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# Neoliberalism and popular women's culture: Rethinking choice, freedom and agency

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**Abstract**

'Choice', 'freedom' and 'agency' are terms liberally appropriated in recent years by popular women's cultural genres to advance an image of the new, empowered woman confidently embracing patriarchal heterosexuality and commodity culture. Critics such as Rosalind Gill have linked this image to the influence of contemporary neoliberalism. This article extends these claims in order to argue that with the rise of this new female subject that reflects the workings of the neoliberal process of subjectification as immanent within and responsive to normative power, a more detailed examination is necessary of the changed meanings of choice and freedom. In the light of this changed form of governance and subjectification, feminist critique of popular women's culture needs to readjust its terms of engagement.

**Keywords**

Choice, freedom, neoliberalism, popular women's culture

**Introduction**

'Choice', 'freedom' and 'agency' are terms liberally appropriated in recent years by popular women's cultural genres such as chick lit, chick-flicks, makeover TV programmes and beauty adverts, to advance an image of the new, empowered woman confidently embracing patriarchal heterosexuality and commodity culture. While these terms suggest a feminist legacy, they are used not to advance the feminist cause, but to celebrate a rhetoric of individual choice and freedom which often is measured in terms of commodity consumption. Feminist critics have lambasted this postfeminist popular culture as a backlash against feminism, and a commodification and 'lifestyling' of genuine

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socio-economic problems (Dow, 1996; Faludi, 1992).<sup>1</sup> This article extends the claims made by critics such as Rosalind Gill that link postfeminist popular culture with contemporary neoliberalism (Gill, 2006a, 2007a), in order to argue that with the rise of this new type of active female subject, a type that reflects the workings of the neoliberal process of subjectification as immanent within and responsive to normative power, a more detailed examination is necessary of the changed meanings of choice and freedom. In the light of this changed form of governance and subjectification, which operates on a plane of immanence and collapses or erases traditional boundaries and oppositions, feminist critique of popular women's culture needs to readjust its terms of engagement. This article argues that the effectiveness of this neoliberal process of subjectification must be acknowledged first before criticism from within, rather than outside, can be carried out more fruitfully. It also seeks to point out that although neoliberal-inflected popular women's culture is far from a utopian site of consumer sovereignty or democracy (Hollows, 2000), criticism that over-stresses its deception and commodification may risk positioning women as passive dupes once more, and revert to a position of pre-cultural studies pessimism.

## Redefining choice, freedom and empowerment

Neoliberalism was formulated in the postwar years by the Chicago School of Political Economy to advocate market supremacy and competitive freedom against Keynesian state planning. It reached its apotheosis as the hegemonic economic, political and social policy of the West with the election of Margaret Thatcher in the UK in 1979, and Ronald Reagan in the USA in 1980. Commenting on the neoliberal ascent in the USA that culminated in the conservative economic, social and imperial policies of the Bush administration, Wendy Brown (2003) pinpointed the constitutive role of neoliberal rationality in the formation of late-capitalist consumer culture and its construction of a new subject, who is interpellated as an acquisitive entrepreneurial and self-responsible consumer. Reflected in popular culture, there has been an increasing trend since the 1990s towards a celebration of conspicuous consumption and solipsistic individual gratification, embodied above all in the image of the empowered, assertive, pleasure-seeking, 'have-it-all' woman of sexual and financial agency.

This is seen, for example, in the rise in the 1990s of the so-called 'Girl Power', which emphasised ultra-feminine looks and a sexualized image as a means of empowerment and agency. The all-girl music band Spice Girls and the feisty, glamorous girl detectives in the new *Charlie's Angels* movies are good examples (Genz, 2006: 76). In media advertising for women's lingerie, women's sexuality is flaunted and their eroticised bodies are put on display, not primarily as an object of the male gaze but in support of a discourse of 'empowered beauty' (Lazar, 2006), emancipation, self-determination and inner worth. 'Wear it for yourself', 'Because you're worth it', so claim the lingerie and cosmetics adverts. In women's romance, the new chick lit genre departs from traditional romance by celebrating an assertive female sexual pleasure and a glamorous cosmopolitan lifestyle of conspicuous consumption (Gill, 2007b; Siegel, 2007). Commenting on this new phase of popular women's culture, Rosalind Gill has pointed out that feminists such as Faludi and Whelehan may be offering a partial picture when

they criticise this new development as anti-feminism, retro-sexism or a 'revival of old patriarchy' (Whelehan, 2000: 5; Gill, 2007b). Such a view fails to see that a 'new femininity' is being constructed in the neoliberal context that addresses young women as autonomous, confident and desiring sexual subjects who actively and knowingly make choices, in stark contrast to women's traditional image of passivity and subordination (Gill and Scharff, 2011). It is this direct interpellation of women as subjects of freedom, choice and empowerment, what Gill aptly terms as a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, that marks neoliberal-inflected popular women's culture as different from before.

Indeed, many feminists have acknowledged that this new culture partially has absorbed and incorporated feminist agendas of gender parity and female emancipation by celebrating women's achievements and enhanced opportunities in education and employment (McRobbie, 1996, 2011). A greater prominence of women-related topics in popular women's genres, and more permissiveness or openness on issues of female sexuality and sexual orientation, also have helped to broaden the scope of sexual expression, not just for heterosexual women but for gay and lesbian people as well (Gerhard, 2005; Henry, 2004). However, feminists have pointed out that freedom and agency in the popular context have been resignified to refer to an individual's voluntary choice of self-objectification, and of willingly participating in and following whatever is prescribed by patriarchal heterosexual norms and capitalist commodity culture (Budgeon, 2001). Thus the 'popularisation' of feminism has been achieved, not to embrace the feminist movement or to advance the goal of social change or elimination of inequality; rather, to alienate feminism, spell its obsolescence and reinforce the patriarchal status quo (McRobbie, 2007, 2011).

For example, this is brought home most poignantly in the episode of *Sex and the City* where Charlotte decides to quit her job to get married and have a baby. As if pressured by the silent disapproval of her three girlfriends, and by her own awareness that her decision might run counter to feminist struggles for gender parity and women's right to employment, Charlotte hotly contends, 'It's my life and my choice ... I choose my choice.' Ironically, Charlotte appeals to the very feminist ideal of female freedom to justify her very unfeminist choice. Claiming that 'The women's movement is supposed to be about choice', she contends that she is justified in choosing to quit her job ('Time and Punishment', s.4, ep.7, 8 July 2001). With these words she silences her disapproving girlfriends, and they simply move on to a different topic. Here, an adroit appeal is made to the feminist ideal of women's freedom of choice, whereby women are liberated from gender constraints over how to live their lives. At the same time it is made in an atmosphere where traditional gender roles are embraced and feminism is positioned as a lecturing, moralising and repressive force from which Charlotte wishes to free herself in order to make her individual choice.

Yet why is neoliberal freedom in its resignified meanings more appealing than feminist ideals of freedom? How does this resignification take place and affect the construction of a new type of female subjectivity? Why do young women willingly 'choose to be dupes', apart from an inability to recognise the conspiratorial manipulation of patriarchal capitalism? Why does this new development make criticism along old lines increasingly difficult? These issues are crucial to feminist engagement with popular women's culture,

and more expansive explorations are needed as to why neoliberalism is so effective, or 'intractable' as McRobbie terms it (2011: xi).

## The immanent neoliberal subject

Feminists have rightly pointed out that a resignification of the meaning of freedom or choice has occurred in the neoliberal popular culture. This is because instead of the traditional humanist definition of unlimited, universalised and absolute freedom, neoliberal choice refers to one's ability to choose maximum material gain and profit in order to construct one's own self, and agency now means the ability to be active in this materialistic, profitable self-actualising project. Rather than viewing freedom as an ultimate and yet-to-be-reached goal, neoliberalism posits a new type of subject as *already* free and rational, a *homo economicus* who freely deliberates every action based on a rational cost-benefit calculation. Reflecting the marketisation of all areas of human life, including the construction of the human subject, this new form of governance dispenses with morality or ethics in the traditional sense, and places them squarely in the responsibility which the individual must shoulder for their own marketised choices. Thus freedom as a new type of 'positive freedom'<sup>2</sup> or positive governance, is never complete freedom from power, but the active ability to respond to power and the autonomous ability to realise one's potential through one's own efforts and active choice. Freedom is not freedom from want but freedom from passivity, and to be free is to exercise one's power to influence and be influenced by others (Foucault, 2003).

This changed meaning of freedom as the active ability to respond to and be influenced by power and marketised cost-benefit calculations may lead to reinforcement, rather than resistance, of the normative status quo. Indeed, despite a much-touted emphasis on women's freedom to do whatever they desire, popular women's genres feature 'free' women who invariably end up making the same choice prescribed by normative culture, willingly desiring the same normative heterosexual relationships and the same sexy, eroticised and fashionably adorned female bodily charm that always has been promoted by patriarchy and capitalism. In makeover TV programmes, across billboard and TV adverts and in chick lit romances, the women may be economically and professionally successful, but they all yearn for the same looks and are emotionally needy, seeking fulfilment in heterosexual encounters. They may come from different backgrounds and professions, and their sexual encounters may be multiple and more than the one climatic union with a single dominant male, as in traditional genres, but such a seeming diversity and freedom works only to lead to a fundamental assimilation whereby all follow the normative line, and fail to problematise heterosexuality in its current forms.

Yet, to criticise this changed form of freedom as false or 'fictional' (Dow, 1996: 209), or as another form of deliberate deception and false consciousness, may be simplifying the case. First, neoliberalism is not simply another form of direct disciplinary power exercised by the dominant discourse over passive female subjects. As a new form of self-governance, where the only guiding principle is marketisation and self-interest, neoliberalism encourages individuals to willingly and freely choose to follow the path most conducive to their self-interest: the path which often turns out to be the normative one, the one for which the state has provided the best conditions. Neoliberalism does not

operate directly on or coerce these choices in the way that traditional disciplinary power works – hence its seeming tolerance or openness – rather, it impacts on the *conditions* that make these choices desirable and voluntary (Read, 2009). It governs indirectly by making desirable activities inexpensive and undesirable ones expensive, thus channelling the choices willingly made by its subjects because these dovetail with their self-interest. Thus, instead of being coerced by direct disciplinary surveillance by the state, individuals now willingly and actively self-govern in a climate enabled by the state. Traditional calls for resistance to dominant power and norms presuppose an opposition or tension between the individual and the state, but such opposition is now collapsed and defused in the neo-liberal atmosphere, for out of self-interest, now the individual as *homo economicus* can self-serve best by choosing to follow the normative line, as part of what Rose calls the ‘patriotic duty of the citizen’ (1999: 145). This is, by and large, a much more effective form of governance, as once responsabilised and entrepreneurialised, these individuals then actively would defend such a form of self-governance and normative choice, thus defusing criticism of oppression and rendering many older terms of critique obsolete.

Another trait that makes traditional criticism difficult is that rather than power working on a passive subject from the top-down or outside, neoliberalism entails a different process of constituting the subject as immanent within, and responsive to, normative power. Neoliberal governmentality is both subjection and subject-making, for the neoliberal subject is not a pre-given essence external to and repressed by power, but is actually immanent to power and enabled by it. Such a subject cannot be simply liberated and restored to its ‘true’ essence by overthrowing power. Therefore, it would be inadequate to criticise active, ‘free’ normative choices as merely false and deceptive, that dupe and objectify women, for such marketised choice and calculations are integral to the constitution of this new type of subject.

For these subjects the boundary between the entrepreneur, conventionally coded as active, and the consumer, coded as passive, is erased as they are emphasised to be the producer of their own choices and calculators of their own risks. In feminist criticism of the neoliberal commodification of freedom, and its new definition of female agency almost exclusively in terms of commodity ownership, an implied reservation is about women’s possible exploitation by capitalist commodity culture when they are lured into full participation. Yet again in the neoliberal context, this tension or opposition between consumer and entrepreneur is collapsed. Shoe fetishism or ‘shopaholic’ behaviour is no longer evidence of women’s victimisation by the tyranny of the fashion industry, but is to be seen as a source of building up confidence and individual identity, as well as having the competitive edge in a marketised arena of dating and working. Criticism of irrational consumption or manipulation by scheming capitalists may be defused, as participation in commodity culture is seen as contributing to the accumulated human capital of the economic subject, who as consumer is their own entrepreneur, her own producer of satisfaction and pleasure, and eventually the bearer of her own responsibility. Thus consumption becomes an entrepreneurial activity which, as Foucault (2008) points out, can be analysed solely in terms of the individual economic subject, who is now recognised as one among many productive enterprise units.

Perhaps the most crucial area where freedom and agency are resignified is where the neoliberal project of individual gratification has threatened to replace the feminist politics of collective emancipation. Emancipation in the political sense of women gaining

strength and abolishing restrictions through solidarity and collectivity is shunned and distrusted increasingly, as young women today turn to small changes in one's personal life. Indeed, it seems that feminism is distanced not because it champions women's rights and freedom, but because it does so on a collectivist basis and predicates individual freedom on social change as a whole.

This is seen, for example, in chick lit works such as *The Undomestic Goddess* (2006) by Sophie Kinsella, author of the 'Shopaholic' series, where the high-flying London lawyer Samantha rejects an offer of partnership in order to work as a domestic housekeeper to be close to her lover. When asked by reporters if her decision has turned her into a 'Judas' to feminism and to all the women who 'have fought for years to gain an equal foothold', Samantha angrily replies that she does not want to tell women anything, she has only 'made a personal choice', for 'personal reasons', and is 'just leading my own life' (2006: 362, 368). This sense of alienation from feminist collective politics is evidenced also in the TV series *Ally McBeal*, where Ally is urged by a mannish, brusque, strident and decidedly unfashionable second-wave feminist figure, Lara Dipson, to drop the mini-skirt-wearing, 'skinny, whiny, emotional slut thing and be exactly who we want you to be'. With feminism and feminists now portrayed almost as a new repressive force from which young women feel the urge to be freed, Ally replies that she does not want to act as a role model for other women, she just wants to be responsible for herself ('Love Unlimited', s.2, ep.2, 18 January 1999).

In her informative study on prime-time television programmes, the feminist critic Bonnie J. Dow writes that women's popular culture has now reversed the feminist adage 'the personal is political', and reduced the political to personal. Calling this a 'lifestyling' of feminist politics and social practices, Dow writes that although these women-focused TV programmes have 'enhanced awareness and acceptance of the range of choices women can make about how to lead their lives' (1996: 208–209), the danger lies in that this exclusive focus on personal lifestyle choices such as appearance, personality, fashion, cooking and marital issues threatens to ignore political beliefs and actions. The second wave feminist adage, meaning that personal, individual problems are all traceable to the political situation of women's subjugation in patriarchy, is now reversed to mean that everything, including the political, is actually personal and individual.

Indeed, this could be seen in the changed attitudes that many popular women's genres now exhibit towards serious or structural problems such as gay or lesbian issues. These genres profess a more tolerant and liberal approach to alternative sexual orientations, seemingly suggestive of greater progress and democracy over traditional repressions and prejudices. Yet gay or lesbian issues, with their sociopolitical complications, are now transformed into a diversity of individual choices and personal decisions as 'just a label ... like Gucci or Versace [or] Birkenstock' (*Sex and the City*, 'What's Sex Got to Do with it?' s.4, ep.4, 17 June 2001). As Samantha puts it, who declares herself a 'tri-sexual', people should stop viewing others as gay or lesbian but just as individuals who are freely expressing themselves sexually ('Was it Good for You?' s.2, ep.16, 19 September 1999). Gay politics is now simply an alternative personal choice amid a whole array of possible choices. Similarly, pornography and the eroticisation of women's body traditionally have been criticised by feminists as an eroticisation of the power relations between the sexes, and thus a primary means of male oppression of women; however, in recent years an

increasing trend toward a mainstreaming of pornography, or ‘porno-chic’, has been witnessed (Attwood, 2011). For example, young girls dressing up as bunnies or in revealing costumes and flaunting their bodies online, are just emphasised to be exercising individual choice about how to present or ‘perform’ a sexual digital image, of which they are in total control (Ringrose, 2011).

Dow’s summary of the situation is certainly insightful, but there also seems to be a suggestion that such ‘lifestyle feminism’, as she calls it, is trivial, superficial and could ‘only go so far’ (1996: 209). Such a view, of course, valorises the political or collective over the personal or aesthetic, but it must be pointed out that it is exactly by changing its discursive deployment and addressing individual desires, aspirations, habits and self-interest at the level of everyday life that neoliberalism has proved so effective. Personal lifestyle choices in the neoliberal context do not just gloss over or ignore real, ‘deeper’ socio-economic problems; they are always marketised and based on deeply materialistic considerations. Neoliberal market supremacy has led to the unprecedented expansion of economics into all areas of human existence,<sup>3</sup> thus marketising all social differences and translating these into costs and benefits that, as mentioned previously, the individual should calculate rationally for maximised self-interest.

The crucial point is not that the political is ignored, but that it is now subsumed under the all-absorbing domain of marketised self-governance. Social, structural problems still exist, but the responsibility or blame now shifts from society to the individual. Any unsatisfactory or unequal situation in a woman’s life is judged as nothing other than the effect of her own choices and investments, which is to be solved not through structural changes but through the individual continually seeking to improve own her competitiveness in a ceaseless project of the self, be it hairstyle, make-up, cooking skills or career capabilities. In the feminist agenda for collective political action, individual women are seen to lack power and the collective is beneficial to the individual, as only in solidarity do women gain the power to fight against the patriarchal state. However, as stated previously, neoliberalism operates by seeing the individual as *already* free and capable of rational calculation based on self-interest. With the tension between the individual and the state collapsed and the individual willingly defending her normative choice, feminist collectivist resistance to the state is actually seen as harmful to the individual’s exercise of personal choices based on her own best self-interest. This certainly leads to important political consequences, as it leaves the status quo pretty much unchanged and equates the patriarchal norm with rationality. Therefore, neoliberal popular culture does not ignore the political, but is ultimately a conservative political project: not by direct oppression of feminist political action, but by subsuming the political and through recourse to non-political, non-traditional means which, nevertheless, have dire political consequences.

## Women as dupes –again?

Popular women’s culture is an area that is crucially important to feminist cultural studies. It is where feminist critics of the 1980s made their tremendous contribution to the field of cultural studies which was, until then, dominated by critical interest in male cultural practices (Shiach, 1998). By catapulting women’s popular genres into the



foreground of critical interest, feminist critics have changed perceptions of the genres as the sugar-coated opiate deceiving women into loving their shackles and embracing patriarchy (Firestone, 1970). Feminist cultural scholarship of the 1980s and early 1990s rejected the Frankfurt School's dismissal of the passively manipulated consumer or reader, and argued for a complicated process of women's consuming or reading of popular women's culture in which the consumer or reader is capable of differential uses, and of imbuing meanings into such uses which may even point toward transgression and resistance (McRobbie, 1978, Modleski, 1982; Radway, 1984). However, with late-1990s popular women's culture, feminists have responded with almost unanimous criticism and found it hard to come to terms with the pervasive ridicule of, and alienation from, feminism in the popular genres that they used to defend.<sup>4</sup>

The celebrated feminist cultural critic Angela McRobbie is famous for her late-1970s and early-1980s assertions that found positive potential for resistance and agency in young girls' love of popular girls' magazines (McRobbie, 1978). However, in her more recent work, McRobbie (2007, 2009) views her earlier scholarship as too optimistic, extravagant and overly enthusiastic. User or consumer agency and empowerment, the very words first used by cultural studies critics to champion the positive potential in the consumption of popular culture, have not led the public to 'embody more emboldened identities' (McRobbie, 2007: 30). Rather, they have been appropriated by the very commodity culture itself to urge young women, interpellated as agentic and empowered, to willingly choose to embrace normative culture and to adjust to it. An idea of antagonism and romantic subversion is now translated into a term of normalisation. What is more, it is now used to 'dismantle' and 'undo' feminism itself (McRobbie, 2007: 29).

This serves to show the difficult position that feminists often find themselves in when criticising contemporary popular women's culture. 'Agency', 'emancipation' and 'empowerment' are familiar feminist terms, as feminists have long fought hard to free women from patriarchal oppression so that they could take their lives into their hands and freely choose their own life courses. It is not hard to see that with the neoliberal resignification of these terms, an adroit appropriation, assimilation and commodification takes place so that forces of resistance are translated eventually into profitable capital and reproductive energy. This has led some feminists to take a more radical stand by castigating the new phase of popular women's culture as intensified deception, commodification and a deeper form of malicious exploitation. According to Shelley Budgeon, the neoliberal form of agency touted in contemporary popular women's culture is contingent upon 'self-objectification and dependence upon the approving gaze of others' (2001: 66). It is not 'real' feminism but 'fictional' (Dow, 1996: 209), 'commodity' feminism (Whelehan, 2005: 155) that 'sells' feminist ideas of liberation, freedom and independence (Hollows, 2000: 194) for the explicit purpose of subjugating and oppressing women more deeply and on a more subtle level. The women consumers championed in 1980s' feminist scholarship are lapsing back into a pre-1980s position of dupes, although this time they are willing dupes and even more unconscious of their exploitation.

This article agrees with the warnings of feminist critics over the danger of 'a fading-away' of feminist critical power into a mere celebration and justification of women's

normative choices (McRobbie, 2009: 4; Tasker and Negra, 2007). Popular women's culture is certainly no consumer's paradise where women are free to experiment or play with meanings and lifestyles. However, this article also argues that recognising the effectiveness of the neoliberal construction of a new type of female subject has proved that new terms of critique are needed all the more, in order to take into full account its changed nature of operation. Neoliberal self-governance is no longer just a continued intensification of disciplinary surveillance along the old lines (although this still exists), and what is at stake is not a matter of how to find authentic, uncoopted forms of resistance – as if a pure, uncommodified and unmediated form of feminism could replace neoliberal popular culture from the *outside*. It is about how to start *from within*, from a position that stands in an immanent yet critical relation to the way that neoliberalism achieves its effective governance: the inner conflict that problematises its touted message.

A fruitful way to begin this critique is to examine the neoliberal claims of liberation and progress. It must be pointed out that despite all the emphasis on freedom, agency and choice, particularly in sexual matters, it is not difficult to see that the women characters in popular genres are not happy. None of the four female leads in *Sex and the City*, for example, are fulfilled and satisfied. All are plagued by a sense of failure or guilt because they feel they ought to be sexually satisfied, now that women are as free as men and spoiled for choice. When Carrie scans the Manhattan dating scene, she feels panicky not because there is no man, but because there are simply too many men and she is scared of not making the right choice. An envy of those traditional women of an earlier age who had little choice creeps into the scene: 'In a city of infinite options there can be no better feeling than that you only have one' ('The Monogamists', s.1, ep.7, 23 August 1998).

The promise of freedom, which should mean the elimination of all prohibitions and restrictions on the individual's exercise of choice, has turned into a new form of restriction and pressure which urges women to follow and not deviate, and to constantly live up to its promise by actively choosing and enjoying. Sexual liberation and freedom, in particular, have become the new imperative, the new obligation from which one is not free.

This is a mentality that the neoliberal self-governance contributes to, whereby to be empowered, free and actively choosing becomes the normative ideal to which one must aspire through ceaseless self-care and perfection, and for which one must bear full responsibility and take risks. This urge to enjoy is accompanied by a sense of guilt or failure over the inability to enjoy or to find the right man, hence a general feeling of desperation and anxiety. In Lacanian terms, the old symbolic prohibitive norms are replaced increasingly by imaginary ideals of social success which, together with ferocious super-ego figures, enjoin the subject to enjoy, have a good time and have it all (Žižek, 1999). Indeed, women nowadays can 'have it all' – an often-heard hymn to the progress of modern day life – but this is often less a statement of fact than an enjoinder, an urge and imperative which women feel they must try to follow. The permissive, free-choice society brings with it a new obligation to be liberated and to enjoy this freedom; but it also produces anxiety, unhappiness and a new form of shackles that eventually undermine its claims.

If neoliberal agency or freedom is deceptive, it is so not because there is a truer form of absolute freedom. It is because, despite the changed, much-qualified and materialistically bound meanings of agency, freedom and choice, neoliberal popular women's genres deliberately appropriate and make extensive reference to the traditional humanist terms of freedom, choice and agency as unbounded, absolute, given and emancipating. This leads to a gap that is glossed over deliberately. In widely-circulated commercial catchphrases such as 'Wear it for Yourself!', 'Girl Power' or 'Free Woman', and in the celebration of sexual freedom and assertiveness in popular women's genres, young women are hailed as free agents with infinite choice, their freedom spiritually unbounded, their inner female essence and worth completely emancipated and of absolute value. This is where the wide appeal of neoliberal popular women's culture lies, as well as the source of its illusion.

This gap is closely related to the inner contradiction between the promised neoliberal fantasy or imaginary of emancipation and empowerment for all, on the one hand, and the market reality of a principle of competition and economised self-interest, on the other. For in a climate of competition, not everyone can be winners and there are bound to be losers. This is used as proof of the need to strengthen the system, and the loser is simply urged to keep working on the project of ceaseless self-improvement so that they can better adjust to the normative ideal. However, there is always the possibility that some might not keep up, or that there are residual elements within the neoliberal subject that need to be constantly improved or rectified, but that cannot be or fail to be. This leads to moments when the loser, who has made the wrong choice and incurred high costs, certainly faces a situation where their individual interests do not dovetail with the normative ones of the neoliberal society, again opening up the intended collapse of the boundary or conflict between the individual and the state. Even among winners, not everyone could claim the same level of power, because not all individuals have equal access to the information necessary to make the same informed choice and to know what best conforms to their interests.

Neoliberalism always has viewed competition as not naturally given, but as something which has to be constantly enabled, urged and fostered. Failure is to be neutralised through continuing self-improvement, but there are bound to be residues that leak through the seams. In the popular women's genres, the answer to these residual failures is simply exclusion. The women characters are emphasised as young, physically attractive and financially well-off, the women who are most 'free' and 'empowered' and also happen to be white and middle or upper class (Gill, 2006b). Those women that are not attractive, past their youth and racially and economically underprivileged are losers in the competition and simply do not appear in the works, or else are hastily dismissed. Even with technologies of bodily makeover and surgical intervention to aid ceaseless self-improvement, the very hierarchical and layered nature of this touted freedom and empowerment is revealed glaringly. Thus, criticism of popular women's genres should start from an unearthing of this residual element within the neoliberal process of self-production that fails to catch up, to avail itself of the choices made available or to achieve maximised self-interest.

It is in this sense that the findings of earlier feminist cultural studies research on romance, women's magazines and other popular female genres still should be valued, not due to their 'over-enthusiastic' celebration of agentive resistance, but because of their perception that these genres are complicated, and capable of harbouring different levels

of meanings and multiple positions of interpretations, rather than simply transmitting and reinforcing patriarchal norms. Thus a more constructive approach could start by recognising the genres' inner tensions and layers. It could start by understanding how they are able to appeal to such a wide audience of young women, how the neoliberal operation of self-governance works, and how its touted freedom is revealed to be governed in ways that are limiting. Popular women's culture is an ideal subject for criticism and critique, not because its women characters may be rescued from self-deception, but rather because it allows its reader (as well as its critics) to move toward self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their own subjectivities, which are both conditioned and constrained as 'free'.

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## Notes

1. 'Postfeminism' is a rather ambivalent term sometimes used interchangeably with, but at other times distinguished from, third wave feminism. The latter refers to a diverse range of activist projects including black feminism and working-class feminism (see Heywood and Drake, 1997 for a definition that stresses this distinction). Postfeminism also may refer to academic feminism which uses a postmodern and poststructuralist approach to question the conventional definition of woman as an identity and subject. Popular postfeminism as reflected in popular women's culture that also appropriates selectively some feminist terms is distinguished from both academic and activist feminism (see Gillis et al., 2007).
2. Hayek says that 'freedom is an artifact of civilization ... Freedom was made possible by the evolution of the discipline of civilization which is at the same time the discipline of freedom' (in Rose, 1999: 67). 'Negative liberty' refers to a situation in which individuals are left alone to do as they wish, while 'positive liberty' is when authorities seek to make people free, to coerce them in the name of justice, rationality to become wiser, healthier or more virtuous in order to realise what their freedom is (see Rose, 1999).
3. This means that the economic principle, or the Marxian economic base, is changed to take on the role of a mentality and process of subjectification, so that the dichotomy between the economic base and the superstructure is more or less collapsed. As Jason Read (2009) points out, neoliberalism is not just a transformation *in* ideology that results in a new ideology, but also a transformation *of* ideology, which situates the ideological and the material on the same plane of immanence.
4. Stephanie Genz has taken a more nuanced stand by arguing that postfeminist popular culture is a complex site that 'interlaces complicity and critique, subordination and creation' (Genz and Brabon, 2009: 26). It contains contradictions and allows possibilities for multiple interpretations and 'different dimensions of agency' for women that 'play to the expectations of the patriarchal gaze while hoping to rewrite patriarchal codes' (2006: 346)

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