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Introduction

Aline Brosh McKenna and Rachel Bloom's "Crazy Ex Girlfriend" follows the life of Rebecca Bunch (Bloom), who abandons a promising career as an attorney in New York to follow her ex boyfriend from a decade ago, Josh, to California. An episode in the first season depicts Rebecca volunteering at the same summer camp as Josh in order to get closer to him. When all does not go as planned, however, she finds herself bruised, rejected, and lost in a cabin full of teenage girls, who remind her to pick herself up. They accomplish this through the original song "Put Yourself First," a female empowerment anthem that directly parodies the work of the popular all-female ensemble Fifth Harmony. The girls descend on Rebecca with lipstick and makeup brushes, as what she needs after heartbreak is a makeover. They swing their hips and pop their torsos, singing "Push them boobs up just for yourself / Wear six inch heels just for yourself." When Rebecca expresses the contradiction that if she acts for herself, she should be comfortable instead of wobbling in heels, the girls reply, "No! Put yourself first in a *sexy* way."

Thus, "Crazy Ex Girlfriend" illuminates the inherent struggle occurring within the concept of "female empowerment," especially when it is touted and capitalized upon by groups like Fifth Harmony. When the members of all-girl groups wear push-up bras and towering heels and sing about their worth as women, as the members of Fifth Harmony do in their music videos for songs like "Worth It" and "Boss," are they truly demonstrating their worth as women, or are they simply rerouting their role as sex objects to the male gaze into a more palatable form, one that gives only the illusion of autonomy and empowerment? "Put Yourself First" seems to give an answer when it shows the girls striking poses for a mustachioed photographer in a shirt

labeled “Male Gaze”; but while a satirical television show has the ability to explicitly anthropomorphize the concept of the male gaze and self-objectification, recognizing these practices in reality proves to be much more difficult, especially in the midst of such situations. Putting on makeup, heels, push-up bras, fake eyelashes, or any similar product more often than not constitutes nothing noteworthy in women’s everyday lives. Generally, women do not proceed through their morning routine analyzing the reasons behind why they enjoy applying eyeliner and mascara; they may simply recognize that they enjoy it, and so they do it. The action does not inherently damage a person, but problems arise when gendered performances blindly overtake someone’s life in heavily gendered American society.

The campers tell Rebecca to “put yourself first for him.” She counters, “If I put myself first for him, then by definition aren’t I putting myself...second?” Instead of giving an adequate explanation, the girls sing, hips thrusting side to side, “Don’t think about it too hard, too too hard / It’s a wormhole / It’s a Mosbius strip / It’s snake-eats-tail / It’s the infinity sign...get a tattoo of the infinity sign / On your lower back, just for yourself!” In this instance, the characters break into a moment of the self-awareness promoted by the song sequence itself, only to slip back into the obsessive need to “put yourself first in a sexy way,” the operative word here too obvious.

Well, here I am, thinking about it very, very hard. When I strap on my own heels and paint my lips in my favorite shade called Man Eater, and when I feel empowered by the response it gets, am I another snake eating its own tail? Does the beauty balm I pat on my face most mornings create scales on my skin, nothing more than a plea for normalized attention—or rather, maybe, an attempt to blend into the rhumba to avoid standing out with taboo dark shadows under my lidless eyes? Does my understanding of the nuances of sexual empowerment do something to dull the venom in my gendered actions, or am I a particularly disgraceful form of viper?

There may not be definitive answers, as differing schools of thought either condemn or celebrate femininity as a strategy to navigate the expectations and demands of a patriarchal society, and in some instances even combat it—in other words, femininity as a form of weaponry. However, since the celebratory belief has recently gained traction, as demonstrated by both the plethora of media promoting female empowerment and the satire it warrants, a critical eye must examine such practices in order to shed the skin, if there is even skin to shed.

What is Femininity?

Sex Versus Gender

Barring a medical emergency, the first observation made about a newborn concerns what lies between the infant's legs, and the doctor shouts, "It's a girl!" or, "It's a boy!" to correspond with the visible genitalia. The initial acknowledgement that the child has either a penis or vagina refers to the sex, or the body's biological characteristics, and the assignment of either "girl" or "boy" relates to the gender, or one's sense and expression of identity that exists in conjunction with cultural distinctions between being male and female. A related term is gender identity, an innate personal sense of being one gender rather than another. Much more often than not, people equate sex with gender and view the two as identical traits, which is what leads the doctor to associate "penis" with "boy" and "vagina" with "girl."

While biological sex in part refers to the genitalia visible at birth, it involves many multilayered components including chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive organs. The common belief is that a person must exist in one of two bodies: a male one, with a penis and testes, both an X and Y chromosome, and higher levels of the hormone testosterone; or a female one, with a vagina and ovaries, two X chromosomes, and higher levels of the hormone estrogen.

However, the existence of intersex people challenges this dichotomous perception. Intersex individuals do not have a clear biological sex that unquestionably falls into “male” or “female.” Instead, they may be born with a variety of characteristics such as genitals that are not easily identifiable (for example, a very large clitoris or a very small penis), both ovarian and testicular tissue, a mixture of sex organs that are not completely male or female, or differing sets of chromosomes. One example of an intersex chromosomal condition is Turner Syndrome, in which a person only has one X chromosome—a marker of neither a male nor a female genetic makeup. Intersex individuals with Klinefelter’s Syndrome have XXY chromosomes, similarly existing outside of a strictly male or female biology. Therefore, biological sex defies the simplistic explanation that many attempt to give it, because more than two biological sexes exist. Intersex people are still human beings with emotions, thoughts, aspirations, and passions; however, they are stigmatized in society because they are not easily categorized into the false binary system of human anatomy that most of society keenly upholds.

Just as intersex individuals defy common views of biological sex, transgender individuals defy common views of gender. It is normally believed that one’s biological sex determines one’s gender. This is once again what occurs when a doctor looks at a newborn child and declares it either a boy or a girl; the doctor does not take into account what the child may grow up to feel, which is a critical component of gender. Because of the preemptive assignment of gender, people sometimes possess a gender identity that differs from the one given to them at birth. Those whose genders correspond with the ones their biologies assume are commonly referred to as cisgender; those who have a gender identity that does not correspond are referred to as transgender, and it is these individuals who present a direct challenge to the idea that biology equals gender.

Gender becomes even more complex when one looks beyond identifying as male or female and recognizes that some people identify as something entirely different. Many people around the world fall under the nonbinary umbrella, a set of identities that exists beyond the binary, or two-parted, system of gender that mainstream society upholds. For example, those who identify as agender feel neither male nor female, and instead live comfortably without classifying themselves as a particular gender. Those who identify as gender fluid do not feel that they have a fixed gender but rather fluctuate between genders over time. Others identify as simply nonbinary, denoting that they do not feel that they live, or that they should have to live, within the gender binary. As of 2014, Facebook offered fifty-eight gender options for users to mark on their profiles, showing the wide range of identities that people claim and demonstrating that gender is a much more multifaceted experience than many believe it to be.

“Doing Gender” Theory

On the surface, gender is often reduced to a simplistic dichotomy of male or female, masculine and feminine, and people become categorized accordingly. Sociologist Betsy Lucal (1999) further explains the binary system of gender, stating that people’s polarized views regarding gender lead them to use socialized cues to classify others into one of two classes, and anyone who does not neatly fit into “male” or “female” is automatically viewed as illegitimate or abnormal (p. 784). To avoid confusion and ridicule, therefore, people learn to “do” a gender, either male or female, and “do” the differing actions and behaviors associated with each. These performances become so socialized in our experience as humans that they are not so much ingrained in our lives but rather become their bases:

Because our appearances, mannerisms, and so forth constantly are being read as part of our gender display, we do gender whether we intend to or not. For

example, a woman athlete, particularly one participating in a nonfeminine sport such as basketball, might deliberately keep her hair long to show that, despite actions that suggest otherwise, she is a “real” (i.e., feminine) woman. But we also do gender in less conscious ways such as when a man takes up more space when sitting than a woman does. In fact, in a society so clearly organized around gender, as ours is, there is no way in which to not do gender. (Lucal, 1999, 784)

Gender, therefore, can become an insidious influencer, leading people to unconsciously “do” masculinity or femininity and leaving little room for conscious, individual choice.

Gender not only encompasses innate identity, performances, and social expectations, but a system of power dynamics. Part of this power both arises from and is created by the idea that “male” is the default; femininity, in turn, requires additional markers of conventional womanhood to differentiate it from masculinity (Lucal, 1999, p. 783). Mickey Mouse wears nothing but red coveralls, yellow shoes, and white gloves. Minnie Mouse, to make sure viewers definitively know she is female, must not wear the same garments; instead, the animators add an extra heel to her shoe, an extra flare to form her skirt, extra long eyelashes to her eyes, and an extra bow on her head. We perceive Minnie as female because she possesses the “extra,” and Mickey as male because he does not. “As with language, masculine forms are taken as the generically human; femininity requires that something be added,” states Lucal (1999, p. 783). People use such additions to present themselves as feminine to others who use visual cues to determine one’s gender, allowing a man to present himself as a woman. This further demonstrates the idea that gender and femininity consist of a complex of cultural cues and learned performances rather than a simple identity drawn from one’s sex.

Gender Hegemony and the Devaluation of the Feminine

If femininity exists as the process of adding “extras” to differentiate it from masculinity, someone may make the argument that it is now socially acceptable for women to wear pants, and therefore less necessary for women to fit themselves into a Minnie-esque image of femininity. If this is the case, why, then, is it not equally as acceptable for men to wear skirts? Why are they still largely prohibited from being anything other than plain Mickey's, with any traditionally feminine addition perceived as taboo? Why do my unpainted fingernails go unnoticed while my brother's pastel blue thumbs cause an uproar at his school?

The answer lies in the hierarchical power structure associated with gender. As previously stated, the masculine rises above the feminine in the hierarchy, leading to an observed devaluation of the feminine. Tulane University researcher Mimi Schippers (2007) studied the concept of gender hegemony and discusses the embedded cultural associations that arise from heterosexual assumptions:

Hegemonic constructions of sexuality as natural or grounded in biology establish the ‘naturalness’ of the complementary and hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity. Placed together in relationship to each other, these features of masculinity and femininity provide the hegemonic scaffolding for relationships between men and women as ‘naturally’ and inevitably a relationship of dominance and submission...The significance of masculinity and femininity in gender hegemony is that they establish symbolic meanings for the relationship between women and men that provide the legitimating rationale for social relations ensuring the ascendancy and dominance of men. (pp. 90-91)

In other words, the perceived physical dominance of men over women translates to a larger societal perception of men's overall dominance. It is important here to emphasize that men do not *in actuality* have to dominate women in all aspects of society; instead, the mere *perception* that they do creates a symbolic complex that perpetuates the hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity.

It is also paramount to acknowledge that within the gender hegemony, masculinity and femininity are tied to their “appropriate” actors, meaning men acting masculinely and women acting femininely. The devaluation of the feminine is the phenomenon that allows women now to wear pants (moving up the hierarchy through a “masculine” action) but bars men from wearing skirts (moving down the hierarchy by adopting a “feminine” action). When a man acts feminine, other men invoke what Schipper (2007) describes as the “masculine hegemony,” the hierarchy within masculinity that places the most masculine men above less masculine men, resulting in “the subordination and marginalization of other masculinities” (p. 87). Therefore, men who adopt feminine actions, such as wearing skirts and make-up, are perceived as lesser because, by being feminine, they are placing themselves lower on the hierarchy established by the gender hegemony.

While society now largely allows women to discard their polka-dot bows and skirts, we must still be, at least in some sense, a Minnie. We can wear pants, but they must be *women's* pants—flatteringly fitted, cut to showcase shoes. We can do away with a cumbersome bow, but our hair must still remain long, or at least styled with a feminine flair. We can play sports and be physically powerful, but we must still look good while doing so, and we are still encouraged to shrink ourselves through exercise and dieting. If we don't—if we fail or refuse—we fall lower not only within the gender hegemony but the “feminine hegemony”; just like its masculine

counterpart, the feminine hegemony involves the ascendancy of certain expressions of femininity over others (Schippers, 2007, p. 94). For example, while it is possible for a woman to be and feel feminine with a buzzed haircut, such an expression would place lower on the ladder than, say, the more typically feminine one of long blonde curls. Therefore, implied within the concept of gender hegemonies is the existence of multiple masculinities and femininities, ones that uphold the established hierarchy and ones that challenge it. The challengers—the polka-dotted Mickeys, the eyelash-less Minnies—find themselves stared at, slandered, ridiculed, even abused because of their embodied opposition to the conventional perception of gender expression. So, yes, women can now wear pants, but I’m waiting to cheer until men can wear lace dresses with no one blinking an eye.

Raunch Culture and Weaponized Femininity

Raunch Culture

The various power structures inherent in gender play a large role in how people behave and choose to present themselves as they conform to masculine and feminine expectations not only to avoid ridicule, but to seek out societal benefits. In the case of coerced femininity, however, the benefits may not outweigh the damage one may do to her body, her internal psyche, and the overall state of gender equality. Author Ariel Levy explores the idea of conforming to socially accepted expressions of femininity and womanhood in the book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*. According to Levy (2005), “raunch culture” encompasses a society in which a specific brand of women’s sexuality, “kitschy, slutty stereotypes,” has become codified and commodified, leading women to be objectified, objectify others, and objectify themselves (34).

Levy cites *Playboy*, *Girls Gone Wild*, pornography, and stripping—all things involving women displaying themselves and their sexuality for profit, male acceptance, and personal gain—as examples of women pandering to the male gaze as per raunch culture, the same way the “Crazy Ex Girlfriend” girls do. However, Levy also delves into less apparent instances of self-objectification due to their ostensibly feminist objectives. The group CAKE, founded by two women, throws monthly parties in which “sexual equality and feminism finally meet,” where women are encouraged to openly discuss and express sexuality as a form of liberation and self-empowerment (Levy, 2005, 70). The founders describe it as a statement against a society that has historically regarded women’s sexuality as a taboo to be left in the dark; however, Levy’s description of a CAKE event reveals the objective power inequalities involved in the organization’s version of sexual empowerment: women dancing on each other with cameras aimed at them after paying to join the party, all wearing the same type of revealing clothing, being ogled by a large group of men (74). Levy’s account demonstrates CAKE’s narrow variety of feminine expression, one that is still driven by appealing to the male gaze. A CAKE partier’s clear regret after drunkenly engaging in sexual activities with other women while men watched underscores this point (Levy, 2005, 74). While publications like *Playboy* openly package female sexuality to cater to a male audience, organizations like CAKE shroud their sexualization of women in the promise of gaining autonomy and power, when in reality the women engage in the same objectification they both crave and reject from men.

The argument Levy progresses throughout these examples is that raunch culture, rather than liberating women’s sexuality, confines it to a narrow iteration, one form of sexual expression, that advances “the prioritizing of performance over pleasure; a lack of freedom to examine [women’s] own varied, internal desires; an obligation to look as lewd as possible”

(168). Instead of feeling free to express themselves however they see fit, women often believe they must conform to one specific type of sexuality, one that objectifies both themselves and other women in an attempt to appeal to the male gaze. The focus is not on women's own pleasure and desires, but rather the ways in which they can sexually appeal to men.

Thus, women implicitly place themselves lower on the hierarchy, which invites a circuitous contradiction: by adopting an acceptable and celebrated form of femininity (one that caters to the commonly perceived sexual desires of men), they are simultaneously raising themselves within the feminine hegemony yet further solidifying femininity as lesser than masculinity. Schippers (2007) states, "Regardless of one's sex category, the possession of erotic desire for the feminine is constructed as masculine and being the object of masculine desire is feminine"; when women add feminine "extras" to their appearance such as makeup, short skirts, heels, even plastic surgery and implants and behave in a sexualized manner in order to become more attractive to the male gaze, they make themselves an object of masculine desire, effectively placing themselves lower in the gender hegemony.

To further complicate the situation, oftentimes, the reason women engage in raunch culture is in an attempt to place themselves higher on the gender hegemony. By objectifying both themselves and other women, many women admitted to Levy that they "wanted to be 'one of the guys'; they hoped to be experienced 'like a man.'" Going to strip clubs or talking about porn stars was a way of showing themselves and the men around them that they weren't 'prissy little women' or 'girly girls'" (p. 4). Embracing the male-dominated culture of treating women like sex objects, whether through porn, strip clubs, or everyday interactions in which people belittle "prissy" or "girly" girls, gives some women the societal benefit of being regarded as "better," higher on the gender hegemony than their "girlier" counterparts. Once again, the devaluation of

the feminine rears its head, and the “female chauvinist pigs” Levy describes use the phenomenon to advance their own standing in society at the expense of other women.

However, women must still refrain from encroaching entirely into the male space; the Minnies, though they may reject the bows, must still wear a skirt as a show of deference. If they don’t, if they try to wear Mickey’s pants, they are viewed as *too* manly, *too* aggressive, *too* sexual—too much. Levy underscores this point with the example of Hugh Hefner, *Playboy* founder and viewed by many as a progressive, feminist knight of the sexual revolution. While on the surface he advocates for free sexual expression and for women to be “themselves,” his philosophy, like many others’, limits who and what a woman can actually be. If a woman’s version of sexuality involves *too much* sexual freedom, she is labeled immoral or wanton; if it involves *too much* appreciation for other women’s bodies, she is written off as a lesbian (Levy, 2005, 59). In short, women must still remain under men in the hegemony, regardless of the ways in which they attempt to raise themselves higher. In fact, in the process of climbing the feminine ladder to move closer to a heavily guarded door, the women who engage in raunch culture perpetuate the idea of masculinity dominating femininity. Levy addresses this contradiction throughout her book, highlighting the behaviors that may temporarily benefit one woman, but that ultimately damage the rest of womanhood.

Weaponized Femininity

Levy begins a critical discussion regarding the ways women are compelled to express their sexuality in contemporary American society, but *Female Chauvinist Pigs* lacks an important piece of the puzzle. It is true that society has become pornified and sexualized, leading a large number of women to choose to engage in raunch culture while unwittingly perpetuating the sexist system they claim to fight against, using the cartoonish, caricatured sexuality Levy

describes to appeal to men and in turn gain social benefits. However, raunch culture is not the only phenomenon to arise from the devaluation of the feminine; women have also created a culture of embracing a certain version of anti-masculine femininity, called here “weaponized femininity,” to combat patriarchal ideals.

Weaponized femininity is a fairly new concept, birthed and popularized through social media sites, but what it lacks in peer-reviewed scholarship, it makes up for in discourse on websites like Tumblr, Twitter, Pinterest, and Reddit. It may be viewed as a subset of raunch culture in the sense that it embraces a particular type of feminine expression as an avenue to a particular type of empowerment, but it is distinct in that it involves an acknowledged disdain for the masculine. Women who engage in weaponized femininity use a “girly” feminine expression to subvert the gender hegemony by reclaiming femininity and infusing it with intentional feminist intent, thereby reframing the feminine as a politically charged, even dangerous identity. Instead of simultaneously rejecting and conforming to an accepted form of femininity as in raunch culture, the culture of weaponized femininity attempts to transcend gender roles by transforming the feminine—usually viewed as soft and nonthreatening—into an act of aggression.

How, then, can femininity become weaponized? A search for “weaponized femininity” on Pinterest reveals images of women, more often than not white, thin, and conventionally attractive, wearing dresses and heels while wielding a knife or gun. There are daggers sheathed in G-strings and pistols adorned with roses, meant to jar the audience with the combination of the nonaggressive (feminine) and the violent (masculine). These images occur alongside photographs of extensive lipstick and eyeliner collections, and even advertisements for certain makeup brands such as one called WarPaint. Taken all together, the Pinterest results reveal a

contradiction not unlike the one found in raunch culture: women attempting to gain power by adhering to a highly stylized, highly intentional version of femininity while in actuality creating a problematically restrictive image of womanhood.

Though weaponized femininity differs from raunch culture in its intent, it ultimately meets the same problems. When women wing their eyeliner “sharp enough to kill a man,” as satirized in a YouTube makeup tutorial parody by Taylor Smith (2013), or when they regard lipstick as “the blood of a man,” they do not challenge much about the gender hegemony. Regardless of the objective, heels, winged eyeliner, red lipstick, and tight or revealing clothing still perpetuate a societally created and accepted expression of femininity, leaving little room for others. The aesthetic of the Internet’s weaponized femininity largely presents itself in the form of thin, white, traditionally beautiful women with pristine makeup and fashionable clothing. Without the influence of weaponized femininity, the images would simply depict large-breasted, flat-stomached women; add a knife or a revolver in their hands, however, and they purportedly become feminist statements, rejections of the very roles they embody. The images still conform to a conventional male fantasy by staying within the confines of conventional beauty and desire. If the culture truly wanted to threaten the male gaze, it would embrace a wide range of women without a care to what mainstream contemporary society upholds as “attractive”—non-white women, large women, pronouncedly muscular women, women with blotched skin and no makeup, bald women, women who don’t shave their body hair. Because this is not the case, weaponized femininity is still rooted in visual appearance and pleasing behaviors, becoming moored in the idea that a woman’s value rests on her physical attractiveness, even when she wields a blade.

Why?

In both raunch culture and the culture of weaponized femininity, women are not passive victims; to assert as much would be an insult to the intelligence of the innumerable women who have engaged in both sets of practices. Instead, it is often a conscious decision to don revealing clothing or to regard makeup as war paint, and women who choose to do so believe it is to their benefit on some level, whether in the name of subverting gender roles, feeling comfortable in their bodies, or simply having fun. The evident contradictions, however, invite scrutiny as to *why* this occurs—why women choose behaviors they may or may not recognize as damaging to themselves or other women.

Patriarchal Bargaining

One explanation could rest in the phenomenon of patriarchal bargaining, defined by Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) as women's strategies and coping mechanisms in dealing with the concrete gendered restrictions placed upon them (275). According to Kandiyoti, "patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts. They also influence both the potential for and specific forms of women's active or passive resistance in the face of their oppression" (275). In other words, patriarchal bargaining influences how women choose to behave to navigate and find success within a male-dominated society. This success often comes at the expense of perpetuating the established gendered power dynamic, as in the case of the women Ariel Levy spoke to who choose to behave "like men" by objectifying other women in strip clubs. They may enjoy the temporary social benefit of connecting with their male peers, but, as previously established, the action results overall in the perpetuation of the gender hierarchy. Patriarchal bargaining works within and on behalf of the system, doing little to nothing, except become the fixation of theoretical discussions, to challenge the power structure.

Internalized Oppression and Domination

Psychological factors could also play a role in women embracing roles that perpetuate their “lesser” placement on the hierarchy. University of Chicago researcher Gail Pheterson (1986) examined some of the psychological and social processes that underscored divisions between women as discovered by the Feminist Alliance Project in the Netherlands (p. 146). Two prominent concepts arose: internalized oppression and internalized domination. Internalized oppression is the process by which oppressed individuals, in this case women, accept their lower status within the dominant society and incorporate it into their behavior. It is often characterized by “self-hatred, self-concealment, fear of violence and feelings of inferiority, resignation, isolation, powerlessness, and gratefulness for being allowed to survive” (Pheterson, 1986, p. 148). While it would again be an insult to assert that every woman propagating a misogynistic culture overtly suffers from the afflictions Pheterson lists, they may still manifest in subtle, often invisible ways. “Female chauvinist pigs” may not possess a self-loathing per se, but a loathing for their status as women and the assumed femininity that placed them there is evident in their attempts to surpass it and mold it into something more akin to masculinity. While there may not be fear involved on a conscious level, the fear of social rejection and sequestration constitutes the undercurrent of many choices women make to either fit into an accepted femininity or strive to carefully construct a nonthreatening female masculinity. While there may not be an overt gratefulness for the ability to exist, some women’s attempts to fit into a stylized, accepted form of femininity reveals a desire to survive and thrive in a man’s world. Women cannot be said to lack agency, but internalized oppression may provide the root of contradictory behavior.

Internalized oppression works in conjunction with internalized domination, defined by Pheterson as “the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within a dominant group of

prejudices against others” and characterized by “feelings of superiority, normalcy, and self-righteousness, together with guilt, fear, projection, denial of reality, and alienation from one’s body and from nature” (p. 146). When women either attempt to become “one of the guys” or behave specifically to appeal to men’s sexual desires, they have accepted the masculine as the dominant group and make efforts to either join or appease that group. On the other side of the coin, men also experience and display internalized domination; just as with women’s internalized oppression, the qualities may simply exist more covertly. No sane man rejects all reality before his eyes, but a denial of reality manifests when a man refuses to—or is perhaps incapable of—viewing a female coworker as an equal despite her comparable education and achievements. Alienation from oneself constitutes a heavy diagnosis, but a man may experience a separation from his body when he stifles emotion for fear of being viewed as feminine, and in turn weak or fragile. The qualities of internalized dominance create limitations for both the dominant and the oppressed, as they narrow the infinite possibilities of human expression to a reduced set of behaviors; “one’s own humanity is thus restricted,” states Pheterson, “and one’s quality of empathy, trust, love, and openness to others and life-enhancing work become rigid and repressed” (p. 146). Internalized oppression and dominance hurt not only women but men as well by barring them from exploring the wide range of human possibilities.

The Age of Choice

There is no denying that historically, society has restricted women’s choices on almost all levels, from ostracizing women who wore pants to barring them from engaging in civic life. From there, there is also no denying that the relatively new freedom to choose their own paths women enjoy should be a cause for celebration. However, discussions of raunch culture and weaponized femininity have already established the contradictions within women’s choices to

adhere to socially rewarded yet problematic expressions of femininity. R. Claire Snyder-Hall (2010) discusses the character of third-wave feminism, developed in the 1990s and continuing today, as a movement that seeks to reconcile traditional femininity with the ideals of feminism by exploring the relationship between gender equality and sexual freedom (p. 255). This new, inclusive wave of feminism driven by the idea of individual choice and self-determination invites its own set of questions—is the concept of free choice inherently problematic because it allows women to perpetuate the gender hegemony? Should women who make such choices deserve negative judgment? Is it anti-feminist to engage in raunch culture or weaponized femininity? Is it anti-feminist to say that it is anti-feminist?

“The New Femininity” and Third Wave Choice

Contemporary feminism draws strength and pride from declaring itself new, different from past iterations of feminism that focused on narrower objectives. Women have won the right to vote, to attend coed colleges and universities, and many other triumphs; third wave feminism expands the fight for gender equality to become more pluralistic and inclusive, celebrating a range of feminine expressions and choices to reach full self-determination. However, exactly how these ideas manifest in practice must be examined.

Anthea Taylor (2003) encourages scrutinizing new ideas within feminism to determine whether they are truly progressive and defiant to the gender hegemony. Though Taylor examined feminism in the early 2000s, before Ariel Levy published *Female Chauvinist Pigs* and before the concept of weaponized femininity took hold of Internet spaces, she predicts the two phenomena in determining that the “new femininity,” as she names it, hinges upon two ideals: celebrating rather than denigrating femininity, and characterizing women’s feminine expression as voluntary and therefore empowering, yet still commodified (n.p.). The former concept pertains to the

attempts of weaponized femininity to raise up femininity by attaching it to an aggressive agenda; the latter reflects raunch culture's embracing of women choosing to objectify themselves and other women. These parallels demonstrate that Taylor's "new femininity" meets the same pitfalls—perhaps empowering a small number of women, but ultimately "[shoring] up, rather than [contesting], a particular symbolic order," here meaning the gender hegemony (Taylor, 2003, n.p.). If feminism is about achieving gender equality, it must challenge the unequal dynamic established within the gender hegemony; raunch culture, weaponized femininity, and the idea Taylor discusses of a new femininity may purport to work towards gender equality, but all three fall short of truly challenging the patriarchal power dynamic. Therefore, when women choose to engage in the practices attached to such cultures, they are not being "feminist" in the sense of actively challenging existing gender relations.

However, they are also not being "anti-feminist" in the sense of actively regressing the advances of feminism. Snyder-Hall (2010) defends the concept of choice within third wave feminism, examining it in the context of individual decisions and expressions. Because feminism intrinsically grapples with the relationship between full, equal personhood and devalued femininity, each feminist faces an internal conflict as to how to reconcile the contradictions arising from the ensuing clash of desires and ideals, leading to an individualized yet simultaneously collective view of feminist action. It is individual in that each woman chooses for herself the most comfortable role or expression of femininity, and collective in that together, women build a network of models and examples to show each other the wide range of possibilities that exist within femininity and womanhood (Snyder-Hall, 2010, p. 259). Thus, it is counterproductive to critique the actions of Levy's female chauvinist pigs, because they are

ostensibly making the best decisions for themselves, and instead more useful for a woman to find her own form of expression.

Snyder-Hall acknowledges a concept that Levy introduced five years earlier: that some women really do feel most comfortable with breast implants, wearing revealing clothing and swinging their hips to mesmerize the men around them. Some women really do find sexual pleasure in catering to the male gaze, and some women really do feel the most themselves in makeup and heels. Others feel most empowered by embracing weaponized femininity and steeling themselves with their “war paint” each morning. However, as Levy proposes, the problems arise when one form of femininity begins to dominate society, overpowering other iterations that many other women may find the most empowering (p. 200). Therefore, it is not inherently anti-feminist for a woman to engage in raunch culture or weaponized femininity. It *is*, however, critical for that woman to examine exactly *why* she feels comfortable or empowered by painting roses on a dagger or going to a strip club. Snyder-Hall worded the idea precisely:

Feminism cannot tell any woman how to resolve her internal conflicts, but it does ask each woman to reflect on her own desires and seriously consider how her choices might play a role in propping up or calling into question the sex/gender system. A “surrendered wife” might ask herself, “When I submit to my husband, does he view me as an equal with different needs or as a subordinate whose needs are less important than his?” A *Playboy* centerfold might ask herself, “Am I really expressing my deep-seated sexual desires or just indulging my own narcissism? Does the sexualized image I am projecting expand the boundaries of gender and sexuality for women or restrict them?” (p. 259)

If women ask themselves similar questions and conclude that their actions really *do* reflect their internal desires, then no, their decisions do not oppose the ideals of feminism, which advocate essentially for women to choose whatever lifestyle they so desire. Yet they also do not progress the ideals of feminism, because they do not challenge gender inequality but rather act within the gender hegemony.

Furthermore, self-questioning may incite discomfort and the conclusion that no, a woman's actions do not reflect her own wishes and attitudes, but instead reflect what she thinks will allow her to obtain the most social benefits or what she believes will protect her from ridicule or even violence from others. Such a case realizes Levy's fears that women often choose behaviors not out of their own wishes, but due to the influence of gender expectations and the limitations set by internalized oppression and dominance. The "Crazy Ex Girlfriend" campers therefore constitute a standard example, with their obsession with contorting their own bodies and selves into what "he" wants, rather than pausing to assess what they truly want. To "put yourself first in a sexy way" is to encapsulate the essence of raunch culture—to place the compulsion to look and act a certain way above personal comfort and fulfillment. The ability for all women to freely choose their own life path does not necessarily damage feminism; the damage occurs when the notions regarding femininity and masculinity set by the gender hegemony permeate all aspects of a woman's life, hindering the very ability to choose free of the often overbearing influence of gender assumptions.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Paradoxes of Gender

Ariel Levy may not have examined every pertinent aspect of feminism, but she comes the closest of any scholar I have read to pinpointing the inherent problem with gender itself:

“Somehow we don’t think twice about wanting to be ‘like a man’ or unlike a ‘girly girl.’ As if those ideas even *mean* anything. Like which man? Iggy Pop? Nathan Lane? Jesse Jackson? Jesse Helms? It is a staggeringly unsophisticated way to think about being a human being, but smart people do it all the time” (p. 108). People patently ignore the broad range of variations of femininity, masculinity, and everything in between in favor of a neatly compartmentalized, categorized system of “this is man” and “this is woman.” In describing the various hegemonies connected to gender and the characteristics attributed to men and women, Mimi Schippers also highlights the ignorance that reinforces false assumptions: “Even if few women and men actually embody these characteristics in relation to each other, the symbolic relationship established through these hierarchical complementaries provides a rationale for social practice more generally” (p. 91). Though throughout life everyone encounters clear examples of exceptions to gender assumptions—a physically weak man, a physically strong woman, a man feeling comfortable and connected with his emotions, a woman who hates shoes and shopping—people still hold tightly to ingrained beliefs about men and women, leading them to act in certain ways they may not have chosen if they were not so wedded to the idea of gender as a segregating institution. It is not a “woman’s dress” if a man owns it, but rather a man’s dress. It is not a “man’s demeanor” that a physically intimidating woman possesses, but rather her own. To truly overcome the issues outlined in this paper, perhaps gender itself must become deconstructed and viewed not as a defining trait, but one of many characteristics a person possesses.

Effects of Self-Sexualization

Beyond conforming to a lifestyle they may not truly want to lead, women and young girls can experience direct psychological damage from engaging in self-objectification and self-sexualization. A 2006 report from the American Psychological Association’s Task Force on the

Sexualization of Girls found that sexualization and objectification destroy confidence and reduce one's comfort in her own body, leading to guilt, shame, anxiety, and self-disgust (Erstein, Mantilla, Manzano, & Seelhoff, p. 5). The culture that promotes excessive sexualization of young girls also promotes the risk of developing depression and anorexia or bulimia, along with increased instances of sexual intercourse and sexual aggression (p. 5). The narrow set of characteristics acceptable within raunch culture, weaponized femininity, and the new femininity contribute to women of all ages believing they must conform to a certain standard, and if they don't, they may be at risk of damaging their bodies and brains to achieve an impossible standard.

The psychological harm that can arise from self-objectification therefore places women's choices in a new context. If a woman who objectifies herself à la raunch culture presents herself to an audience of other women, as in the case of a porn star, can she be blamed for inflicting such damage on her peers? The answer once again lies in Levy and Snyder-Hall's misgivings about free sexuality. It is not the fault of the woman engaging in raunch culture, but rather that the image of female sexuality put forth by raunch culture is the predominant one, oftentimes the *only* one, another woman sees. If only one, stylized form of femininity overpowers all others—whether the caricature-like iteration Levy describes or the pseudo-aggressive one of weaponized femininity—therein lies the root of the issue. As Levy (2005) states in her conclusion, “If we are really going to be sexually liberated, we need to make room for a range of options as wide as the variety of human desire. We need to allow ourselves the freedom to figure out what we internally want from sex instead of mimicking whatever popular culture holds up to us as sexy. *That* would be sexual liberation” (p. 200). More so than sexual liberation, I argue that making Levy's wishes a reality would be *life* liberation. If humans were to free ourselves from the restraints of gender, especially from the narrow iterations and stereotypes put forth by the mainstream popular

culture, then it would not matter whether some women prefer strapping on heels while some prefer slipping on sneakers. It would not matter whether some men prefer to be dominant while some prefer to be submissive. People would be able to simply *be*, free of the limiting influence of gender assumptions.

Personal Case Study

I was not raised to be overtly feminine. My mother never wore makeup and never shaved any part of her body, and throughout my childhood she never mentioned my appearance or weight in a negative manner. When I started commenting on my own weight—I grew faster than my peers as a child and felt out of place until around the age of fourteen—she immediately shut me down, telling me that I was beautiful and had nothing to worry about.

But therein lies the catch: her telling me that I was beautiful. By doing so, my mother, like so many other mothers, unwittingly emphasized the importance of my physical appearance to my worth as a human. I never heard her tell my older brother he was beautiful, but my closest sister and I heard it almost every day. While I do not resent my mother for this, now that I am older I recognize its relevance to the study of gender relations. What was worse, however, were the media images constantly barraging me and my friends from every angle. Whether from television, magazine advertisements, or images on the Internet, they never seemed to stop. I became obsessed for a while with being just like the girls I saw all around me: thin, perfectly made-up, hair sensually curled around their faces. I looked down at my pudgy arms, the blond hair falling in a limp frame around my face, and felt like I needed to hide. I wore baggy clothes whenever I could, and there was an entire summer in which I refused to wear shorts because I was ashamed of my legs.

Fortunately, I grew out of the shame for the most part, but I still have friends now in their twenties who refuse to wear shorts or leave their house without putting on makeup. We are still barraged with images of unattainable bodies and faces, leading me to sometimes stare wistfully at an advertisement and wish I had that body, that hair. It's always only for a second, but it is a second too long.

I admit that I have engaged in raunch culture and weaponized femininity at various points in my life, but mostly after I entered college. I have put on revealing clothing, strapped on heels, painted my face, and felt good about it—sexy, even. There was even a time when my roommate and I started a photoshoot wearing red lipstick and posing with knives—it started out as a joke, but quickly turned into a practice in aggressive empowerment. However, I have found a marked difference between when I dress to feel good for myself and when I dress to appeal to the male gaze and potentially attract a man. Even if I wear the same cropped shirt and heeled boots in both situations, more often than not I find myself feeling doleful and uncomfortable at the end of the night when my intention is to be appealing, rather than happily exhausted from dancing and having fun when I am only worried about myself and my own friends.

Especially after I began studying social science, I became acutely aware of the ways my friends and I engage in problematic behaviors. To this day, I watch my friends in sororities go to fraternity mixers entitled “Call of Booty: World of Whorecraft” and “CEOs and Corporate Hoes.” As sickening as these are, and as sickening as my friends *acknowledge* they are, they still attend the parties and dance with the boys who named them. As much as I understand the intricacies of weaponized femininity, I still find comfort in staining my lips red and dancing in heels even though I know, at least for myself, that the reason for the comfort is that they make me look conventionally attractive.

I constantly ask myself why I engage in these behaviors; R. Claire Snyder-Hall would be proud. However, the answers are not as clear-cut as she presents them. The answer is yes, I enjoy teetering in heels and accentuating my curves, but when I dig deeper, the affirmation still arises from the fact that I feel appealing to the male gaze. To feel sexy is to feel sexual, able to be coveted in such a way. Therefore, when I feel sexy, it is inherently tied to my experience and expectations as a heterosexual woman. Ultimately, my “yes” entails a plethora of layers that I must peel back to truly get to the core of the issue, a core I haven’t yet solidified.

Conclusion

As complicated as the issue is, I am not a snake. Neither are the “Crazy Ex Girlfriend” characters, nor the women of Fifth Harmony, nor the women who go to strip clubs or romanticize rifles. If we verge on becoming reptilian, it is within the constraints of a gendered society that places too great an emphasis on gender in the first place. The power dynamics associated with gender motivate people of all genders to mold their behaviors to specific expectations to gain social capital, or simply even acceptance and safety. Therefore, it is “snake eats tail,” but we are more so the casualties of the thrashing serpent rather than the snake itself.

However, we do have a responsibility to question our actions rather than qualifying any action a woman takes as feminist. We should not scorn other women for romanticizing a weaponized feminine aesthetic, but we must not equate perpetuating aggression as a feminist statement. We should not write off girls who “go wild” as vapid victims of mindlessness, but we must also recognize the ways in which such actions perpetuate existing and harmful gender relations. When we hail every choice a woman makes as a feminist endeavor, we fall into the trap of empowering some women who make decisions concordant with the status quo, but leaving others who do not fit conventional or celebrated renditions of femininity in the dust.

Women are not passive victims in their own lives, but rather agented beings capable of choice. Gender, however, often complicates that choice by introducing extraneous factors that hold great influence over how people choose to behave. If not for the imbalanced gender hegemony that both overtly and subtly places maleness above femaleness, women would not have to engage in social arrangements such as raunch culture and weaponized femininity in order to compensate for their “lower” status as women. However, the intricate power dynamics that exist within gender have narrowed the ideas regarding what people—men, women, or otherwise—can appropriately be. Therefore, women can celebrate their freedom of choice, but must simultaneously recognize the convolutions and contradictions that play a role in the sexualization, objectification, celebration, and weaponization of femininity. While we attempt to navigate our own femininities in our own lives, it is imperative to determine the source of our behaviors and desires, and continue to engage in self-questioning to assure that our behaviors are of our own will.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2lmojePnA0> (Put Yourself First)

I. Introduction

- A. “If I’m doing this for him, aren’t I by definition putting myself...second?”
“Don’t think about it too hard.”
 - a. Introducing the concept of women’s choices becoming influenced by the male gaze

II. What is Femininity?

- A. “Doing Gender” theory
- B. Devaluation of the feminine--<http://www.jstor.org/stable/190119>
- C. Defining/examining femininity in the context of multiple femininities—
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4501776>
- D. Gender consciousness/agency in developing self-identity--
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/190119>
 - i. “Empirical research reveals that a substantial minority, or even a majority of U.S. American women, recall being tomboys in childhood. Because of increased pressures, physical changes, and tomboy lore that the status is temporary, most girls seemingly renounce their tomboyish ways in adolescence. Some research suggests, however, that tomboys merely adopt a more feminine performance in the face of these pressures, retaining many of their tomboy skills and traits.”
 - 1. Concept of a “tomboy”—breaking out of strict gender norms
- E. Personal experience of femininity

III. “Raunch Culture”

A. Contradictions of gender

“Even if few women and men actually embody these characteristics in relation to each other, the symbolic relationship established through these hierarchical complementarities provides a rationale for social practice more generally” (Schippers 91).

B. *Female Chauvinist Pigs* and explanation of what raunch culture is

C. Personal experiences experiencing/perpetuating raunch culture

D. Why does this happen?

a. Internalized oppression: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174362>

i. “Internalized oppression is the mechanism within an oppressive system for perpetuating domination not only by external control but also by building subservience into the minds of the oppressed groups.”

ii. Connection to “Put Yourself First”

b. Internalized domination (same link)

i. “Internalized domination perpetuates oppression of others and alienation from oneself by either denying or degrading all but a narrow range of human possibilities.”

ii. Limitations for the oppressor as well as the oppressed

“Regardless of one’s sex category, the possession of erotic desire for the feminine is constructed as masculine and being the object of masculine desire is feminine” (Schippers 90)

IV. Sexual Empowerment/Women’s Choices

A. The “new femininity”--[http://p2048-](http://p2048-library.ramapo.edu.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/docview/210910610?accountid=13420)

[library.ramapo.edu.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/docview/210910610?accountid=13420](http://p2048-library.ramapo.edu.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/docview/210910610?accountid=13420)

B. Discussion of “choice”-- <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25698533>

a. “Despite women embracing and expressing sexual agency at different historical times and in different cultural settings, contemporary, Western constructions of heterosexual sex still reduce it to penetrating and being penetrated and that relation is consistently constructed as one of intrusion, ‘taking,’ dominating” (Schippers 90)

C. Connection to raunch culture

D. Personal experience

V. Media Study –The Women in *Teen Wolf*

A. Discussion of femininity/feminism in the media in general--

[http://p2048-](http://p2048-library.ramapo.edu.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/docview/210910610?accountid=13420)

[library.ramapo.edu.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/docview/210910610?accountid=13420](http://p2048-library.ramapo.edu.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/docview/210910610?accountid=13420)

B. Alison, Lydia, Melissa

VI. Impact of These Processes/Where do we go from here?

A. Effects of self-sexualization-- <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20838700>

B. Is femininity/feminism an individual or political act?--

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23269182>

C. Challenges facing third wave feminism--[http://p2048-](http://p2048-library.ramapo.edu.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/docview/233237030?accountid=13420)

[library.ramapo.edu.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/docview/233237030?accountid=13420](http://p2048-library.ramapo.edu.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.library2.ramapo.edu:2048/docview/233237030?accountid=13420)

D. Personal thoughts on femininity/feminism/tie back to “Put Yourself First”

Other potential links:

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3081875>

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20676769>

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3090101>

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25698533>

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25792560>

<https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2013/12/28/my-two-cents-on-feminism-and-miley-cyrus/>

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/089124388002003004>