groovier' postfeminism now allows women to (re)emphasize or return to lifestyle choices and personal consumer pleasures, rather than those older agendas for more direct kinds of social activism.¹⁸ As with the term backlash, then, postfeminism involves more than simply an outright rejection of anything feminist.

Rather, and as with the discussion of backlash above, in this popular understanding and usage of postfeminism, feminism is 'written in' precisely so it can be 'written out'; it is included and excluded, acknowledged and paid tribute to, and accepted and refuted, all at the same time. This definition of postfeminism thus also perfectly exemplifies Faludi's argument about the current backlash; both reject not women's rights and equality themselves (which constitute at least one definition of feminism), but what they define as and see wanting in an earlier feminism, and respond by redefining the more appropriate route now, after feminism, for today's women.

These more familiar usages of both of these terms, though, are ultimately problematic, especially for current feminist analyses of pop culture. Too often, they end up sharing the assumption that there was—or is—something easily (and continuously) identifiable as 'feminism' to begin with, which they then use as a measuring stick to gauge the 'backlash.' It is precisely this presumption of an agreed upon definition of feminism against which one can measure those representations of commercial culture, though, that then also delimits or hinders both their political and theoretical usefulness. In their largely unquestioned acceptance of this definitional stability, many of the current feminist critical usages of these terms do in fact reflect a kind of reaction or response to an earlier feminism, although not in the ways suggested above. Rather, I want to argue, they suggest a kind of 'harking back to' a desired past, a past when feminism supposedly had a stable meaning—and one presumes, a stable agenda—rather than the kind of polysemy or multiple meanings that so dominate feminist theorizings and politics today. The ubiquity of these terms as shorthand feminist cultural critique thus also demonstrates all too well that remains too often both unacknowledged and unacknowledgeable—that there have always been competing definitions of feminism, not just around different social or political agendas, but sharply separated by considerations of race, sexuality, class, and a variety of other systems of social differentiation. Even during the 1970s, the period defined as the 'feminism' that is being rejected in both terms—ostensibly because of its singular definition and deficiencies for many women—feminism had multiple and varied meanings. To believe that 1970s (second wave) feminism had one defining definition or agenda for change, and one that didn't meet the wants of too many women, is to completely overlook (and write out) the many other voices of the time that repeatedly challenged the idea and perception that there was ever one agreed upon definition of feminism. For example, the (according to Faludi, entirely media-generated) mobilizing of the term 'backlash' solely to describe a perceived reaction against an earlier feminism and its 'costs' to women, only makes sense if one also accepts the (again, according to Faludi, equally media-generated) premise that there really was, or is, a necessary conflict between feminism and this list of things it supposedly can't include, only if one believes that this range of 'denied' interests was or is antithetical to feminism—that is, if one really believes that feminism ever meant that one couldn't also be invested in that particular definition of femininity that the media supposedly reverts to in its self-proclaimed desire to represent women's (better) interests. While it is certainly true that some feminisms did espouse this (and some still do), such a definition glosses over the many different and often contentious perceptions and debates between

feminisms about the multiple constructions and definitions of ‘femininity,’ and the debates over their status in any feminist theory or politics.

The problematic issue here, then, is that this same delimited understanding of feminism is also the definition mobilized and used in many of those critiques of current representations of women and feminism as examples of the ‘backlash.’ My worry here is that paradoxically, (if unintentionally), critics who mobilize this word to critique or denounce contemporary media and pop culture representations of women share the same definition of feminism—and of what it includes and excludes—as the supposed creators and perpetrators of that backlash, although they obviously differ in their perceptions of whether this is desirable. Because they subscribe to this same particular and delimited definition of feminism, though, any emphases on those interests supposedly ‘feminine’ interests in the media, pop culture, and advertising are then too often quickly and easily identified only as examples of the ‘backlash,’ and thus also as examples of a rampant anti-feminist (and anti-women) bias throughout the media; in this understanding, an argument for some rendition of traditional ‘femininity’ cannot, necessarily, also be an argument for feminism—a slippage which overlooks how complex many feminisms’ engagements with multiple definitions of ‘femininity’ have been.¹⁹ And the consequence of this shared perception of feminism is that contemporary media and pop culture are then repeatedly denounced for being replete with endless examples of this kind of image, repeatedly accused of perpetuating a ‘backlash,’ and repeatedly identified as the reason for continued frustration, despair, and ultimately rejection by feminists and feminisms. The term backlash thus too often becomes a kind of shorthand for a distinction between a more ‘authentic’ feminism on the one hand, and a suspect, tainted, and usually commercialized rendition of feminism on the other, with the unquestioned assumption that the latter is definitely a problem. And the political result, and limitation, of this agreement of definition is that rather than challenging the limited definition of feminism represented by both the media and their critics, rather than rewriting the overly simple distinction between the particular definitions of both feminism and femininity being drawn, these critiques instead respond by simply refusing the conclusions proffered—either that women’s ‘equal rights’ have been attained or that ‘feminism’ (stably defined) has ‘cost’ women (too much). The politics of backlash thus become a politics of rejection of those representations and the activities they reflect, rather than a more complex engagement with all the definitions and assumptions at work in those representations—an engagement that might then also lead to a more complex, even contradictory, discussion of what feminism(s) can and does(do) mean to many women today.

In much the same way as with backlash, the term postfeminism also elicits a number of other signifieds besides the ‘end’ of feminism—signifieds that make it a much more nuanced, and ultimately more productive, term than its more common usage outlined above suggests. More than simply marking that which comes ‘after,’ the prefix ‘post’ also signals a relationship to its former term, becoming a prefix that constitutes a link with, rather than a break from, its central word ‘feminism.’ In this view, the ‘post’ in postfeminism in fact signifies a continuing relationship to an earlier moment, as the ‘post’ in other current and equally contentious terms such as postmodernism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism does. Thus, rather than being an ‘anti-feminism,’

postfeminism instead becomes—in much the same way as these other three terms—a way to talk about the changes in and growth of feminist thinking over the last 40 years, especially as it has intersected with a variety of other critical languages and approaches (including those other ‘posts’). This is precisely the interpretation offered of this term by a number of contemporary feminist theorists. In *Postfeminisms*, for example, Ann Brooks argues for the importance of rearticulating postfeminism as “feminism’s ‘coming of age’, its maturity into a confident body of theory and politics, representing pluralism and difference and reflecting on its position in relation to other philosophical and political movements similarly demanding changes” (1).²⁰ As argued for by Brooks and others, then, interpreting the prefix ‘post’ in this way translates postfeminism to simply mean feminism today; rather than something separate from and earlier feminism, it instead simply both refers and draws attention to all the shifts in feminist thinking over the past 40 years, as it has engaged with a greatly expanded range of considerations. In its linkage with an earlier feminism, this alternate understanding of the term postfeminism suggests that the breadth of feminist issues is now much broader than ever before, across a range of political, social and cultural issues, and intersecting with a variety of theories about gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, class, and even corporeality, to name just some of the areas of current and complex feminist debates. Postfeminism today is thus not about what comes after feminism, but is about the conceptual shifts within feminism; it refers to transitions in the last 40 years from earlier debates largely focused around equality issues to the current focus on multiplicity, plurality, and difference (Brooks, 4).²¹

From these broader perspectives, then, both this ostensibly ‘more fun’ postfeminism and the more complex understanding of backlash outlined above are not simply reactions against or ‘anti’ feminism. Instead, they become terms to talk about the broadening scope of feminist issues and areas of interest, contributing to theorizing and practicing a feminist politics of engaging with these issues; they open up the possibilities of finding and understanding feminisms in places and in ways very different from—and perhaps even unrecognizable to—that earlier period. As opposed to their more limited meanings as simply reactions against feminism, the terms ‘backlash’ and ‘postfeminism’ both articulate a feminism that takes up and addresses such issues as popular culture, beauty and body practices, sex/iness, and all those other traditional ‘trappings’ of a particular understanding of femininity, engaging with them in often complex and even contradictory ways, rather than accepting and perpetuating their (necessary) rejection. In this shift, these two terms capture the state of feminisms today, complete with all their difficult debates and animosities, their conflicts and contradictions, their pleasures and desires. They are about, not against, feminism; not an appropriation or distortion, but a shift in central categories and questions; not a depoliticization or trivialization, but an active rethinking; not wholly new phenomena, but a way of articulating changes in and the evolution of feminisms. And in their expanded definitions, there is no one definition of what any feminism is, or isn’t. Instead, both now become terms loaded with contradictions and debates, terms about which ‘we’ will not all agree on the political potential of, but terms where, I want to argue, it is far more useful to consider the breadth of what they allow for and encompass (and might be brought to encompass), rather than what they don’t. Using ‘backlash’ and ‘postfeminism’ in these more complex and open-

ended ways allows an insistence on the plurality of positions and issues that they connote for a whole range of different women, rather than collapsing back into arguments over whether we should even use these words or not.

It is of course important to stress that I am not necessarily here promoting a complete relativism, nor am I necessarily accepting the idea that feminism is whatever anyone says it is, that anything that focuses on women in any way is an example of popular feminism or feminism as broadly accepted. As individuals, we all make distinctions all the time, and draw boundaries between what we perceive to count as 'feminism' and not. And personally, I want to hang onto that right, for my own self-definition of feminism and the articulation of my own agency and my own politics. I do want to be able to continue, for example, to insist for myself that feminisms must be at least on some level about social and structural change that they cannot just be about individual women's empowerment without exploring how that empowerment is defined and achieved. But I also want feminisms—both mine and that of others—to be about a continual process of questioning and challenging, not a product or series of beliefs or issues that I hold myself or anyone else accountable to. This would be again to simply reiterate precisely what these more familiar definitions of backlash and postfeminism ironically both accuse earlier feminism of and then also do themselves—designing a checklist or 'rule book' of appropriately 'feminist' behaviors and beliefs. What I am arguing for here, though, is the necessity of engaging in the debates about what kinds of possibilities and limitations are suggested by these oft-used terms—especially in talking about media and pop culture, for engaging in those hard discussions even while realizing they have no definitive answers—because they are also dependent on their discussants, rather than passing judgments based on preconceived definitions, which much of the use of these two terms too often engages in. This expanded understanding of both postfeminism and backlash, that sees them as the points of conjuncture between a number of often competing interests and agendas, and that focuses on them as continuities rather than ruptures, are precisely what has always made any feminism so alive and lively, so exciting and seductive, and it is this that we who identify as feminist should always be striving for in all of our theorizings, rather than shutting down through our cherished—and unquestioned—terms.

Notes

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² As indicated here, the use of this term ranges from women's/feminist social and political action groups, such as NOW and Mediawatch, to a number of more in-depth 'scholarly' feminist investigations. As examples of this latter, see Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richard's *ManifestA: young women, feminism, and the future*, Suzanna Danuta Walters's *Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory*, and Imelda Whelehan's *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism*. While not a complete listing of feminist writers who make use of this term to explore contemporary representations of women and of feminism in media and pop culture, these authors all offer wide-ranging analyses of what they all perceive as a media replete with examples of a 'backlash' against feminism and feminist social and

political changes (or gains). The ubiquity of that ‘backlash’ of course depends on how broadly it is defined; however, in the perceptions of these critics, current media and pop culture is dominated by an anti-feminist sentiment that is best captured by that term.

³ Emphasis mine. This quote comes from a *Boston Globe*, May 22, 2000 story on this report. The 2000 Feminist Primetime Report itself is available online at the NOW site: <http://www.now.org/issues/media/watchout/report/>. Primetime Reports for subsequent years are also available at this same URL.

⁴ Emphasis mine. See Walters for much more detailed explanation of this term, in which she argues that she connects it “the banner term postfeminism, because I believe this word encompasses the backlash sentiment already mentioned as well as a more complex phenomenon of a recent form of antifeminism” (117). The defining of the term ‘backlash’ as synonymous with anti-feminism here is obvious.

⁵ While this can often be a difficult distinction to make, since it necessitates that there be some agreed upon definition of feminism that acts as the standard of measure, what I am signaling in its usage here is simply the popularity of the term in many different audiences of commentators, including those who do not identify themselves as ‘feminist’ by their own (often contested) definitions of that term.

⁶ Faludi also argues, though, that this emphasis is really only in the media, completely constructed and disseminated by them. ‘Real’ women, she constantly notes, are not buying into this ‘myth’ of their unhappiness and lack at all. One especially clear example of this tension between media representation and women’s lives occurs in her section on the founding of the chain of lingerie stores, Victoria’s Secrets. According to Faludi, while the media and other commentators insist that women want sexy, lacy undergarments, her own trips to the store repeatedly reveal that women are overlooking those garments in favor of ‘good ole’ cotton underwear. I’ll return to this point about the split between feminism and femininity perpetuated by Faludi and so many others later in this paper.

⁷ In her book *Feminist Media Studies*, van Zoonen notes some of the problems with critiques that focus on ‘realistic’ or ‘distorted,’ positive or negative, images of women. The argument that media must reflect ‘reality’ and produce what are deemed to be more realistic or more positive images, she reminds us, is always dependent on who is doing the observing and judging, and what position they are speaking from. Not only do such critiques rarely deal with whose image of reality should be represented, but they also assume a stable definition of both woman and gender, shared by everyone, and only in need of better representation--beliefs that are challenged by poststructuralist accounts of gender as constructed. See vanZoonen, and especially chapter 3, for more detail of this argument.

⁸ An important caveat is in order here. While this is true at least some of the time in Faludi’s book, much of the time her definition reverts to the less complex and ultimately more limiting definition of simply being a reaction against or a rejection of feminism, a slippage that ultimately makes her use of this word less powerful and suggestive for thinking about contemporary feminism. Elayne Rapping argues much the same point in her critique of Faludi’s book, arguing that the term ‘backlash’ is too often used to over-generalize about large amounts of disparate material. While noting that Faludi does have one chapter in which she explores the inconsistencies in much “media hype,” thereby illustrating Rapping’s own theoretical belief that the media “are not a monolithic presence, nor are they oblivious to feminist ideas” (272), in the rest of the book, she contends, Faludi never explores the possibility of contradiction, multiple meanings, or alternate readings of any media text or pop culture phenomenon, insisting instead that they are all just more examples of anti-women backlash. See Rapping for more on this argument, and for her critique--and some responses to it--of Faludi’s *Backlash*.

⁹ Of course, what neither Faludi nor most of the proponents of this theory of backlash ever fully address is how this articulation limits which women are being talked about. Both “backlash” and “postfeminism” are particularly frustrating terms for many feminists who argue that there are still many women unrecognized and unaddressed in many feminisms, and who still struggle to have their voices and needs heard.

¹⁰ Thus, for example, Faludi points out that “[T]he backlash line blames the women’s’ movement for the ‘feminization of poverty’—while the backlash’s own instigators in Washington pushed through the budget cuts that helped impoverish millions of women, fought pay equity proposals, and undermined equal opportunity laws” (xxii). In this account, the feminization of poverty is caused by feminism’s insistence on

no fault divorce, and by feminism's insistence on 'sex equality' and 'sex-neutral language and law.' It is feminism that has led to the devastating consequences of divorce (25) and women's greater poverty post-divorce. Again, though, this is an understanding of feminism that defines it as the fight for equality (with a certain group of men), and then defines that fight as the fight for equality of opportunity or treatment (formal equality), rather than, as much feminist work has so powerfully articulated, to equality of outcome (substantive equality). This is also a definition of feminism that sees it largely as unchanging in over 40 years of thought and struggle--as always fighting for the same things, in the same ways.

¹¹ See note #4 above, for how this tension is illustrated in Faludi's argument about 'real' women versus both Victoria's Secrets and the media's myths about women's "feminine" lingerie desires. Most of Faludi's 550-page investigation is aimed at illustrating just how media-generated and constructed this entire notion of women's unhappiness is, as opposed to her own multiple and everyday observations to the contrary, where she notes women's real anger more than their imagined unhappiness.

¹² Whelehan calls this kind of perception that feminism is somehow incompatible with 'femininity' the "oldest argument used against feminism" (17). And yet, interestingly, many feminist commentators seem to agree with it. In chapters such as "Beauty and the Backlash" and "Dressing the Dolls: The Fashion Backlash," for example, Faludi argues that since the rise of the women's movement in the 1970s, these industries have seen declining sales and profits, all connected to the rise of "women's occupational success" (202). This linkage between feminist social movement on the one hand, and a decline in the kinds of 'femininity' promoted by these industries on the other hand, is—for Faludi as for the industries themselves—precisely because feminism both was not and could not be about those kinds of 'femininity.' I'll return to this point later in this paper.

¹³ While the focus of this paper is not on those periodic media claims about feminism and its 'death,' those few examples are telling examples both of the limitations of many of the uses of the terms 'backlash' and 'postfeminism,' and of how much many feminist critics' understandings and uses of those same terms share with their purveyors, a point I take up later in this paper. See Walters and Baumgardner and Richards for detailed and provocative readings of some of these examples from *Newsweek* and *Time*.

¹⁴ I put the word feminism in quotation marks here not because I don't believe it is feminism (which again would presume some stable definition to that word, and a particular power to define it), but because many of self-identified users of that term don't necessarily recognize themselves as feminist, desiring instead to distance themselves from feminism, defined as passé in every way. As other authors have examined (see for example, Orr, Speigel, Heywood and Drake, Gamble), this distancing is also always dependent on a very particular and limited construction and understanding of second wave feminism. The next part of this paper further develops this point.

¹⁵ Again, I put "we" here in quotation marks because it assumes a universal that isn't so. Claims to postfeminism are frustrating for many feminists (and feminisms) that believe that feminism of any kind hasn't even begun to touch the lives of too many women anyway....

¹⁶ This particular definition of (post) 'feminism' as more fun, more relevant, and more desired by many women has even gone on to become a self-identification for many women. Before its URL was taken over by a porn site (and it is now an unoccupied address), the 'postfeminist playground' (www.pfplayground.com) used to best exemplify this kind of self-identity with the term as new and 'more fun' than ordinary feminism. In postfeminism's self declared construction of itself as quite separate and different from an earlier feminist period, it dovetails quite closely with at least one central contention of much self-identified third wave feminism—a coincidence that many third wavers vehemently deny, as exemplified by Heywood and Drake's insistence on the clear difference between the two terms. While I have taken up a detailed examination of the overlaps and distinctions between these two popular late 20th century/early 21st century self-defined 'feminisms' in more detail elsewhere (see Braithwaite, 2002), my argument here is ultimately against their separation. Rather, I insist that they are both part of the contemporary field of 'feminisms,' replete with debate and contradiction, and highlighting different kinds of continuities with early theories and struggles.

¹⁷ Indeed, a number of writers have also pointed to this same rendition of feminism, albeit often in less outrightly dismissive terms, as one powerful reason why so many young women currently supposedly refuse to identify as feminist, best exemplified in that ubiquitous “I’m not a feminist but...” refrain. In fact, Bolotin argues that she originally wrote her 1982 column in the *New York Times Magazine* in an attempt to investigate why so many young women refused the term ‘feminist,’ and thus, supposedly, also rejected feminism as any longer relevant to their lives. And Bolotin was not alone in this query; Paula Kamen’s 1991 *Feminist Fatale* was also a book length investigation of this same phenomenon. Many young women have taken issue with this perception, however, refusing the accusation that young women no longer identify with the word, or, by extension, the politics, of feminism, and arguing instead for how they have redefined that term, making it signify a different set of concerns and issues. See Rundle as an example of the rebuttal of this claim, Hogeland as an example of its supporters, and Baumgardner and Richards as an example of negotiating both of these claims.

¹⁸ And indeed, critics of this term often charge that this ostensibly more fun postfeminism is characterized by the appropriation, distortion, depoliticization, and even trivialization, of feminist politics and ideas; it adopts and uses feminist, or at least feminist-sounding, rhetoric, but has no history or politics, and is focused on individual rather than social change. Again, though, as with the above example of backlash, postfeminism’s rejection of feminism as passé ultimately relies on the same image or stereotype of feminism and of feminist issues and agendas as perpetuated throughout much of the media.

¹⁹ It is here that the importance of new theories of audiences’ roles in ‘reading’ pop culture also becomes especially relevant. While a longer discussion of these ideas remains outside the scope of this paper, emphases on audiences as actively negotiating meaning, rather than passively receiving it, are central to arguing for (possible) distinctions in what might otherwise appear to be quite similar images or representations. When this kind of complexity around interpretation is missing, and the emphasis is only on the surface content of the image itself, then pop culture can only be read as offering ‘more of the same,’ and that conflation of femininity with anti-feminism gets too easily perpetuated. Whelehan, for instance, looks at an example from *Elle* magazine in which schoolgirl fashion is ostensibly offered as a ‘playful, positive, and invigorating challenge’ to the sexual fantasy more usually associated with that look (for non schoolgirls, that is). “We are encouraged to accept that the image set in the nineties is utterly different in its connotation, because the models in question are self-consciously playing with the ‘girly’ look. Ultimately the image itself offers the same echoes of mock innocent, vulnerability, the air of being looked at. An instinctive response is ‘what’s the difference?’... Lamentably, as in so many instances in women’s glossies, the ‘post-feminist’ image amounts to a reclamation of a pre-feminist image” (146-47). But that is precisely part of my point here—that images such as these, and their adoption by any number of women, can and do open up (desperately needed) space to articulate a feminism with and of femininity, one that is potentially understood by its varied participants in quite different ways than ‘what’s the difference’ response initially suggests.

²⁰ Interestingly, this redefinition of postfeminism as similar to other current (and complex) theoretical languages so far appears quite geographically divided. Brooks and Gamble, for example, who ultimately argue for this shift in understanding, publish in Australia and England respectively, while the more popular understanding I outlined earlier is almost the only one found in North American writing about the term.

²¹ August Tarrier and Suzanna Danuta Walters, on the other hand, share a rather less forgiving understanding of that connection between ‘feminism’ and its ‘post’ than does Brooks. Tarrier, for example, argues that “what provides ‘postfeminism’ its cachet is its deployment of the term ‘post’ - i.e., its claim to be transgressive. The prefix ‘post’ presumes in some sense the death of feminism or at least its impending obsolescence: the suggestion is that we have somehow surpassed the mainstream and have moved beyond it to a more authentic (and, not incidentally, much trendier) moment. It makes sense, then, that the advent of ‘postfeminism’ would occur at a time when the marginal and subversive have tremendous currency both in the academy and in popular culture.” Likewise, while Walters recognizes that one definition of postfeminism arises from academic poststructuralist and postmodern theory—what she calls “continental theory,” she goes on to maintain that “both varieties of postfeminism share a distorted and revisionist (in the worst sense) history of feminism, signaling the end of a trend even though we have hardly achieved its

aims in the first place” (136). Thus, while Walters at least shares Brooks’s contention that the ‘post’ in postfeminism is about some kind of connection to its core term, she differs quite radically in her conclusion about what this connection means.

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