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CONTEMPORARY FEMININITIES  
AFTER POSTFEMINISM

GENRE, AFFECT, AESTHETICS

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PhD

2018

# Contemporary Femininities After Postfeminism

## Genre, Affect, Aesthetics

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the  
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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the relationship between postfeminist discourses of empowerment and constructions of female subjectivity in contemporary fictional genres aimed at women and girls. First, the thesis examines narratives focusing on women whose coming of age coincided with the height of postfeminist cultural dominance, and then explores the continuing influence of postfeminism in contemporary girlhood coming-of-age genres. By analysing how postfeminism is constructed narratively, aesthetically and generically, this project develops an original set of theoretical concepts and frameworks through which to read contemporary feminine culture and contributes to ongoing debates within feminist media studies. To understand how postfeminism *feels* in our contemporary moment, Lauren Berlant's work on genre (2008, 2011), impasse and cruel optimism (2011) is mobilised to conceive of postfeminism as a set of failed fantasies of fulfilment. The thesis illuminates a major cultural turn in which the construction of postfeminist empowerment in popular genres begins to drastically shift from an affective register of carefree pleasure, to one in which postfeminism is articulated as a site of rage and resentment. Chapter One analyses *Gone Girl* (Gillian Flynn 2012) as emblematic of this affective shift. Chapter Two examines Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012–2017) through the lens of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011: 1), while Chapter Three's analysis of *Appropriate Behaviour* (Desiree Akhavan 2014) abandons the frame of postfeminism entirely, instead detailing a sense of profound isolation from normative genres. Through a reading of *The Hunger Games* (Suzanne Collins 2008, 2009, 2010), Chapter Four expands on Robin James' (2015) model of resilience, adapting the insights of Mari Ruti's (2017) and Jane Elliott's (2013) conceptions of agency to sketch out the parameters of newly emergent feminine subjectivities in which a capacity to overcome socially inflicted suffering is what determines social viability. Chapter Five's analysis of *Bande de Filles/Girlhood* (Céline Sciamma 2014) explores the transformative and relational aesthetics of resilience, while Chapter Six uses Nikolaj Lübecker's (2015) study of feel-bad modes of cultural production to conceptualise the negativity generated when contemporary genres contravene expectations of resilient girlhood.

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## Introduction

An emerging genre across literature, screen and digital media is beginning to articulate a profound discontent with postfeminist 'happiness scripts' (Ahmed 2010: 59) surrounding romance, marriage, and work. Loss, disillusionment, failure and isolation permeate these narratives, typically focusing on women in their late twenties and early thirties whose embodiment of freedom through their spending power, unlimited choice of consumer products and performance of an 'up for it' sexuality (Gill 2007, 2008; McRobbie 2008) has not delivered the anticipated happiness or self-fulfilment. By contrast, girlhood coming-of-age narratives are increasingly producing femininity within discourses of resilience, constructing girls as capable of overcoming and adapting to bleak and unforgiving social conditions. An acute generational disconnect exists between the difficulties faced by millennial women in adjusting to social circumstances radically altered by the 2008 global and financial crisis, and the apparent successes of contemporary girls constructed as capable of surmounting much harsher obstacles. The aim of this thesis, therefore, is to map and understand the impact of postfeminist discourse on women whose coming of age coincided with the height of its cultural ubiquity, and to explore the continuing postfeminist legacy in girlhood coming-of-age genres.

Seeking to understand the diverse legacies of postfeminist discourses, this thesis explores the aftermath of their cultural dominance from the early 1990s to mid-2000s. The key research questions I ask are:

1. Does postfeminist discourse generate particular formations of female subjectivity in contemporary culture?
2. How do fictional genres aimed at women and girls navigate the paradoxes of postfeminism?
3. What kinds of affective registers are produced by postfeminist culture?

Motivated by these questions, the thesis aims to produce a better understanding of the relationship between postfeminism and constructions of contemporary female subjectivity, by drawing on the insights of a diversity of affective research practices. Although I will provide a more detailed overview of affect theory later in this introduction, I want to note here that by affect, I mean embodied sensations which

include feelings and emotions, but often prefigure them. I am principally drawing on Lauren Berlant's (2011) work, which suggests that cultural formations generate subjectivity through the mobilisation of affects. Kristyn Gorton observes that while there are often distinctions made between emotion as 'a sociological expression of feelings' (2007: 334) and affect as a physiological response to feelings, it is more widely acknowledged that biology and society cannot be so neatly separated (Goodley *et al.* 2018; Gorton 2007; Ngai 2005). Although some scholars place more emphasis on affect (Brennan 2004) or on emotion (Ahmed 2004), the two are typically imbricated and therefore more often used interchangeably, a practice this thesis also follows. My interest lies primarily in the role that affect plays in constituting subjectivity, as well as the relationship between our bodies, environment and social others. As such, the thesis examines the myriad affects mobilised by postfeminist discourse, and their relationship to cultural constructions of female subjectivity.

The original point of departure for this thesis was an interest in the synergies between postfeminism and neoliberalism (Gill 2007, 2008; Gill and Scharff 2011; McRobbie 2008). Neoliberalism, by which I mean the extension of market values and economic practices like free enterprise and competition into social and cultural spheres, is the major defining socio-cultural discourse of our contemporary moment.<sup>1</sup> Along similar lines, the genres aimed at women and girls over approximately the last thirty years have been dominated by a postfeminist mode of cultural address. By postfeminism, I am referring to a contradictory set of discourses which respond to, disavow and individualise feminist politics. Certainly, both neoliberalism and postfeminism espouse an ethos of individualism that supplants social and political arguments regarding structural inequalities. Furthermore, as Rosalind Gill proposes, 'the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism' (2007: 164). Accordingly, Gill

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<sup>1</sup> To periodise the inception of our current configuration of neoliberalism, I follow David Harvey, who suggests that 1978–1980 constitutes 'a revolutionary turning-point' (2005: 1) in neoliberalism's social and economic history, as political leaders in China, the US and the UK instituted economic strategies to privatise public services, deregulate industry and repudiate social provision.

suggests that postfeminism 'is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas' (164) and therefore cannot be theorised solely as a response to feminism. Building on my MA research, which explored the affinity between neoliberal ideals and postfeminist discourse through the figure of the self-reflexive young woman, this project begins to chart an account of what happened *after* the prevalence of 1990s and 2000s postfeminism.<sup>2</sup> One of my primary aims is to demonstrate the ways in which affective readings can provide new insights into postfeminist media scholarship, as well as contributing to the field of girl studies and feminist cultural studies more widely. This introduction therefore provides an outline of the current debates within postfeminist scholarship, affect theory and girl studies.

### **Postfeminism**

While postfeminist media scholarship is understood as a notoriously complex and contradictory set of discourses, it has become widely recognised as both a 'double entanglement' (McRobbie 2008: 6) and a 'distinctive sensibility' (Gill 2007: 147). Postfeminism is theorised as an epistemology, era, movement, identity and sensibility (Genz and Brabon 2009; Gill 2007, 2008; McRobbie 2008; Projansky 2001) throughout different disciplines, with sociology, cultural and media studies featuring prominently in the literature. For instance, Genz and Brabon discuss a framework of 'diverse manifestations of postfeminism' (2009: 2). They emphasise the multiplicity of the term within academia, politics and popular culture, rather than reducing it to a singular and limiting definition. The diverse usage of the term speaks to the range and impact of postfeminism as well as to its elastic capacity to hold meanings that are perhaps more culturally evocative than they are descriptive.

Angela McRobbie theorises that by 'taking feminism into account' (2008: 16), popular and political media culture constructs feminism as having completed its duty of securing liberation and equality for women, and is therefore no longer

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<sup>2</sup> As I explain in the first chapter of the thesis, the period 'after' postfeminism cannot be linked to an exact date, though it is roughly synchronous with the 2008 economic crisis and subsequent recession (Negra and Tasker 2014), following which the aspirational postfeminist myth of 'having it all' becomes all the more strikingly untenable.

required. Within this framework, feminism is not ignored or entirely disregarded; rather it becomes legible primarily as a burdensome legacy from which women are now able to gratefully cut loose and subsequently enjoy their newfound freedom to have it all.<sup>3</sup> Along similar lines, Gill argues that postfeminism is characterised by a number of ‘interrelated themes’ (2007: 147), including the depoliticization of feminism, performance of a heightened hypersexuality, the persistent association between femininity and the body, and the notion of the self as a never-ending project requiring continual surveillance, maintenance and discipline (2007: 149). This thesis takes up the themes Gill identifies and considers them as the foundational generic elements of postfeminism, expressed across a variety of media, from the makeover genre to chick lit and the romantic comedy. For example, McRobbie (2008) notes that the makeover is a primarily female genre typified by transformation, usually of girls’ and women’s appearances, fashion or style, and always with an aim toward self-improvement.<sup>4</sup> Along similar lines, the chick lit genre, widely established as having been inaugurated by Helen Fielding’s novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996), features a heavy focus on female self-monitoring and surveillance.<sup>5</sup> Within the romantic comedy genre, Chloe Angyal draws on Gill’s sensibility to identify a ‘postfeminist cycle’ (2014: 4) that takes place from 2005–2011. In particular, her analysis focuses on feminist politics and masculinity in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (Stoller 2008), sex and hook-up culture in *Friends With*

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of ‘having it all’ is endemic to postfeminist culture, and usually refers to the widespread belief that, having reaped the benefits of liberation promised by feminism, women who may not previously have entered the workforce are now able to secure professional careers at the same time as marriage and motherhood.

<sup>4</sup> Prominent themes of the makeover paradigm include the relationship between public and private space (Moseley 2000), the feminisation of British culture (Ball 2012) and the policing of femininity (Tincknell 2011). The makeover is an especially important genre within postfeminist scholarship, with Gill and Scharff devoting a section of *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (2011) to the contemporary focus on sexuality within the genre. Within the section, Laura Harvey and Gill (2011: 52–67) focus on sexual entrepreneurship in British television, while Michelle M. Lazar investigates Singaporean beauty adverts (2011: 37–51).

<sup>5</sup> For further examples of chick lit see Sophie Kinsella’s novel *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic* (2000) and Lauren Weisberger’s novel *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003). The Bridget Jones franchise sparked a great deal of academic interest, particularly in relation to postfeminism; for example, see Imelda Whelehan’s *Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary: A Reader’s Guide* (2002), and McRobbie’s chapter ‘Notes on Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime’ (2004). For analysis of the chick lit genre that goes beyond the influence of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, see *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction* (Ferriss and Young 2013).

*Benefits* (Gluck 2011) and women's professional independence and economic power in *The Ugly Truth* (Luketic 2009), demonstrating the wide scope of Gill's work in examinations of postfeminist culture.<sup>6</sup>

In light of postfeminism's ever-growing cultural ubiquity, a vast archive has amassed investigating and classifying the diversity of its manifestations. For instance, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker's *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (2007) includes chapters examining the relationship between postfeminist culture and ageing (Wearing 2007: 277–310), masculinity and the makeover genre (Cohan 2007: 176–200), and the racialised implications of postfeminist discourse for African American women (Springer 2007: 249–276). More recently, Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller's *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (2013) looks at how femininities and masculinities are constructed in popular film, from discourses of virginity (Farrimond 2013: 44–59) and lesbian sexuality (Bradbury-Rance 2013: 27–43) to fatherhood (Hamad 2013: 99–115) and a history of the 'male singleton' (Brabon 2013: 116–130). However, concurrent with the wide-ranging examinations of postfeminism's cultural operations and manifestations is a growing sense of frustration with its lack of critical specificity and dubious utility.

Indeed, the value of postfeminism as a critical term has itself been subject to interrogation by scholars who either proclaim their 'frustration [...] boredom and ennui' (Whelehan 2010: 159), or alternately, claim that postfeminism is 'potentially redundant' (Retallack *et al.* 2016: 88) as a new fourth-wave feminism has since displaced it. The potential redundancy of postfeminist scholarship *per se* is easily refuted, for although it is vital to focus on emergent feminist political activism, as Gill (2016) points out, the existence of feminist politics has never precluded the ongoing proliferation of anti- or postfeminist ideas and modes of cultural production. However, Imelda Whelehan's complaint that 'postfeminism can be

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<sup>6</sup> Tamar Jeffers McDonald (2007), Claire Mortimer (2010) and Leger Grindon (2011) concur that the Hollywood romantic comedy can be divided into chronological sub-genres or cycles, such as the 1930s screwball, the 1950s sex comedy, and the nervous romance of the 1970s. Angyal's work builds on theirs by identifying a specifically postfeminist cycle of the romantic comedy.

boring and frustrating to analyse because its message requires little unpacking and lies prominently on the surface of these narratives' (2010: 159) rings true and proves much more difficult to dismiss. It would often appear that researchers set out to argue that a cultural work is postfeminist, and so unsurprisingly, find exactly what they are expecting. Jessalynn Keller and Maureen Ryan argue similarly that postfeminist analysis 'falls short' and cannot account for the 'complicated politics' (2014: n.p) of our contemporary moment. In this regard I certainly agree that the results of this kind of analysis often appear to be predetermined, and that to persist in simply labelling cultural texts as postfeminist (or not) is a reductive critical practice.

Of course, given the numerous ways postfeminism is deployed, this certainly is not true of every case. However, as Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones point out, Gill's (2007) article 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility' led to a style of feminist media studies analysis that tended toward adopting 'a tautological approach' (2016: 5–6) in selecting texts primarily based on the degree to which they were seen to conform to aspects of Gill's definition of postfeminist sensibility. Indeed, Gill's article has turned out to be extremely influential and shaped the way feminist scholars understand and approach postfeminism. The postfeminist discourses that prevailed in the 1990s and early 2000s construct subjects as requiring strict surveillance and self-discipline to maintain their femininity, at the same time as emphasising their increased freedom, choice and independence. Women's individual empowerment is especially glorified (Negra and Tasker 2005: 107), which leads me to use the term 'postfeminist empowerment' to define this period. I do so with a view to historicising this particular era both in cultural and academic discourse. In particular, I find it necessary to specify my own take and distinguish this era as one typified by postfeminist empowerment in order to signal that my interest lies in mapping the reverberations and cultural legacies of this particular late twentieth-century configuration of postfeminism.

### Postfeminist Impasse

The growing frustration with the limitations of postfeminist analysis is indicative of what Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* (2011) labels ‘impasse,’ described as a ‘cul-de-sac’ in which ‘one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, *in the same space*’ (2011: 199 original italics).<sup>7</sup> There is a sense from prominent feminist scholars that although analyses of postfeminist culture continue to proliferate, the debates themselves have stalled somewhat, continually circling the same critical terrain. It is from this understanding that my thesis proposes that postfeminist media studies as a genre of scholarship itself has arrived at a critical impasse. It is not my intention to discount postfeminism altogether, nor to endeavour to find a ‘way out,’ so to speak, of such an impasse. Rather, each chapter finds new ways to inhabit and move around in this ‘same space’ while constructing alternative approaches to thinking through the pervasive legacies of postfeminist culture.

Although I agree with Tisha DeJmanee’s argument that simply ‘declaring a theoretical fatigue with postfeminism does not erase its dominant presence in popular culture’ (2016: 131), I would contest her claim that ‘a generation or more of women have now grown up not knowing anything but postfeminism’ (131). For although culturally ubiquitous, postfeminism is not a totalising or panoptic ideological trap from which there is no escape. Postfeminism is certainly not the only discourse in circulation, as scholars like Retallack *et al.* (2016) point out. However, postfeminism undoubtedly dominates the media archives available to women and girls over approximately the last thirty years. In particular, scholarship tends to classify popular texts addressing women from the mid-1990s to early 2000s as postfeminist (Genz and Brabon 2009; Gill 2008; McRobbie 2008; Projansky 2001; Negra and Tasker 2007). The expansive cultural scope and influence of these works, such as the popular television series *Sex and the City* (Star 1998–2004)<sup>8</sup> and the film *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Maguire 2001)<sup>9</sup> has been widely noted, though they

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<sup>7</sup> A more detailed and elaborate explication of Berlant’s concept of impasse is provided further below.

<sup>8</sup> Based on Candace Bushnell’s eponymous 1997 anthology.

<sup>9</sup> Based on Helen Fielding’s eponymous 1996 novel.

are rarely criticised outright for their postfeminist attributes (Adriaens and Van Bauwel 2011; Gerhard 2005).<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, postfeminist media scholarship is invaluable when it comes to understanding this particular cultural climate and historical moment. However, these debates are less conducive in making sense of the contradictions and ambivalences inherent to women's and girls' complex relationships to postfeminist culture. In view of this, and the dissatisfaction expressed by prominent media scholars, I argue that it is essential to supplement and extend existing analyses of postfeminist culture to better understand the way it 'increasingly operates in and through the emotions' (Gill 2017: 609). Moreover, this thesis aims to demonstrate that affective approaches facilitate a multifaceted perspective on the complex and often-contradictory ways cultural producers respond to postfeminist norms.

Within postfeminist media scholarship, Gill observes that popular media often puts on display the 'empowered female subject,' women who are 'simply following their own desires to "feel good"' (2007: 153–4). At the vanguard of the field, Gill's understanding of empowerment as an individualised feeling of emancipation sets a clear precedent for articulating and comprehending postfeminism on an affective level. Defending the still-urgent need for postfeminist scholarship, Gill writes that 'it should not be the only term in our critical lexicon, but it does still have something to offer' (2016: 612). For me, that something crystallises upon exploring the impact of postfeminism through the lens of affect theory, a field with the capacity to revitalise postfeminist media studies. My argument that postfeminist criticism is at an impasse underscores that my interest is not in identifying whether and in what ways a cultural work can be labelled postfeminist, but rather in asking what such works communicate about *how postfeminism feels*. As the thesis aims to demonstrate, affective approaches are especially important in understanding works that might otherwise be simply categorised as postfeminist based on the presence of the associated generic elements outlined above. Furthermore, since postfeminist

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<sup>10</sup> See Chapter Two for further discussion of *Sex and the City* as a classic postfeminist empowerment text and for analysis of how Lena Dunham's television series *Girls* (2012–2017), which follows the lives of four twenty-something young women, marks a significant shift in cultural imaginaries of girlhood, femininity, and professional success.

media studies as a field typically focuses on the ideological implications of cultural works (Colling 2017), there is a consequent dearth of attention to the aesthetic dimensions of postfeminist culture, which is a gap this thesis proposes to fill. To explore how postfeminism feels in our contemporary moment, I draw from and adapt the work of Berlant, in particular her concept of ‘cruel optimism’ (2011: 1). The next section gives a brief overview of the two most prominent strands of affect theory—ontological and feminist cultural studies—and situates Berlant’s work within the latter.

### **The Affective Turn**

Affect has emerged as a key social and cultural research area over recent years. A sensorial orientation, or the ‘affective turn’ (2007: 2) as identified by Patricia Clough, marks a multi-disciplinary shift within feminist cultural studies and queer theory toward exploring emotions, moods and feelings. Growing chiefly from a dissatisfaction with dominant analytical frameworks, namely the limitations of poststructuralism, affect theory can be broadly divided into two categories of thought, although there are many points of overlap between them. First of all, there are critics and theorists who, inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s readings of the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, study affect as a set of ontological properties, conceiving it as an essentially autonomic response to social, environmental or cultural stimuli (Connolly 2010; Massumi 2002; Protevi 2009; Shaviro 2010, 2012). A clear and precise account of exactly what affect is or does proves elusive as theorists work from varying definitions and traditions. For example, Brian Massumi distinguishes between affect and emotion, defining the former in terms of bodily responses that precede the subject’s conscious perception of them, whereas emotion ought to be seen as the derivative and consciously perceptible product of affect, for instance taking the form of joy, fear or anger (2002: 23–45). Similarly, in *Post Cinematic Affect* (2010), Steven Shaviro follows the broadly Deleuzian conceptualisation of affect as precognitive experience, with emotion figuring as the subsequent cultural crystallisation. In line with Deleuze (1994) and Fredric Jameson (1990), Shaviro describes his project as an ‘affective mapping’ (2010: 5) of twenty-first-century film and media texts that

exemplify the intertwining of image and capital. In Shaviro's work, affect emerges as an expressive force that 'eludes cognitive definition or capture' (4). Arguing that the evolution of digital modes of production is directly linked to neoliberal financialisation, Shaviro's formal analysis of what he labels 'post-cinematic' (1) media texts detects a constitutive, expressive and participatory relationship between cultural production and complex social processes like neoliberalism.

Secondly, affective approaches have gained significant currency within a multiplicity of feminist and queer research methodologies, playing a particular key role in the understanding of the manifold intersections between subjectivity and politics (Ahmed 2004, 2006, 2010; Berlant 2008, 2011; Cvetkovich 2012; Love 2007; Sedgwick 2003). A key concern of many of those who work under this rubric is the concept of shared affective spaces in which connections between the body and wider social sphere are forged, with special emphasis on how affect is shaped by cultural and political forces beyond the control of the individual experiencing it. In the suffusion of the ordinary with fantasy, Berlant contends that 'affect theory is another phase in the history of ideology theory,' allowing us to return to 'the encounter of what is sensed with what is known and what has impact in a new but also recognizable way' (2011: 53). Affect is therefore the connecting force enabling us to decipher the relations between individuals and the structures ordering their lives. Berlant's research underpins much of my thinking; her coinage of the term 'cruel optimism' (2011: 1) in particular is one of the key concepts that set this thesis in motion. As Berlant suggests, cruel optimism is a relation that emerges when our desires for particular kinds of lives (and our efforts to secure those lives) become destructive, instigating a stubborn belief that detrimental and harmful ways of living will eventually provide the fulfilment we seek.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Although a different register of enquiry, the concept of cruel optimism finds a productive synergy with the Marxist notion of false consciousness, which emphasises the illusory nature of ideology and the way ideology functions to mystify and obscure the realities of exploitative and inequitable social relations in capitalist societies. Indeed, Robert Stam *et al.* (2015) consider cruel optimism a 'feminist updating' of false consciousness that highlights 'the ways that subjects invest in and are attached to the toxic normalcy of institutions and relationships and social systems that actually undermine any possibility of social happiness' (2015: 128). The concept of false consciousness suggests that if the

As I explain in more depth in Chapter Two, Berlant's project, in part, is to assess the impact of an increasingly insecure public sphere on subjectivity through her engagement with affect, aesthetics and attachment. For Berlant, attachment is a messy, complex set of processes in which we pin our hopes to ideals, objects and institutions that sustain our sense of 'what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world' (2011: 24). In this way, our attachments often sustain us at the same time as they exhaust our capacity to organise our lives in ways that might be more rewarding. We endeavour to align ourselves with social convention and expectation (marriage, work, etc.) in the hope of ensuring success, love, financial security, or what Berlant terms the 'good life' (2), even when our efforts are quite unlikely to pay off. Berlant is therefore especially interested in why we remain committed to our fantasies of the good life, even after enduring recurrent disappointment. The very term fantasy, with its roots in Freudian psychoanalytic wish-fulfilment, suggests an inherent tension between desire and the reality of our lives. Fantasies, on the one hand, by their very definition, hold little hope or promise of their eventual realisation. On the other hand, Berlant points out, fantasies of how our lives might eventually unfold constitute our sense of self-continuity, that ourselves and our world 'add up to something' (2) we can navigate and comprehend. Fantasy, then, is what mediates the tension between the reality of an external world continually out of joint with our internal hopes and desires.

Berlant's concept of cruel optimism has been crucial in developing my understanding of postfeminist cultural discourses as conveying to women and girls a route to a gendered formulation of the good life at the same time as acting as an impediment to the realisation of that very same fantasy. Therefore, following

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majority of workers were privy to the 'true power relations between the owners of the means of production and those who merely endure it,' as Stam *et al.* put it, we might be able to alter or revolt against them. This notion of revealing the true nature of society's power relations as the first step toward revolution is explored further in Chapter Four's reading of *The Hunger Games*. However, for Berlant, it is not necessarily that our consciousness is false—for we are often all too aware that our investments in normative culture and social institutions are in tragic misalignment with our own interests. Therefore, what the concepts of cruel optimism, and in particular, impasse, both account for is a relation in which subjects may well possess at least a partial awareness of the futility of their investments, yet these attachments remain stubbornly intact precisely because they provide a sense of optimism and self-continuity.

Berlant, I conceive of postfeminism as an enduring set of fantasies, ideals and affects circulating around femininity that, although often detrimental, also remain frustratingly prevalent within feminine culture. Similarly, Negra (2008) explains how postfeminist fantasies allow certain kinds of selfhood to seem possible, offering the allure of a feminine subjectivity unencumbered by the historical weight of complicated gender politics and bolstered by the seemingly more straightforward pleasures of domesticity, conventional romance and sentimentality.

Influenced by and intersecting with Berlant's work is Sara Ahmed's interest in the phenomenological 'feminist cultural studies of affect' (2010: 13). In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Ahmed explores the cultural role and effects of happiness.

Arguing that happiness cannot be simply conceived of as an individual autonomic response, Ahmed develops the relationship between affect and social orientation, investigating privileged behavioural modes and institutions like monogamy, marriage, family and gender norms, each of which promises a particular kind of happiness to those who comply. Focusing on the ever-growing gap between the promise of happiness and its absent reality, Ahmed notes that 'the promise of happiness takes this form: if you have this or have that, or if you do this or do that, then happiness is what follows' (2010: 29), thus drawing attention to the continual deferral of happiness, always implicitly sited around some distant corner. The frustration of the deferred promise is what motivates Ahmed's work on affect. Her ultimate goal is to disrupt the promise of happiness and replace it with less illusory and more effective forms of emancipatory politics.

Ahmed's work is located within a sub-division of affect theory concerned with negative affect or 'ugly feelings' (Ngai 2005), such as failure (Halberstam 2011), shame (Munt 2007), depression (Cvetkovich 2012), or the painful negotiations of queerness in Western culture (Love 2007). Ann Cvetkovich interrogates the notion that the affective turn is a new critical phenomenon, demonstrating that feminist thought has in fact been engaging with affect for many years. Significantly informed by Berlant's notion of impasse, Cvetkovich's (2012) work challenges the prevailing narratives of depression as an individual affect caused by either unfortunate

genetics or traumatic childhoods, instead reframing depression as a socially produced phenomenon. Although sharing a similar interest in sensory experience, Cvetkovich works from a terminology of affect that exceeds and expands on the Deleuzian understanding. For Cvetkovich, it is a category that 'encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of ways' (2012: 4). Albeit preoccupied with very different strategies and intentions, a clear point of convergence between the work of Cvetkovich and Shaviro, for example, is their shared aim in developing an account of what it feels like to live under twenty-first-century capitalism (Cvetkovich 2012; Shaviro 2010), which strongly resonates with my own mapping of the enduring vestiges of postfeminist discourses of choice and empowerment.

Berlant's reading of cultural texts is interested in 'patterns of adjustment in specific aesthetic and social contexts to derive what's collective about specific modes of sensual activity toward and beyond survival' (2011: 9). Any impasse or loss of fantasy will involve particular methods of adapting or transitioning to form new attachments. Berlant explores the recurrence and repetition of collective affects that contribute to the fantasy in the first place. Such cultural mapping is a common feature of theoretical work attempting to understand the complexity and disorderliness of contemporary capitalism. Aesthetics, therefore, becomes the key by which such complex structures are rendered recognisable. As Nick Srnicek notes, neoliberal capitalism cannot be perceived directly as it is a 'non-object' (2012:10); it therefore requires methods that allow the unrepresentable to be affectively perceived instead. Both Srnicek and Shaviro (2010) take up Jameson's concept of 'cognitive mapping' (1990: 54) from *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* as a way of comprehending our global world systems. Accordingly, for Shaviro, media and cultural texts are in themselves 'affective maps, which do not just passively trace or represent, but actively construct and perform, the social relations, flows and feelings they are ostensibly "about"' (2010: 6).

Along similar lines, I find aesthetics to be one of the primary ways by which a complex affective structure like postfeminism becomes legible. The thesis overall,

and Chapter Two in particular, takes inspiration from Berlant's conceptualisation of genre as an evolutionary multiplicity (2008: 4). In *The Female Complaint* (2008), Berlant argues that genres work as conceptual and structural conventions that evolve and mutate in relation to changing social and historical conditions. Seeking to understand the kinds of genres that emerge in our contemporary present under an oppressive neoliberal social imaginary, Berlant describes genre as 'a loose affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take' (2011: 2). Our relationship to genre, therefore, is what determines our expectations and experiences when watching an event unfold, whether in fictional narrative or in the immediacy of our own lived realities. We are heavily invested in our expectations, both in fiction and in our lives. Nancy Thumin describes fictional genres as maintaining a 'tacit understanding between producer and audience' (2012: 163). Berlant's and Thumin's ideas enable me to consider 'genres of living' (Duschinsky and Wilson 2015: 180), a concept that implies an especially fluid contract, or relation. Within this paradigm, it matters who or what produces such a genre, and who is the presumed audience for its implicit advice on how to live. How and between whom are the terms and conditions of such a contract drawn up? In other words, where do our ideas about how to live our lives come from?

For Berlant, genre as 'an aesthetic structure of affective expectation' (2008: 4) is key in orienting subjects toward (or away) from particular kinds of lives. Crucially, Berlant's thinking enables me to consider postfeminism itself as a genre that constructs an affective expectation of happiness, fulfilment and self-realisation.<sup>12</sup> Gill describes postfeminism as a 'patterned yet contradictory sensibility' that is 'connected to other dominant ideologies (such as individualism and neoliberalism)'

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to clarify that my understanding of genre derives from Berlant's arguments about the relationship between aesthetics and affective expectation, rather than in relation to genre theory as is typically understood in film and literary studies, though there is some overlap. For instance, genre scholar Steve Neale's proposal that 'genres are instances of repetition and difference' (1980: 48) corresponds with Berlant's interest in the ways that genres are shaped and reshaped in accordance with specific social and historical contexts. Similarly, both focus on the relationship between genre and pleasure. Neale suggests that audience pleasure stems from recognition of familiar generic elements, as well as from seeing those elements used in new ways. Equally, Berlant understands genre as an aesthetic structure promising those who engage with it that they 'will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected,' although the details themselves may vary (2008: 4).

(2007: 621). In their review of the postfeminist sensibility and its uptake in recent scholarship, Sarah Riley *et al.* (2017) note that Gill's definition suggests postfeminism operates as or is comparable to an ideology. Furthermore, they point out that the term 'sensibility' underscores the affective characteristics of postfeminism, yet at the same time, this area remains relatively underexplored (3). Understanding postfeminism as a genre is useful precisely because it enables me to explore the affective qualities of postfeminism. Berlant suggests that to call something a genre 'is to think about it as something repeated, detailed, and stretched while retaining its intelligibility, its capacity to remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations' (2008: 4). Rather than (only) a sensibility or ideology, I use Berlant's work on genre to consider postfeminism as an aesthetic structure with recurrent conventions that produce gendered expectations. I therefore frame postfeminism as a genre in order to, first, highlight the ways that postfeminism comprises a set of mutating socially-agreed upon conventions that offer women and girls conceptual structuring principles for how to live, think and feel. Second, situating postfeminism as a genre emphasises the way that such conventions develop over time; they remain intelligible as part of the same cultural formation yet retain an elasticity that permits their ongoing evolution. More specifically, the thesis is interested in exploring the affective contract, or promise of the particular kind of feminine good life that is generated by the recurrent generic conventions of empowerment postfeminism.

### **Girl Studies**

This thesis also contributes to the field of girl studies, which typically positions the girl as a figure of neoliberal and postfeminist discourse (Aapola *et al.* 2005; Gonick 2006; Harris 2004). Taking a feminist approach to critical youth studies, girl studies explores 'what it means to be a girl' (Aapola *et al.* 2005: 1). Since the 1990s, the cultural and academic focus on girls and girlhood has grown exponentially (Aapola *et al.* 2005; Driscoll 2002; Gonick 2006; Harris 2004; Kearney 2009; Projansky 2014; Negra and Tasker 2007). As Samantha Colling puts it, 'at the turn of the twenty-first century, the ubiquity of girls in films and media was unparalleled' (2017: 3). The sociocultural context through which girl studies emerged centred on girls' increased

purchasing power in the marketplace (Kearney 2009), their paradoxical construction as either 'at risk' and vulnerable (Pipher 1994: 43) or as empowered 'can-do' girls (Harris 2004: 13), as well as the proliferation of girls' own media production, such as zine culture, riot grrrl and hip hop (Kearney 2006, 2009). Efforts to define, study and apprehend the girl are legion, leading Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose to consider the girl as 'a socio-political project' to be 'over-determined, weighted down with meaning' (2013: 247). The primary discourses constructing girlhood include an understanding of the girl as always in 'the process of developing a self' (Driscoll 2002: 6), embodying hypersexuality (Renold and Ringrose 2013), subject at once to internal self-monitoring (Banet-Weiser 2014) and external media surveillance (Hasinoff 2012).

The subject position of the girl exists somewhat uneasily in relation to that of the adult woman. Historically, as Mary Celeste Kearney notes, women's rights movements have often 'constructed women in opposition to youth,' partially 'in order to demonstrate that women were like men and thus deserved the same rights' (2009: 8). Equally, Kearney describes how since the 1990s, 'female youth have reclaimed the term "girl" as a positive label for members of their demographic group, thus demonstrating their resistance to being homogenized under "women"' (2009: 15). Evidently, both girls and women as groups have made efforts to establish themselves as independent from one another, suggesting that the relationship between girlhood and womanhood is subject to complex fluctuation. Of course, the particular significance of the girl within postfeminist culture further complicates and compounds this relationship. Sarah Projansky suggests that femininity within a postfeminist cultural formation is often constructed by and within the performance of 'girlness' (2007: 45).<sup>13</sup> Following Projansky, Handyside considers 'the girl coming of age' to be 'a representative figure of postfeminist values and their impact upon the individual female identified subject more generally' (2015: 4). Similarly, as Catherine Grant and Lori Waxman put it, 'girlhood is not meant simply as an age but as an allegorical state' (2011: 2). Such scholarship

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<sup>13</sup> Projansky's concept of girlness is discussed in further detail in Chapter One.

suggests that girlhood is applicable to all female subjects regardless of age, and that it is especially relevant to postfeminism. Accordingly, Catherine Driscoll (2002) proposes that the girl cannot be defined as a demographic or category of identity. In line with Driscoll, I consider the girl as a conceptual figure, typically constructed as being in process or undergoing a significant transition (2002: 6). Each of the texts I analyse engages with, or else is organised by, some notion of girlhood, with my research findings indicating that to varying degrees girlness typically functions as an idealised embodiment of femininity.

Just as girlhood is considered central to postfeminist culture, so postfeminism appears to explain everything about Western girlhood, and has thus dominated theoretical work undertaken in this area over the last decade (Projansky 2007; Negra and Tasker 2005). However, a shift towards new parameters is clearly underway, as postfeminism appears to have exhausted its potential for some scholars. For example, striving to avoid representational analysis that prioritises 'decoding and deciphering images in terms of their normative and ideological baggage' (Gottschall *et al.* 2013: 1), a sub-field within girl studies advocates affective methodologies for exploring girlhood adolescence. Informed by the ontological strand of affect theory, in particular Deleuzian feminist approaches, scholars typically use qualitative data collection methods like focus groups, interviews, video diaries or workshops with pre-teen and adolescent girls as participatory research subjects. With an emphasis on embodiment and materiality, scholarship in this area explores 'girlhood becomings' (Gottschall *et al.* 2013: 1), the relationality of girls' experiences of their bodies and emotions in connection with media imagery (Jackson, S. 2016), 'the sexual politics of schooling' (Ringrose 2013: 1), subject formation in adolescence (Jackson, A. Y. 2010), and also includes a heightened focus on girls' digital networks and peer relations on social media (Ringrose 2011; Ringrose and Harvey 2015; Ringrose *et al.* 2012; Retallack *et al.* 2016). Importantly, what this demonstrates is a clear precedent within girl studies for exploring an understanding of femininity and girlhood subjectivities through an affective lens. However, while the materialist research into girlhood takes its inspiration from the ontological strand of affect theory and prioritises girls as

research subjects and participants, my own research is motivated by feminist cultural studies methodologies and highlights notions of girlhood as narratively and generically constructed.

In *The Aesthetic Pleasures of the Girl Teen Film* (2017), Colling seeks to provide a corrective to the scholarly tradition of focusing on either the pedagogical role of teen films (2017: 2), or else ‘reclaiming specified pleasures as ideologically resistant, empowering or conversely oppressive’ (11). Such an approach either reads against the grain to recoup a politically progressive meaning, or else condemns the film for its moments of conformity. Focusing on the aesthetic dimension of the ‘girl teen film’ (1), Colling instead examines the kinds of pleasures they generate.<sup>14</sup>

Acknowledging that the films she analyses do indeed conform to neoliberal and postfeminist values in a number of ways, Colling explains that she is more interested in examining how the aesthetic and affective design of such films works to construct this particular version of girlhood as pleasurable.

Colling’s pursuit of alternatives to analysis of the ideological implications of girls’ media culture intersects with Mitchum Huehls’ work in *After Critique: Twenty-First-Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (2016). Huehls finds that the critical reception of twenty-first century fiction produced by contemporary authors such as Uzodinma Iweala, Karen Yamashita, Colson Whitehead and Tom McCarthy often suggests they have simply capitulated to the market-driven neoliberal status quo. Countering this characterisation of their work, Huehls suggests that these authors have in fact become increasingly sceptical of the efficacy of critiquing the ideological implications of neoliberal culture and subjectivity. One of the primary reasons Huehls identifies for this scepticism is that neoliberalism has always already co-opted all forms of representation, rendering any attempt at a critique of those representations utterly futile. Accordingly, whichever position we occupy, conservative or progressive, in favour or against, ‘we are speaking the language of neoliberalism’ (12). Although this line of thinking cannot be directly mapped onto

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<sup>14</sup> Examples of ‘girl teen films’ (2017: 1) Colling works with include *Mean Girls* (Waters 2004), the *Bring It On* franchise (2000–2009) and *The House Bunny* (Wolf 2008). Further discussion of Colling’s approach can be found in Chapter Two.

postfeminist culture, similar to Colling and Huehls, a number of the works I analyse have been subject to accusations of capitulating to the patriarchal status quo or conforming to postfeminist convention.<sup>15</sup> My thesis acknowledges that each of the works I have chosen is, in different ways and to varying degrees, shaped and generated by postfeminist culture. However, that is not to say that they must therefore have entirely capitulated to or be endorsing postfeminist ways of thinking. Inevitably, as I have suggested, if searching for the signs and symptoms of postfeminism, one will surely find them. However, as Colling and Huehls suggest, identifying and criticising those symptoms is unlikely to contribute much to—let alone productively intervene in—the current academic debates surrounding culture produced by and/or about women and girls.

Rather than restrict his analysis to locating instances of conformity with or resistance against neoliberal ideology, Huehls instead declares his interest in ‘literature that ‘inhabit[s] the world neoliberalism has produced’ (2016: xii). I interpret this to mean that, rather than overtly opposing neoliberal principles, contemporary fiction has instead begun to explore what it means and how it feels to live in the market-driven, cost/benefit society neoliberal ideology has generated. Moreover, just as Huehls suggests that ‘neoliberalism as a way of thinking about the world [has become] a way of being in the world’ (2016: 3), so too—in my view—has postfeminism. With its generic principles already thoroughly installed, we cannot simply wipe culture clean of postfeminism’s influence and reboot. Similarly, postfeminism cannot be equated to a pernicious strain of malware infecting an otherwise flawlessly operational system. Postfeminism *is* the system—at least to some extent, if not universally. Berthold Schoene interprets Berlant’s concept of impasse as something that ‘cannot be worked through or overcome,’ suggesting that perhaps ‘the only viable option is to embrace and adapt to it as our new way of life’ (2017: 96). I would argue this is precisely what the texts I analyse in this thesis try to do: adjust, accept and adapt to the ways in which postfeminist ideas about how to live our lives have irrevocably altered not only the cultural

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<sup>15</sup> See Chapter One’s discussion of the critical reception of *Gone Girl*, which includes media debate over whether or not the novel and film ought to be classified as either feminist or misogynist.

landscape, but also feminine subjectivity. As Berlant suggests, recognition that one's investments in structures like postfeminism are unworkable, ultimately not paying off or producing the anticipated results, is unlikely to eclipse their capacity to provide us with a sense of self, world and stability.

Postfeminist cultural analysis remains vitally important, yet this thesis argues there is much more to consider, in addition to examining the ideological implications of girls' and women's culture. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate, affective approaches enable me to sidestep the problematic of whether cultural works conform to or resist postfeminist convention, and to concentrate instead on what they articulate about how postfeminism feels. Seeking to capture a watershed moment in the aftermath of postfeminist culture, my project therefore explores what it might feel like for women and girls to inhabit the world as produced, shaped and informed by postfeminism. On discovering that the impact and effects of postfeminist empowerment discourse tend to register largely in two key ways, I decided to deploy these as major structuring principles for my thesis. Accordingly, while the first three chapters explore the impact of coming of age during the height of postfeminist influence, the second half of the thesis shifts focus to its ongoing legacy within girlhood and coming-of-age genres in our here and now. I will now provide an outline of how the conceptual structure of the thesis will unfold, with brief explanations of the theoretical underpinnings of each chapter.

### **Thesis Structure**

Chapter One opens the thesis with the argument that postfeminist empowerment is no longer entirely legible as a feel-good genre, and as such, has begun to palpably disintegrate. To understand this cultural turn and detail the particular ways in which the postfeminist fantasy is failing, I use Nikolaj Lübecker's insight into the growing phenomenon of what he designates as 'feel-bad films' (2015: 2) by which he means films that create and block desires for particular kinds of catharsis. In *The Feel-Bad Film* (2015) Lübecker identifies several modes of filmmaking using narrative and cinematographic devices to produce aesthetically unsatisfying experiences. The affective production of desire is key to this formulation. According

to Lübecker, feel-bad films produce desire in spectators for particular kinds of aesthetic catharsis, promising narrative closure that is subsequently withheld. Drawing on this idea, Chapter One demonstrates that postfeminist culture constructs desires for particular types of feminine fulfilment but subsequently does not produce the satisfaction that it promises. Through analysis of Gillian Flynn's novel *Gone Girl* (2012), I argue that postfeminism has begun to be envisaged within our collective cultural imagination as a feel-bad genre reneging on its promises of satisfaction for those female subjects who comply with its norms and conventions. My analysis of *Gone Girl* highlights the ways postfeminist empowerment discourse demands that women at once perform and conceal characteristics of traditional femininity. Key to my reading is the novel's central figure of the 'Cool Girl' (2012: 250), whose 'coolness', or social viability, derives from concealing her compliance with social norms and any traditionally feminine qualities such as passivity. Coming-of-age within this paradigm is shown to lead to subject-dissolution, an exhaustion of 'girl' as a category. This exhaustion is crucial to the articulation of postfeminism as a feel-bad genre. Postfeminism's expectation of endless flexibility and continual playful transformation of identity does not deliver growth or change; rather, it simply returns the protagonist to the unhappy place where the novel began.

Chapter Two argues that one of the key ways postfeminism operates culturally is as a relation of cruel optimism, a concept developed by Berlant to explain how the bonds we form to objects, institutions and ideals often prove more harmful than fulfilling, and how difficult, even near impossible, it can be to sever such attachments. Building on the analysis of *Gone Girl*, this chapter examines how cruel optimism manifests at the level of narrative structure as a continual looping process of renouncing and then returning to postfeminist convention. Inspired by Berlant, I characterise this dynamic as indicative of postfeminist impasse, produced by the disparity between the aspirational promise of personal and professional fulfilment and its disappointing lived reality. *Gone Girl's* intertextual underpinnings drawn from crime, gothic and horror genres enable Flynn to exaggerate and amplify the ways that traditional femininity is concealed by the cool girl persona, which itself is revealed as inauthentic. Lena Dunham's television series *Girls* (2012–2017), on the

other hand, constructs this impasse as a continual loop of aspiration, frustration, impasse and recurrence. It is at the points of aspiration and compliance with convention that the series' protagonist is constructed at her most socially acceptable (both in the narrative world and in critical reception of the series), that is, the points at which her successful coming-of-age might finally be achieved. However, my reading of *Girls* is that the series veers between constructing socially acceptable and socially undesirable forms of subjectivity in a way that emphasises the dynamic of cruel optimism while highlighting social inclusion as the main reason why we might aspire toward convention in the first place.

Where Chapter Two explores the difficulty in cutting loose from harmful genres, Chapter Three complicates the analysis of cruel optimism. Although superficially similar to *Girls*, which proves almost pathological in its efforts to work through women's relationships to postfeminist ways of living, I argue that *Appropriate Behaviour* (Akhavan 2014) is not preoccupied by the same concerns and cannot be so straightforwardly linked to a genre like postfeminism or a relation of cruel optimism. While at first the film may appear to stage a cruelly optimistic clash between American Iranian conventionality and queer sexuality, it becomes clear that the two genres are not in opposition, and that it is in fact the protagonist who finds herself at odds with both. Therefore, where the previous chapter's interest lies in exploring what it is like to feel constrained by an attachment to failed genres, this chapter examines how *Appropriate Behaviour* negotiates the contradictions and complexities of feeling isolated from popular or normative genres. Although true generic isolation is, of course, impossible, *Appropriate Behaviour* constructs an affective seclusion and sense of detachment from living without a clear generic path to follow. In departing from the tight hold postfeminist convention can retain over feminine subjectivity, this chapter nonetheless articulates the ways our present genres appear incapable of producing subjects in alignment with their respective communities. Chapter Three pays close attention to formal composition and narrative structure to examine the aesthetic implications of a femininity unmoored from normative genres, and simultaneously trapped within and between two genres of living.

Chapter Four marks a structural break or turning point of the thesis, as well as operating as an introduction to the concerns of the final three chapters. Whereas the first three chapters investigate the failure of postfeminist empowerment discourse to produce the kinds of happiness and fulfilment it promised, this set of three chapters explores various ways that the postfeminist legacy of agency and empowerment manifests in contemporary girlhood coming-of-age genres. With this in mind, Chapter Four's principal argument is that resilience has become a key feature of contemporary femininity. James' concept of resilience is central here, as she argues that overcoming identity-based oppression '*in socially profitable ways*' (2015: 15)<sup>16</sup> offers subjects inclusion within neoliberalised systems of social and political power, thereby updating traditional hierarchies of identity-based oppression.<sup>17</sup> Working from a Marxist mode of analysis in *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (2015), James examines manifestations of resilience discourse in contemporary pop music aesthetics, and how these are connected to neoliberal capitalism. For James, resilience is not characterised by one's capacity to survive adversity, but by the ability to overcome trauma or suffering by converting it into surplus value. According to James, because resilience has become one of the key markers for creating social value, certain forms of trauma and suffering are thereby naturalised. Importantly, James delineates a specifically gendered form of resilience discourse, explaining that where traditional normative femininity was overtly centred on fragility and passivity, in our contemporary moment social viability is predicated on 'visibly overcoming the negative effects of feminization' (2015: 82). In this paradigm, fragility remains the presumed foundation of femininity; however, women become responsible for the labour of overcoming their perceived gender deficits in order to find acceptance as viable subjects. Moreover, this marks a significant departure from the norms of postfeminist empowerment discourses that require female

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<sup>16</sup> All further italicisations included in citations from James' work are her own.

<sup>17</sup> Falguni Sheth (2009) explores the former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's role with regard to the controversial US military prison in Guantanamo Bay, arguing that privileging a woman of colour within the US government obscures and contributes to the white supremacy at the heart of political institutions. Similarly, Jasbir Puar's (2007) concept of homonationalism details how 'good' gays and lesbians who will adapt and contribute to society's existing status quo are nominally included and accepted within it.

subjects to perform and quietly conceal traditional femininity. Using *The Hunger Games* (Collins 2008–2010) trilogy as an illustrative case study, this chapter explores the intersections between femininity and contemporary resilience discourse, examining the narrative structure of resilience and the creation of narrative space in which feminine subjectivity is produced through overcoming profound trauma.

Building on the framework established in Chapter Four, the fifth chapter distinguishes between a transformative mode of resilience produced in the service of dominant hierarchies of power, such as patriarchy, and an intersubjective relational resilience produced in the affirmation of girlhood itself. Transformation is a concept central to the postfeminist paradigm in both its empowerment and resilience modes, and a key convention within coming-of-age narratives, often constructed as the means to emancipation or the foundation of identity formation. I analyse *Bande de Filles/Girlhood* (Sciamma 2014), a film structured around self-reinvention that offers temporary access to different ways of living and forms of social inclusion. This chapter provides important insight into the complex ways resilience discourse operates culturally. At first, transformative and relational resilience appear pitted against one another, with the former seemingly complicit with postfeminist conventions of self-improvement and flexibility, and the latter a liberatory framework constitutive of girls' social ties. Yet as my analysis of *Girlhood* demonstrates, the two modes are in fact thoroughly imbricated, suggesting that we must move beyond a model of critique based in uncovering the symptoms of either emancipatory politics or complicity with dominant social hierarchies.

Having established the contours of contemporary feminine resilience discourse and explored examples of its aesthetic modes within popular literature and art house cinema, Chapter Six both develops these concepts in further depth and circles back to revisit the first chapter's feel-bad paradigm. I revisit Lübecker's work examining the feel-bad film in order to develop the concept of feel-bad femininity, analysing how the film *Catch Me Daddy* (Wolfe 2014) produces a spectatorial desire for resilient agency and then blocks its satisfaction through the denial of narrative

closure. My development of the feel-bad feminine mode arises from the synergy I identify between James and Lübecker. James explains how the resilience model encourages us to *use* our negative feelings, that we must create a surplus value from our negative feelings that benefits neoliberalised systems of power, and we must do so especially in relation to traditional gender conventions. Meanwhile Lübecker explains how the feel-bad film produces negative emotion and refuses to generate a positive or cathartic outcome. This chapter draws upon the mythic quest narrative analysed by Teresa de Lauretis (1984), linking it to the coming-of-age-narrative, both of which are organised around overcoming obstacles and adversity in a way that resonates with the structure of resilience discourse. If feminine social viability is, as this thesis argues, predicated on overcoming perceived gender deficits, the obstacle that must be defeated within resilience narratives is therefore conventionalised femininity itself. Chapter Six also raises questions about the stakes of social viability. Through analysis of how *Catch Me Daddy* accrues an excess of traditionally feminine affect that threatens the fantasy of a coherent and self-determining subjectivity, I explore the assumption within the so-called anti-relational strand of queer theory (Bersani 1995; Edelman 2004) that any challenge to such a fantasy is of indisputable value. In this way, I argue that feel-bad genres provide opportunities to question the complexity of our fantasies surrounding the embodiment of agency and resilience, opening up forms of refusal to participate in social and cultural norms and expectation, while at the same time interrogating the subjective risks in doing so.

An additional structural principle complementing that of the six-chapter trajectory outlined above is the notion of three pairs of two chapters in dialogue with each other. Accordingly, Chapters One and Six both investigate feel-bad modes of cultural production, but whereas the first chapter examines postfeminist discourse itself as a feel-bad genre, the final chapter explores the frustration of female agency as a mode of feel-bad femininity. Both Chapters Two and Three explore our relationship to genre, be it in terms of a cruelly optimistic investment or in terms of individual isolation and exclusion from normative genres. Finally, Chapters Four and Five explore and construct different modes of resilience, mapping out the concept's

resonance within girlhood coming-of-age narratives. This secondary structure works to draw a thread between the opening and close of the thesis by returning to and developing the framework introduced in the first chapter, as well as creating links and resonances between the concerns of the first three chapters and the latter half of the thesis. For although the thesis structurally distinguishes between empowerment and resilience as culturally specific modes of postfeminism, this division is nevertheless a conceptual conceit, designed to differentiate between modes of social viability that may yet turn out to be entwined even though manifesting distinctively from one another. In other words, young women coming of age during the height of resilience discourse are by no means immune to the social expectations of postfeminist empowerment discourse that Gill outlines, and vice versa. Each works conceptually as a culturally and historically specific construction that mobilises particular affective frequencies. Throughout the thesis I also highlight further examples of texts operating within the discourses outlined here, finding points of convergence and productive conflict between and within genres.

In conclusion of this introductory chapter, I want to briefly comment on the link between the empowerment mode of postfeminist social viability and the contemporary resilience model. *Gone Girl* and *Catch Me Daddy* may not initially appear to have much in common with regard to either genre or narrative; however, they are united in the way they navigate a loss of social inclusion: *Gone Girl* in response to postfeminist empowerment discourse, and *Catch Me Daddy* in response to postfeminist resilience discourse. As I later discuss, within a resilience paradigm, the primary route to become a socially acceptable feminine subject is to overcome perceived gender deficits and capitalise on them. By contrast, *Gone Girl* demonstrates how postfeminist empowerment discourse encourages women to conceal their enactment of traditional femininity by performing it as socially desirable agency. As Meredith Nash and Ruby Grant observe, 'postfeminism is positioned as part of a contemporary neoliberal refashioning of femininity in which women escape traditional boundaries of femininity through a continual reworking of subjectivity as subjects and objects of commodification and consumerism' (2015:

981). Both the empowerment and resilience modes of postfeminism are therefore predicated on overcoming femininity through processes of transformation. Whereas postfeminist empowerment genres are typically concerned with this transformation as private and concealed, newly conventionalised genres of resilience are interested in exposing the transformation process. In both cases, the transformation and the reworking are key to 'escaping' traditional femininity and thus aligning with and adhering to dominant social norms. Tracing the significant cultural shift whereby postfeminist ideas and ways of living first begin to register as feel-bad, before they then become entrenched as resilience discourse within our imagination of girlhood, each chapter maps complex, contradictory and incomplete ways of being in our contemporary world. My aim is to explore methods of relating to and navigating the ways in which women and girls are culturally encouraged to produce them/ourselves as feminine subjects. In this way, the thesis hopes to make a valuable contribution to feminist and postfeminist media scholarship through its affective approach to uncovering the relationship between normative genres, on the one hand, and the social and cultural construction of femininity, on the other, and by exploring the ways in which we collectively conceptualize desirable modes of being and agency in our current moment.

## Chapter One: Feel-bad Postfeminism in *Gone Girl* (2012)

While efforts to oppose, contradict and undermine postfeminist femininity have always been contemporaneous with its relative cultural dominance, Gillian Flynn's novel *Gone Girl* is especially notable in this regard for bringing the concept of postfeminism as damaging to women's individuation and subjectivity to a mainstream audience. One of the key defining features of postfeminist culture is the insistence on limitless choice; as Gill observes, 'the notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities' (2007: 153). In addition, postfeminist culture constructs a catalogue of what Gill and Christina Scharff term 'new femininities' (2011: 8) for women to adopt. According to Amy Shields Dobson, this type of discourse tends to 'construct and address girls and young women as strong, confident, capable, and fun-loving subjects in contrast to earlier models of weak femininity' (2015: 29). *Gone Girl* is important because it explores the destructive impact of the postfeminist mode of address and exposes the illusion of free choice. The novel therefore provides an entryway to the impasse of postfeminism, as well as playing a key role in a significant cultural turn wherein postfeminism begins to be constructed in the cultural imagination as a feel-bad genre that does not produce the satisfaction it promises.

While such a shift cannot be dated precisely, it occurs in rough alignment with the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent global economic downturn. Tasker and Negra state that postfeminism 'reads differently now that the economic bubble has burst' (2014: 6–7). Indeed, the postfeminist aspiration to 'have it all' feels especially unattainable (though evidently no less desirable) in the midst of a postrecession culture characterised by precarity and insecurity. The economic crisis quickly gave rise to a still-growing body of fiction exploring its impact.<sup>18</sup> In her timely analysis of postrecessionary American cinema, Marie-Alix Thouaille observes that the typical

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<sup>18</sup> See Katy Shaw's *Crunch Lit* (2015) examining the contemporary 'recession writings' of authors such as Jonathan Franzen and Don DeLillo. For a wider analytic scope considering the relationship between gender and precarity, see *Gender and Austerity in Popular Culture: Femininity, Masculinity and Recession in Film and Television* (ed. Davies and O'Callaghan 2016).

aspirations of postfeminist glamour and glossy professional success are ‘under considerable strain’ (2018: 1) in films like *Girl Most Likely* (Springer Berman and Pulcini 2012), *Bachelorette* (Headland 2012) and *Young Adult* (Reitman 2011).<sup>19</sup> Thouaille argues that ‘despite orienting themselves toward post-feminist ways of living,’ the heroines of these films not only prove ‘unable to reap the promises of postfeminism,’ but more importantly, ‘the very pursuit of post-feminist aspirations is portrayed as destructive and toxic’ (2). Likewise, albeit the driving force of *Gone Girl*’s narrative, the desire to maintain social viability within a postfeminist paradigm proves devastating to its protagonist. In this way, the novel acknowledges the feel-good power of the postfeminist ‘promise of happiness’ (Ahmed 2010), while ultimately constructing postfeminist ways of living as incapable of producing happy or fulfilled female subjects. Postfeminist self-fulfilment therefore remains aspirational in *Gone Girl* but is demonstrably unattainable without incurring great personal cost. The price of postfeminism has finally begun to register within mainstream media culture. This chapter will show that postfeminist empowerment discourse is no longer fully legible as a feel-good genre and details the ways in which it has begun to collapse from within.

*Gone Girl* is primarily concerned with the effects of the recession on the privileged, white middle classes. Flynn’s dual protagonists, Nick and Amy, are formerly successful writers in New York ‘cut loose’ (2012: 5) from their careers, their job losses wrought by the declining economy and advent of internet media. Subsequently driven to surrender their wealthy upper-middle class lifestyle, the couple relocate to Nick’s midwestern hometown. Envisioned as ‘a miniature ghost town of bank-owned, recession-busted, price-reduced mansions, a neighbourhood that closed before it ever opened’ (4), the Missouri setting evokes the omnipresence of loss, debt and dispossession structuring the contemporary American psyche. Indeed, Flynn’s own experience of job insecurity following her

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<sup>19</sup> The American comedy *Bachelorette* is of particular interest as an intertextual reference point for *Gone Girl*. Whereas *Gone Girl* explores the destructiveness of postfeminist femininities through a single protagonist, *Bachelorette* does so through four distinctive ‘types’ as embodied by the film’s four thirty-something protagonists, all of whom have been profoundly damaged by their deeply internalised investment in postfeminist culture.

redundancy in 2008 after ten years of writing for the American magazine *Entertainment Weekly* evidently informs a large part of the novel's premise. Capturing the mood of a post-2008 generation, Flynn unravels the interconnections between the decline of print journalism and the ascendancy of new media, mass media narratives of violence and the exploitation of a 24-hour news cycle, and crucially also, the weary performance of prescriptive gender expectations that lie at the heart of *Gone Girl's* domestic horror story.<sup>20</sup>

The novel appears at first glance to be a well-worn psychological thriller: a beautiful woman disappears and her husband is the chief suspect for her murder. Opening on the morning of their fifth anniversary, present-day scenes told from Nick's perspective as he realises his wife is missing alternate with Amy's diary entries dating back to their first meeting seven years earlier. The first half of the novel paints a contradictory picture of their marriage: whereas Amy's diary suggests Nick is lazy, aggressive and potentially violent, Nick's narration portrays Amy as irrationally perfectionist, obsessive and highly-strung. The second half of the novel further unravels the conflicting narrative perspectives by revealing that Amy is alive, in hiding, and having successfully faked her death is now working to frame Nick for her murder. In this way, a preoccupation with concealment and deception is central to the novel's structure. The diary chapters, which create a seamless version of postfeminist femininity, are shown to be entirely fabricated for the purposes of incriminating Nick. Just as Amy assures Nick that she is a 'cool girl' (2012: 250), we too are deceived by the diary entries, which work to convince both the reader and the police detectives within the novel's world that Amy is simply a loving wife, trapped in a failing marriage and afraid for her life. In this way, the

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<sup>20</sup> In *Neoliberal Gothic: International Gothic in the Neoliberal Age* (2017) Linnie Blake and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet contend that the rise of gothic genres over the last thirty years is a direct consequence of and response to the dominance and 'extraordinary violence' (2017: 14) of global neoliberal capitalism. Given the economic precarity, devaluation of social welfare and the public sector, and the erosion of rights-based discourses, they argue, it is therefore, 'entirely appropriate [...] that ours is a culture inhabited by monsters' (14). Just as Blake and Monnet reason that the suffering wrought by neoliberal policies and practices materialises in our literature and on our screens, this chapter shows that *Gone Girl's* gothic-influenced generic framing is central to the way the novel articulates postfeminism itself as a site and object of horror.

fundamental artifice at the core of postfeminist femininity is emphasised at the level of both narrative content and structure.

Initial critical reception of the novel praised it for its 'tense prose' (Johnstone, *Independent* 2012) and *Guardian* writer Alison Flood described it as an 'absolute must read' (2012). Although Flood's article makes a brief reference to the novel's gender politics, most responses, like Lev Grossman's (2012) review for *Time*, treat it purely as a psychological thriller, paying little attention to *Gone Girl's* sustained critique of normative gender scripts. Grossman describes the novel as:

a story about men and women who live double lives not because they're secret agents or jewel thieves but because as human beings they're incapable of being who they appear to be. Their whole personalities are crime scenes where evidence of their true selves has been hastily concealed--except that nothing stays hidden forever.

Grossman's assessment is apt, but fails to address the novel's central underpinning premise, which is that Nick and, in particular, Amy are incapable of being their 'true selves' because of the pressure they feel to live up to prescriptively gendered ideas about how men and women should live. Critical focus shifted following the release of David Fincher's film adaptation in 2014, which provoked a slew of articles dissecting the narrative directly in relation to feminist, gender and sexual politics. On the one hand, Todd VanDerWerff commends the adaptation as 'perhaps the most feminist mainstream movie in years' (*Vox* 2014), while critics like Nico Lang are more cautious, believing that the film 'betrays the crucial balance of Flynn's novel' (*AV Club* 2014), indicating that while the novel might offer some feminist potential, Fincher's adaptation falls short.<sup>21</sup> Commentators like Nile Cappello who downright dismisses the novel as 'decisively misogynistic' (*Huffington Post* 2014) are rare, yet speak to the broader discourse surrounding Flynn, who is accused of harbouring 'a deep animosity towards women' (Burkeman, *Guardian* 2013).

However, Cappello's central complaint that 'there is not a single woman in the

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<sup>21</sup> According to Thouaille, films like *Young Adult* (2011) and *Girl Most Likely* (2012) are not 'overtly, or even straightforwardly, feminist;' rather, their cultural significance lies in the ways they skilfully (and perhaps unexpectedly) unravel 'the ambiguities and contradictions of investing in postfeminist ways of living' (2018: 2). Similarly, those critics who endlessly debate the presence of feminist politics in *Gone Girl* are overlooking the novel's contribution and commitment to exploring, in ugly detail, the affective impact of postfeminist culture.

entire novel that isn't a complete and utter mess' is easily refuted. As Burkeman points out, Flynn's:

lurid plots make no claim to social realism: to interpret her evil female characters as somehow representative of their real-life gender, you must wilfully overlook hundreds of pages of other people and events that you'd almost certainly never encounter in reality, either.

Indeed, *Gone Girl's* narrative of extreme violence and manipulation finds resonance with Anne Billson's 'preposterous thriller' category, the conventions of which include a convoluted evil masterplan, elaborate murders and outlandish plot structure (*Telegraph* 2013). As Anne Helen Petersen suggests, there are plenty of popular crime thriller novels with outlandish yet narratively satisfying twists and turns. Petersen's assessment of the film is summed up succinctly by the title of her article, 'The Problem With "Gone Girl" Is That There's No "Cool Girl"' (*Buzzfeed* 2014). What Petersen astutely identifies is that the novel distinguished itself from the typically homogenous preposterous thriller through its construction and critique of a familiar 'mode of femininity that our current cultural moment valorizes and celebrates' (2014): the figure of the Cool Girl. The first half of the novel introduces readers to this beautiful, fun-loving and easy-going girl via Amy's diary. Through the much-quoted Cool Girl monologue, the novel exposes this type of girlhood as an artificial construction:

Men always say that as the defining compliment, don't they? She's a cool girl. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl (2012: 250—251).<sup>22</sup>

Whereas in the novel the Cool Girl monologue corresponds to the persona constructed by the diary chapter ('Diary Amy'), Petersen demonstrates that the first

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<sup>22</sup> I will return to this quotation and provide more detail later in this chapter.

half of the film creates a sense that Amy's character, while certainly intelligent and beautiful, simply 'isn't, well, *cool*' (2014 original italics). Petersen continues:

She has to be transcendent—and then, when the twist turns, and she becomes her “real” self, it illuminates the Cool Girl not as a natural state, but a performance calculated to attract, please, and sate a man's desires. Without that contrast—and, by extension, the understanding that Amy was motivated by her frustration with the impossible expectations of “perfect” femininity—Amy comes off as a one-dimensional sociopath.

This 'twist,' upon which the entire central premise of the novel is predicated, is rendered either ineffective or irrelevant in the film adaptation, depending on one's perspective. Amanda Dobbins concurs that 'the problem with Movie Amy' is that 'she is stripped of her motivation,' but she cites this not as a symptom of 'woman-hating' but rather as a 'failure of adaptation—and maybe not even a failure, since the resulting film is a very entertaining story about a man whose crazy wife ruins his life' (*Vulture* 2014). Both Petersen and Dobbins highlight that, unlike the novel, the film does not interrogate the damaging effects of normative femininity; instead, it is much more interested in exploring Amy's character as femme fatale, using the film noir genre to critique romantic comedy narratives that position marriage as the ultimate fulfilment for all women. The film played a crucial role in the cultural conversation about *Gone Girl*, its perceived shortcomings as an adaptation provoking further discussion of the novel's success in challenging normative femininity. As indicated by *Gone Girl's* critical reception, the Cool Girl figure is essential to the construction of postfeminist tropes and ways of living as affectively feel-bad. This chapter therefore primarily focuses on the novel, rather than attempting to compare it to the film, as the above-quoted critics have already done so.

### **Reiterative and Defiant Agency**

Postfeminist empowerment texts are those in which compliance with postfeminist norms and ways of living (such as those outlined by Gill) ultimately lead to happiness and fulfilment. Most often, this sense of fulfilment is achieved by linking narrative closure to traditionally postfeminist objects of desire like heterosexual romance, marriage and motherhood. As Ahmed explains in *The Promise of*

*Happiness*, ‘happiness functions as a promise that directs you toward certain objects, as if they provide you with the necessary ingredient for the good life’ (2010: 54). Ahmed identifies monogamy, marriage, family and gender compliance as socially privileged ways of living while examining how happiness is promised to those who align themselves with these normative institutions. Similarly, Ahmed explains that ‘we can think of gendered scripts as “happiness scripts” providing a set of instructions for what women and men must do in order to be happy’ (59). The concept of gendered happiness scripts is particularly apt in relation to *Gone Girl*, a novel preoccupied with social roles, scripts and performances. Indeed, *Gone Girl* marks a bold effort not only to ‘envisage a materially, historically, and experientially constituted’ postfeminist subject, but to construct her as a ‘subject engendered [...] precisely by the process of its engagement in the narrative genres’ (De Lauretis 1984: 106). This is evident in the ways that Flynn’s dual protagonists are not only explicitly constructed as acutely aware of social and generic convention, but also feel worn down by the cultural expectations they have absorbed.<sup>23</sup> The novel is alert to the significance of narrative genres in the formation of subjectivity, as well as recognising the kind of freedom afforded to those with the capacity to shape their own narratives.

*Gone Girl*’s anxieties regarding endlessly reiterative social conventions resonate with Judith Butler’s formulation of agency predicated on both the repetition and subversion of established norms. Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) was hugely influential and her model of performativity has dominated feminist and gender theory since its publication in 1990. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (1993), Butler describes performativity as ‘that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains’ (2011 [1993]: xii). What this means in terms of gender, for example, is that ‘feminine’ is not a fixed definitive category but rather something that is actively being (re)produced through repetition. Butler’s central claim is that “agency,” then, is to be located

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<sup>23</sup> Although postfeminist femininity is the primary subject of *Gone Girl*’s critique, the novel also pays attention to the role of postfeminist culture in shaping Nick’s character, who is constructed as equally exhausted by the roles, scripts and performances dictated by dominant masculine norms.

within the possibility of a variation on that repetition' (2010 [1990]: 198). In other words, we repeat, but with a difference, and thereby gradually alter the norms of signification. For Butler, there is no agency to be found 'outside' or beyond culturally constructed identities. As she writes, 'construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible' (2010 [1990]: 201). Butler goes on to assert that the 'critical task for feminism is [...] to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions' (201). Mari Ruti has recently taken issue with Butler's model, deploring that it 'remains remarkably respectful of hegemonic power' and therefore limits our full potential and capacity for agency (2017: 40). As Ruti explains, for Butler 'everything, including resistance, must be done *in relation to power* rather than direct opposition to it' (40 original italics). Ruti's argument draws out the distinction between a complicit negotiation with power and our capacity to categorically oppose it.

Ruti is deeply critical of Butler's assertion that the only way to create 'new social possibilities' is 'through a collaborative relation with power' (Butler, Laclau and Žižek 2000: 4). Of course, Ruti is not the first to point out that 'every attempt to subvert norms presupposes the very norms it seeks to undermine' (2017: 41). Accordingly, 'every reiteration of femininity on some level falls back on stereotypical notions of femininity' (41).<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, for Ruti this presupposition 'is why the Butlerian performative subject is caught up in an endless loop of collaborating with power' (41). Rather than dismiss Butler's model entirely, Ruti acknowledges that performativity 'can be a genuinely rebellious practice' and might well be 'all we are capable of' (41). However, she offers another reading of Butler by comparing performativity to a 'related ideal of queer mobility' (41), insisting that both hew a little too closely to the norms of consumer capitalism and the neoliberal imperative toward self-reinvention. This, Ruti goes on to argue, is one of the

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<sup>24</sup> Tina Chanter argues that any social construction makes space for subjects to subvert, rebel against or reject such constructions, yet there remains 'a sense in which those injunctions govern individual reactions, albeit negatively or indirectly. If a woman prefers wearing black leather to pink flowery dresses, this choice is far from incidentally related to the ideal of femininity that culture upholds for her' (1997: 47).

reasons why contemporary queer theory has taken an increasing interest in ‘acts of defiance that undermine the entire worldview that hegemonic power—now often explicitly named as neoliberal capitalism—represents’ (42).<sup>25</sup>

To construct a model of defiant agency, then, Ruti turns to Lacan and Žižek. Ruti’s stance on ‘the radical potential of Lacanian ethics’ (2017: 8) is set in motion as she constructs a fruitful dialogue between Lacan and Butler. Ruti makes a convincing case for the need of a defiant queer subject whose agency is forged in the act of risking her social viability by saying ‘No!’ (Žižek 2005: 140)<sup>26</sup> to hegemonic expectations.<sup>27</sup> Key to this formulation of agency is the idea that we can free ourselves (never entirely, but perhaps enough) from hegemonic capitalism if we can learn to separate its desires from our own.<sup>28</sup> A model of defiant agency articulates the ways that ideological interpellation will always fail to entirely capture us. As Butler notes in *Gender Trouble*, ‘the injunction to be a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated’ (2010 [1990]: 199). In other words, although normative ideology is powerfully reiterated and thus reinforced, there will always remain instances of collapse that might at least potentially enable defiance. Butler’s argument about the repetition and subversion of norms remains convincing, and the most realistic option for the majority of subjects. However, Ruti is right to argue that this is not enough, and that those

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<sup>25</sup> The other reason, Ruti suggests, why queer theorists are finding it increasingly difficult to endorse mobility and fluidity is that these are simply synonyms for instability, which has more capacity for harm than freedom, particularly in a globalised capitalist society defined by precarity (2017: 41).

<sup>26</sup> Here, Ruti is drawing on Žižek’s assertion that normative power and hegemonic expectation are not incompatible with oppositional acts of ‘radical autonomy’ (2005: 40). For Žižek, the ‘negativity of freedom’ (40) can manifest in the Lacanian ‘act’ (Lacan [1964] 1977: 50), which cannot be defined as simply any action or behaviour that may be irreconcilable with hegemonic expectation; rather, it must also be an act in accordance with one’s own desire or ‘inner directive’ (Ruti 2017: 45), a concept this chapter will explore in further detail.

<sup>27</sup> Ruti acknowledges Butler’s view that Lacan’s act of defiance is impossible, as even the idea that we might reject normative power is simply ‘one ideological fantasy among others’ (2017: 48). Moreover, Ruti explains, even if we were capable of saying ‘No!’, for Butler this would be too individualistic an endeavour, too close to the kind of antirelational solipsistic heroism Butler frequently disavows (2017: 55). Yet drawing on the classic example of Antigone’s defiance of the law, Ruti counters Butler by insisting that as Antigone risks her viability as a social subject on behalf of her brother, individuals are indeed capable of effectively defying normative power.

<sup>28</sup> A version of this paragraph appears in my review of *The Ethics of Opting Out*, which was published by *Feminist Theory* in 2018.

points at which dominant ideologies fail to fully capture us are significant as they offer us an important opportunity to defy what is socially expected of us. Ruti is articulating a frustration with the performative model, this 'too humble' relation to power, asking us to truly consider the question 'is that all there is?' when it comes to our alleged entrapment within normative ideology. In this way, Ruti's critique presents a compelling alternative to conceptualisations of agency that operates in complementation rather than substitution of the performative model.

Both models of agency play an important role in *Gone Girl's* examination of postfeminist normativity. For instance, there is a sense within the novel that generic conventions, rather than providing a set of useful guidelines, have instead exhausted their potential, as 'we know the words to say' in any given situation and 'are all working from the same dog-eared script' (2012: 81). These lines speak a weariness with repetition—of feeling trapped by an understanding of the world in which all subjectivities, scripts and roles are readily available, and all we are capable of is deviating within pre-existing norms and boundaries. While *Gone Girl* is clearly disillusioned with reiterative agency, it also highlights the difficulties of enacting agency through a defiance of social norms. Expressed most clearly through the Cool Girl monologue examined in more detail later in this chapter, there is an evident desire within the novel to refuse postfeminist convention—yet at the same time, *Gone Girl* articulates the near-impossibility of truly doing so. As I discuss in this chapter, the moments in which Amy attempts to say 'No!' are all constructed as ultimately in alignment with postfeminist convention. According to Ruti's model, any act of defiance that relies upon adhering to social expectation will eventually fail. This is precisely what happens in the novel: Amy is searching for a decisive act of defiance—against Nick and against the hegemonic postfeminist norms she has conformed to her entire life. Yet the allure of social inclusion and alignment proves too powerful to resist. While Amy's character risks her life, her marriage and her autonomy, she never truly risks her social viability in the way Ruti demands. This is important to bear in mind, as the novel is both speaking to disillusionment with a Butlerian model of subjectivity, and at the same time sounding a warning about the dangers of pursuing social viability at the expense of one's own desires. Indeed,

*Gone Girl's* protagonist is constructed as almost entirely incapable of conceiving her own desires beyond socially acceptable feminine norms. As I will argue, in *Gone Girl*, the act of concealing one's 'inner directive' (Ruti 2017: 45) and choosing to follow normative paths has a profoundly damaging impact on subjectivity. There are key moments at which the novel seems to acknowledge other paths that Amy might take; however, for a subject caught up entirely in a quest for social viability, such alternatives are not an option. In this way, the novel is not simply a quest for happiness, fulfilment, or even social belonging; rather, I read *Gone Girl* as a novel about maintaining feminine social viability in a postfeminist culture.

### **Narrative Closure and Coming of Age**

Postfeminist empowerment genres typically offer a specific kind of feminine catharsis. For example, in the 1990s *Sex and the City* primarily constructed feminine desires for material consumption and sexual autonomy. For the majority of its run from 1998–2004, the series was not preoccupied with an inevitable romantic trajectory culminating in marriage. However, in its final episode 'An American Girl In Paris (Part Deux)' (2004: 6.20), the series delivers closure through the reconciliation between protagonist Carrie Bradshaw and her emotionally unavailable love interest 'Mr Big.' As Emily Nussbaum notes in her *New Yorker* article, for most of the series 'Big wasn't there to rescue Carrie; instead, his "great love" was a slow poisoning' and their relationship provoked 'as much anxiety as relief' in viewers (2013). In this way, *Sex and the City* was successful in demonstrating that the affections of a prototypical leading man were not very satisfying for women, perhaps even harmful. In light of this, the final episode feels regressive, a turning back to romantic comedy tropes the series had previously sought to undermine, or at the very least interrogate. Despite its compounding and contravening of the romantic comedy genre, *Sex and the City* ultimately constructs postfeminist ways of living as capable of delivering a particular form of catharsis that assured viewers that this type of femininity was fully operational and as such would provide satisfaction. The subsequent feature film *Sex and the City: The Movie* (King 2008) continues in the same vein, producing traditional marriage as the primary object through which narrative closure is achieved.

In contrast, the way romance and marriage are constructed in *Gone Girl* suggests that postfeminist scripts might be able to produce a subject in alignment with the norms of her society, yet also prove overwhelmingly incapable of producing this subject as happy or fulfilled. Whereas the goals of social viability and happiness were seamlessly united in postfeminist empowerment texts, *Gone Girl* marks a fundamental separation between the two. Having grown up surrounded by postfeminist ideas about sex and romance, *Gone Girl*'s protagonist learns that social viability within this paradigm means performing particular femininities. The novel articulates these femininities through its 'types' of girl, and the figure of 'Cool Girl' is the primary identity through which the protagonist achieves her social status.<sup>29</sup> In this way, *Gone Girl* situates itself within a cultural period in which narratives and images of girls have become 'hypervisible' (Gonick *et al.* 2009: 1; Handyside and Taylor-Jones 2016: 1). As already observed, the figure of the girl has particular resonance within postfeminist culture. According to Projansky:

Girlness—particularly adolescent girlness—epitomises postfeminism. If the postfeminist woman is always in process, always using the freedom and equality handed to her by feminism in pursuit of having it all (including discovering her sexuality) but never quite managing to attain full adulthood, to fully have it all, one can say that the postfeminist woman is quintessentially adolescent [...] no matter what her age (2007: 45).

This idea of a 'quintessentially adolescent' postfeminist womanhood is articulated through Flynn's decision to create a female protagonist who is 38-years-old, having long reached the age of majority, yet must enact various types of girlness to attain feminine social viability. An unbounded belief in the power of the self to transform as required—to rewrite one's own story and to change one's generic outcome in the process—is what drives Amy's characterisation throughout the novel. Flynn constructs Amy as the Perfect Girl, who finds an escape from the pressure to excel by playing the Cool Girl, only the escape turns into yet another trap. The disillusionment with cool girl femininity and its capacity to bring only a fleeting kind of happiness is what sets the entire novel in motion. However, rather than spinning

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<sup>29</sup> Amy reels off an inventory of personas she has already assumed prior to the Cool Girl: 'Amazing Amy. Preppy '80s Girl. Ultimate-Frisbee Granola and Blushing Ingenue and Witty Hepburnian Sophisticate. Brainy Ironic Girl and Boho Babe (the latest version of Frisbee Granola)' (2012: 266). The list demonstrates the endlessly recyclable femininities available to perform and discard at will.

out into limitless subjectivities, Amy has exhausted her options: by the end of the novel there is no one left for her to become. *Gone Girl*'s first-person narration offers readers a kind of access to Amy's interior world. However, the novel is dominated by a sense of what or who Amy is not, rather than who she is or could be. This is demonstrated by the way Flynn constructs Amy's character as 'pretending to have a personality' (2012: 250). 'What persona feels good, what's coveted, what's *au courant*?' (250 original italics), Flynn writes, thus articulating a kind of femininity predicated on self-transformation dictated by normative social desirability. The novel informs us that a 'Real Amy' exists, 'and she was so much better, more interesting and complicated and challenging, than Cool Amy' (254). Yet this 'Real Amy' is nowhere to be found in the novel itself, suggesting that while Flynn's protagonist has some slim self-awareness that her own desires exist, her sense of self is overwhelmed by normative fantasies of who she should be. There is a sense in *Gone Girl* that the prescriptiveness of gender normativity is not the only problem; rather, the very processes of repetition and variation are what feel limited in scope. Amy's repetitions of social norms have led not to a subversion of those norms, but to an exhaustion of her selfhood. Butler argues that there is 'not a transcendental subject' and 'no self that is prior to the convergence or who maintains "integrity" prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field' (2010 [1990]: 199). The way the novel insists upon (yet does not manage to articulate) the existence of a 'Real Amy' directs us to this desire for a transcendental subject, a desire to locate a coherent sense of self beyond or somehow outside the postfeminist paradigm, its performances, tropes and scripts, not to mention the cultural weight they carry. The fact that this prior external self is a fantasy does not impede the search, nor extinguish the desire.

That Amy's character appears to be devoid of authenticity steers toward women's association with lack or blank subjectivity, a long-held idea in Western culture (Mulvey 1975). In her analysis of Sofia Coppola's stardom and filmmaking, Caitlin Yunuen Lewis links the concept of blankness to postfeminism, positing that 'lack is a defining feature of Coppola's female protagonists' (2011: 190). Lewis goes on to explain that this lack is derived from their construction as idealised white subjects

in addition to 'the limits of their roles' (190) under postfeminism. In this sense, postfeminist ways of living in Coppola's films signal an inability to come of age. In the same way, what is significant about *Gone Girl* is the way it constructs the Cool Girl performance (among other postfeminist femininities) as something that leads to subject-dissolution rather than subject-formation. Moreover, postfeminism in *Gone Girl* is constructed as a set of scripts, ideals and objects that are more likely to impede than deliver coming-of-age success. Instead of selfhood and subjectivity taking shape through the coming-of-age process, the novel suggests that postfeminism is producing subjects characterised by their ability to conceal their 'true' selves (if such a thing exists). If contemporary women are 'blank' or 'lacking,' *Gone Girl* suggests, it is because postfeminism made them this way. In this chapter I argue that the way *Gone Girl* formulates, recycles and discards all the different femininities, subject positions and personae offered by postfeminism points to an exhaustion of 'girl' as a category. The novel itself does not pose a solution to the problem of postfeminism through offering alternative models of fulfilment for its protagonist (and, by extension, its readers); rather, it emphasises that the dominant frameworks through which women are socialised and encouraged to conform are producing profoundly unhappy subjects. The happy postfeminist subject is of course still in cultural circulation, as Gill (2016) points out, since new feminisms do not displace 'older' postfeminist ideas. Equally, feel-bad constructions of postfeminism do not supersede or overwrite cultural texts in which postfeminism continues to be positioned as the categorical path toward feminine fulfilment and/or emancipation.

### **Cool Girl Postfeminism**

The tropes and fantasies constructed by postfeminist empowerment genres crystallise in *Gone Girl*'s figure of the Cool Girl. Postfeminist empowerment discourse demands that women perform and conceal traditional femininity. The outward appearance of traditionally feminine attributes such as passivity or fragility are decidedly undesirable traits for a contemporary female subject to possess. Similarly, *Gone Girl* constructs the overt preoccupation with marriage and conventional beauty standards (exemplified also by *Bridget Jones's Diary*) as

something women must disavow. By contrast, the Cool Girl articulates a form of socially desirable femininity. The Cool Girl is 'cool' (or socially viable) because she retains elements of traditional feminine passivity whilst being careful to conceal them; for example, by anticipating others' desires in advance and presenting them as her own. Amy's now-infamous Cool Girl diatribe (already quoted above) immediately follows the revelation that Amy has faked her death (and framed Nick for her murder) and is presented (both by the character and to some extent the narrative) as justification for her actions:

Men always say that as the defining compliment, don't they? She's a cool girl. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2: because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl (2012: 250–251).

In this passage, Flynn (ventriloquizing through her protagonist's narration) outlines what is required for heterosexual women to be deemed socially desirable subjects. Writing about the distinctive features of contemporary postfeminist culture, Gill—drawing on the work of Jean Kilbourne (1999)—notes that 'being "confident", "carefree" and "unconcerned about one's appearance" are now central aspects of femininity in their own right—even as they sit alongside injunctions to meet standards of physical beauty that "only a mannequin could achieve"' (2008: 441). Gill's definition of postfeminist femininity resonates with Flynn's Cool Girl, who must conform to conventionalised beauty norms, whilst appearing indifferent to her weight, and enjoy being 'one of the guys' rather than share her messy, feminine feelings. In this way, Cool Girl updates the Bridget Jones style of femininity: whereas Bridget is overtly constructed as a 'self-monitoring subject' (McRobbie 2008: 20) who diarises her obsession with weight loss and finding the right man, Cool Girl must aspire to these same goals, albeit in secret. The transformation of passivity into agency and enjoyment is key to this iteration of postfeminist femininity. If Cool Girl were simply to acquiesce to her boyfriend's wishes, it would render her too passive, too traditionally feminine. Instead, Flynn emphasises that

Cool Girl must work to anticipate her male partner's desires, and in doing so, present her love of video games, threesomes and hamburgers as entirely authentic, that is, as her own choice and agency. Unfortunately, this section of the novel is easy to read as an indictment of women who simply enjoy stereotypically masculine activities like playing football or drinking beer, as some critics have done (Moss, *Bustle* 2014). However, the narrative makes it clear that the 'problem' with the Cool Girl is that 'they're not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they're pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be' (2012: 251). In other words, masculinist norms continue to set the terms of socially acceptable femininity to which women must adapt, all the while concealing the performative inauthenticity and artifice of their conformity.

Echoing the familiar neoliberal assumption that anyone not thriving under its regime simply isn't trying hard enough, Flynn emphasises how all-encompassing the norms of cool girl femininity are: 'every girl was supposed to be this girl, and if you weren't, then there was something wrong with *you*' (252 original italics). Furthermore, by stressing that 'there are variations to the window dressing'—for example, a Cool Girl who 'loves seitan and is great with dogs' (251) to attract her vegetarian boyfriend—the novel demonstrates that it is the performative nature of the persona that is truly important. The narrative insists that the specificities are unimportant; what matters is that Cool Girl is classified as someone who 'likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn't ever complain' (251). The uncomplaining Cool Girl has some ties to what Lewis identifies as an 'idealized classic white femininity,' defined by 'emotional restraint, demureness, and ethereality' (2011: 191). However, she also diverges in some significant ways. Molly Haskell's analysis of the 'dialectic between the blonde and the brunette' (2016 [1974]: 349) in Hitchcock's films is of relevance here. The idealized white femininity Lewis identifies resonates with the trope of the 'cool blonde' (Mulvey 2006: 97), characterised by her aloof and withholding nature. Haskell points out that in films like *The Birds* (1963) and *Marnie* (1964), 'the sexual connotations of the old iconography remain—blonde: virgin; brunette: whore—but the values are reversed, so that it is the voluptuous brunette who is "good" and the icy blonde who is "bad"' (349).

According to Haskell, Hitchcock's blondes are not punished for their bad behaviour; rather, they are subjected to 'excruciating ordeals, long trips through terror in which they may be raped, violated by birds, killed' because they withhold 'love, sex, trust' from the male characters in the films (349). As Haskell writes, 'the plot itself becomes a mechanism for destroying their icy self-possession, their emotional detachment' (349). In effect, the narrative is constructed in such a way as to punish attractive yet unavailable women. In contrast to the icy blonde, the brunette character is constructed as 'down to earth, unaffected, adoring, willing to swallow her pride,' although her flaws include a tendency 'to be possessive and [...] too available' (349). It is significant that Lewis identifies 'emotional restraint' as an idealised feminine quality, while Haskell notes that Hitchcock's 'good' women are characterised by their accessibility to the male protagonist. This contradiction is key to Flynn's version of cool girl femininity, which prizes restraint when it comes to women's own desires, yet at the same time encourages women to be emotionally available in accommodating male desire. Cool Girl therefore works as an update to idealised white femininity: she is conventionally attractive and emotionally restrained, down to earth and accommodating without ever crossing the line into possessive behaviour that would make her undesirable to men.

The Cool Girl can also be understood in relation to Ahmed's figure of the 'feminist killjoy' (2010: 50–87). According to Ahmed, those figures who do not easily fit into normative institutions that promise happiness become 'affect aliens' (42), including the 'melancholic migrant' (121–159) who refuses the fantasy of a postracial society, or the feminist killjoy who continues to raise the subject of institutionalised sexism. Because they cannot or will not find happiness in the 'right' places, Ahmed's affect aliens are by definition socially undesirable subjects. As Ahmed argues, 'feminists might kill joy simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising [...] they disturb the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places' (2010: 65–6). Placing the feminist killjoy in opposition to the Cool Girl allows us to see more clearly the ways in which performing cool girl femininity sustains that same good life fantasy. In a similar way, we can even trace Cool Girl's ancestry through Betty Friedan's figure of the happy American housewife in *The*

*Feminine Mystique* (1965).<sup>30</sup> In *The Promise of Happiness* Ahmed situates the feminist killjoy in relation to this fantasy of the happy housewife, the socially desirable figure of the 1950s and 1960s for (some) women to embody and measure themselves against.<sup>31</sup> This particular fantasy is founded upon concealing ‘the signs of domestic labor under the sign of happiness’ (2010: 50). Whereas the feminist killjoy exposes the unhappiness of dominant social scripts and objects, the happy housewife upholds them with ‘a beaming smile’ (50). Similarly, postfeminist empowerment discourse is predicated upon the concealment of traditional femininity to preserve its harmful fantasy.<sup>32</sup> In this way, as she conceals the labour of traditional femininity with a performance of agency and empowerment, the Cool Girl operates quite ironically as an update to the happy housewife. Ruti explains how Lacan sets the inner directive of desire against ‘the morality of power, of the service of goods’ (Lacan 1959–1960: 315 in Ruti 2017: 45). According to Lacan, ‘as far as desires are concerned, come back later. Make them wait’ (1959–1960: 315). We can now see how this translates to the postfeminist paradigm, which asks women not just to put their own desires on hold, but also to indefinitely mask the very existence of such desires. Immediately following the Cool Girl monologue, Amy narrates:

I waited patiently—*years*—for the pendulum to swing the other way, for men to start reading Jane Austen, learn how to knit, pretend to love cosmos, organise scrapbook parties, and make out with each other while we leer and then we’d say, *Yeah, he’s a Cool Guy* (2012: 251 original italics).

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<sup>30</sup> Flynn’s Cool Girl also has countless cultural counterparts, for example: *There’s Something About Mary* (Farrelly and Farrelly 1998), *500 Days of Summer* (Webb 2009) and *Drinking Buddies* (Swanberg 2013). Strikingly similar to the Cool Girl, the female characters in these films are typified by their ability to successfully tread the line between behaving like ‘one of the guys’ while still conforming to stereotypical feminine beauty norms.

<sup>31</sup> Ahmed turns to bell hooks, who points out that when *The Feminine Mystique* was published in 1965, over a third of American women were already in the workforce (hooks 2000: 2 in Ahmed 2010: 50–1). Therefore, it was a specific section of society, that is, ‘only women with leisure time and money who could actually shape their identities on the model of the feminine mystique’ (2000: 2). hooks’ analysis points out the ways in which the fantasy of the happy housewife was determined by the intersection between race and social class, an insight which equally applies to Flynn’s construction of cool girl femininity.

<sup>32</sup> This recalls Joan Riviere’s article ‘Womanliness as Masquerade’ (1929) in which she argues that, particularly among professional women in male-dominated workplaces, a mask of femininity must be performed in order to escape masculine judgement.

This outburst implies that there is a willingness to perform to a certain degree; however, there is also an expectation of reciprocity that goes unfulfilled. *Gone Girl* suggests perhaps some women would not be opposed to holding their desire, if only the gesture were to be acknowledged and returned in kind. Significantly, by the end of the novel, at the same time as highlighting the ways in which transformation and concealment are damaging to female subjectivity, *Gone Girl* also acknowledges similar effects on masculine subjectivity in the way Nick is characterised as newly terrified of his wife, ‘the fun, beautiful murderess’ (452):

Me, Nick Dunne, the man who used to forget so many details, is now the guy who replays conversations to make sure I didn’t offend, to make sure I never hurt her feelings [...] I am a great husband because I am very afraid she may kill me (452).

This suggests that although the roles have, to a degree, switched—now Nick is the one who must convincingly conceal his desires—the territory itself remains bleakly unchanged (De Lauretis 1984). The final scene indicates that Amy and Nick are continuing to follow their predetermined scripts. Nick is deviating from what he is ‘supposed to say’ (463), yet informs Amy that his ostensive devotion is derived from pity, ‘because every morning you have to wake up and be you’ (463). Here the novel produces postfeminist aspirational fantasies of marriage and motherhood as affectively feel-bad for both characters in the novel (as accentuated by Amy’s response: ‘I really, truly wish he hadn’t said that. I keep thinking about it. I can’t stop’ (463)). The reader is left with a vision of an unhappy marriage and a child that signifies not domestic happiness and futurity, but deception and despair. The novel’s final scene, which undermines postfeminist expectations of domestic fulfilment, emphasises the negative and undesirable feelings generated by postfeminism. In particular, the construction of Amy’s character as an unlikeable heroine whose fidelity to feminist politics is questionable at best produces feelings of discontent that work to expose the fraudulence of the postfeminist promise.

### **The Dead Girl’s Suicidal Viability**

While *Gone Girl* primarily focuses on the damage to women’s subjectivity caused by inhabiting the Cool Girl persona, the second half of the novel also invokes the ‘Dead

Girl' (2012: 263) as a cultural category embodying the complex relationship between femininity, perfection, agency and social viability. The popular trope of the dead girl is an enduring cultural figure that spans multiple fictional and lived genres. The dead girl is invoked in the novel first of all as a method to 'destroy Nick' by engineering 'a story that would restore my perfection. It would make me the hero, flawless and adored. Because everyone loves the Dead Girl' (263). Here, the conventions of the dead girl's story are considered preferable to those of the 'Dumb Average Woman' (263) with a cheating husband, despite the inevitably fatal conclusion of her narrative arc. Once again, social status is what is at stake: Amy is interested in destroying Nick's at the same time as regaining her own. In identifying that the most effective way to achieve both ends is through Amy's (carefully staged) death, *Gone Girl* demonstrates that her pursuit of postfeminist happiness scripts leads Amy not to self-fulfilment, as promised, but rather to a position in which suicide is considered her best option for retaining maximum social viability. The novel therefore presents a paradox in which opting out of the social through self-annihilation becomes, in effect, a method of increasing one's viability as a social subject.<sup>33</sup>

Amy's narration explains how, in her quest to maintain her viability as a feminine subject, she performs socially acceptable white upper-class femininity by taking part in masculinised activities, cultivating an accommodating persona and epitomising what Gill calls 'the sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is forever "up for it"' (2007: 151). The novel invokes an implicit social contract, in which fulfilling the norms of postfeminist femininity provides the reward of a conventional (heterosexual) romantic relationship. The aspiration is, of course, not only in regards of the relationship itself, but also in the fantasy of attaining a form of self-coherence as a subject within the dominant social order through alignment with heterosexual romantic norms. Therefore, the novel turns on the violation of this contract, as Amy's character discovers that Nick's affair has forced her to adopt 'a new persona, not of

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<sup>33</sup> See further discussion of self-annihilation and social viability in the conclusion to Chapter Six.

my choosing' and subsequently refuses to play the part of 'Dumb Average Woman Married to Average Shitty Man' (2012: 263). Flynn characterises Amy as acutely aware that if this story becomes attributed to her, she will join the ranks of 'the women with endless stories that make people nod sympathetically and think: *Poor dumb bitch*' (263 original italics). In this way, *Gone Girl* demonstrates the gendering of social viability and transgression. Nick's cheating is not a threat to his own social position; instead, his transgression reflects unfavourably on Amy, who as a result stands to lose her social status.

The dead girl is long established as a figure encapsulating the relationship between spectacular public fascination and the ostensibly flawless beauty that only death can confer. Elisabeth Bronfen chronicles the disquieting union between femininity and death, noting that 'the feminine corpse becomes a trope for that immaculate wholeness impossible in life' (1992: 129). Similarly, Alice Bolin's article on the televisual Dead Girl uses the series *Twin Peaks* (Frost and Lynch 1990–1991) as a key example of how death, beauty and perfection become entwined in the cultural imagination. The central mystery of the series revolves around the murder of teenager Laura Palmer; as Bolin observes, 'Palmer's corpse is *Twin Peaks*' truly memorable image' (*LA Review of Books* 2014). Described by Greil Marcus as 'unforgettable,' the image of Palmer's 'lifeless face' is 'pristine, unmarked, untroubled, gray-blue from its hours in the river, with dots of water clinging to the skin like beads' (*The Threepenny Review* 2006). This indelible cultural image of the beautiful dead girl is invoked as crucial to Amy's revenge scheme. Marcus' romanticised language to describe Palmer's washed-up corpse corresponds to the way Flynn constructs Amy's fantasy of her 'slim, naked, pale body, floating just beneath the current, a colony of snails attached to one bare leg. My hair trailing like seaweed' (2012: 276). Flynn's image of a beautiful drowned woman is reminiscent both of the historical dead girls of Renaissance and Pre-Raphaelite art, such as John Everett Millais' influential painting *Ophelia* (c. 1851–1852),<sup>34</sup> and of a contemporary publishing trend featuring dead girls on the covers of young adult novels. For

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<sup>34</sup> Key examples within this genre also include Paul Albert Steck's painting *Ophelia Drowning* (1895) and *The Young Martyr* by Paul Delaroche (1855).

example, the cover art for Alyxandra Harvey's novel *Haunting Violet* (2011), Carrie Ryan's *The Dead-Tossed Waves* (2010) and Nova Ren Suma's *Imaginary Girls* (2011) demonstrates the continuing resonance of the dead girl as a figure of cultural fascination (Figure 1).<sup>35</sup> The endurance of romanticised dead girl imagery, her limbs spread and trailing hair, suggests that Amy's assertion is correct; that whereas in life she is likely to be remembered as a '*poor dumb bitch*' (263 original italics), death offers a more preferable narrative outcome where an illusive memory of her deathly perfection survives.

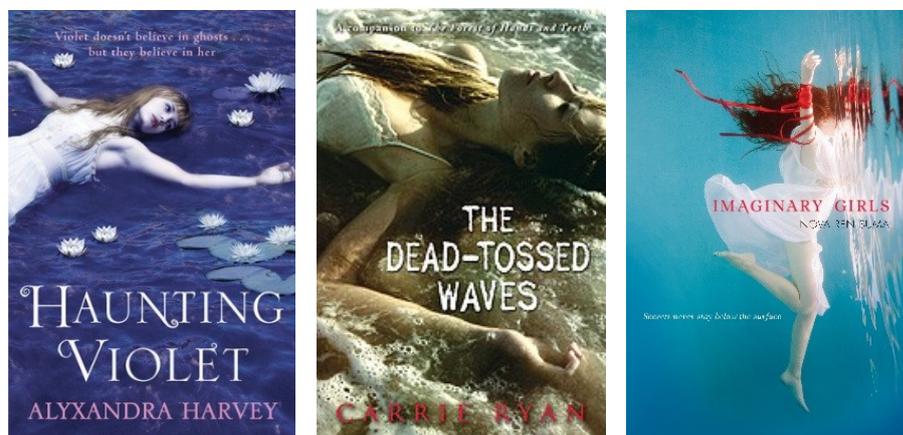


Figure 1 Young adult novels featuring dead girls as their cover image (Harvey 2011; Ren Suma 2011; Ryan 2010).

*Gone Girl* exploits the trope in a way that highlights how the dead girl continues to be a fundamental signifier of feminine perfection. However, the novel is also in dialogue with media in which a measure of narrative agency is ascribed to women through death. For example, Katherine Farrimond (2017) analyses the figure of the dead femme fatale in retro noir films such as *Shutter Island* (Scorsese 2010) and *Mulholland Falls* (Tamahori 1996) 'where the dead woman becomes more dangerous from beyond the grave' (2017: 40).<sup>36</sup> For Farrimond, these films

<sup>35</sup> Further examples of this popular contemporary publishing trend include *Envy* (Olsen 2011), *The Unbecoming of Mara Dyer* (Hodkin 2011), *Throat* (Nelson 2011). See also what might be considered an exemplar dead girl novel *The Lovely Bones* (Sebold 2002), narrated by a teenage girl in heaven following her brutal rape and murder.

<sup>36</sup> The retro noir films Farrimond identifies all draw upon the classics of the 1940s noir genre, an exemplar of which is Daphne Du Maurier's novel *Rebecca* (1938) and its subsequent film adaptation of the same name (Hitchcock 1940), where the title character is afforded agency and influence,

complicate the notion of the female corpse as a wholly passive object, as the dead femme fatale is also constructed as a 'deadly threat to the male protagonist' (41). In a similar way, Flynn's Dead Girl is a complex figure, retaining the associations with 'passivity and the loss of selfhood' (40) as Farrimond identifies, yet is also constructed as capable of exerting influence after her death, as one of Amy's key objectives is to frame Nick for her murder, thus condemning him to the death penalty. *Gone Girl* is therefore operating intertextually with this kind of story, in which women have more influence over the narrative in death than in life. As Bolin observes, 'the Dead Girl is not a "character" [...] but rather, the memory of her is' (2014). The dead girl might indeed be socially desirable, but narratively speaking she simply becomes a collection of others' memories of her.

There is also perhaps a sense in which the dead girl is constructed as a figure of escape, an immutable tactic to evade the pressures of conventional femininity. As Lewis identifies in her analysis of Sofia Coppola's films *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) and *Marie Antoinette* (2006), 'the traditional roles Coppola depicts (wife, mother, daughter, object of male lust) can be stultifying, suffocating, and perhaps only escapable through death' (2011: 190). In *Gone Girl*, the romantic figure of the dead girl is yet another fantasy of wholeness and coherence; she appears to offer a way out of the social order whilst simultaneously providing a method of attaining the social acceptance that remains out of reach to the living. There is no pressure to either conform or rebel against social convention; the dead girl opts out entirely, yet manages to retain some semblance of agency and selfhood. Suicide would gain Amy the public image of perfection she desires but might equally be interpreted very differently by readers as a selfish or vindictive act. Self-striking is ultimately constructed as a capitulation to the social order. As Amy complains: 'It's not fair that I have to die. Not really die. I don't want to. I'm not the one who did anything wrong' (2012: 314–315). Flynn's decision to draw upon and then ultimately reject

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despite having died prior to the events of the narrative. For further examination of Hitchcock's fascination with the trope of the dead woman who 'exerts an influence from beyond the grave' see Tania Modleski's *The Women who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (1988: 1). For wider analysis of this particular trope, see also Deborah Jermyn's (2004) discussion of the female corpse in film noir and classical Hollywood, including *Rebecca*, *Phantom Lady* (Siodmak 1944) and *Gaslight* (Cukor 1944).

the dead girl trope makes sense in terms of her readership, as although Amy would be more socially desirable within the world of the narrative, the reader would be far less likely to perceive of Amy as a narratively viable subject.

### **Genre Flailing**

Throughout the novel, Flynn constructs postfeminist happiness scripts and tropes in ways that link them to emptiness, blankness and lack, unravelling both their aspirational influence and exposing the damage they cause to female subjectivity and the coming-of-age process. However, with nothing new, let alone redemptive or cathartic, assuming shape in the wake of the postfeminist genre's undoing, Amy's fate is to return to live among the remnants of postfeminism. After all, this is not a coming-of-age narrative in which identity-formation is what's at stake; rather, it is a story about the aftermath of being produced as a feminine subject in a postfeminist framework. When a genre's ways of living are constructed as the cause of frustration and disappointment, we can begin to comprehend it as a genre in crisis. The crisis of postfeminism is articulated in how its scripts, roles and categories overwhelmingly produce unhappy subjects. The novel expresses this in the way Amy's performance of the Cool Girl only brings her unhappiness. Amy therefore finds herself in the midst of a crisis: the genre that she believed would offer her a positive (that is, a world- and self-defining) outcome has failed. As Berlant explains, such failure is inclined to result in a serious crisis of 'genre flailing':

In a crisis we engage in genre flailing so that we don't fall through the cracks of knowledge and noise into suicide or psychosis. In a crisis we improvise like crazy, where "like crazy" is a little too non-metaphorical (2017: n.p).

Berlant recognises that suicide and psychosis are not where we want to end up during or after a crisis; both are figured as undesirable outcomes. We learn to extemporise, or 'flail,' when trying to prevent these kinds of outcomes that begin to seem if not inevitable, then perhaps a little too plausible. *Gone Girl* posits these untenable options in the wake of Amy's postfeminist crisis through the dead girl (as

discussed) as well as the ‘psycho bitch’ figure,<sup>37</sup> neither of which offers a narratively or socially viable form of generic closure. As well as resonating with the tropes of femininity that *Gone Girl* mobilises in response to the collapse of postfeminism, Berlant’s observation also speaks to the novel’s structure and its use of preposterous thriller conventions. Structurally, the novel veers wildly between unpicking crime genre conventions including the missing wife trope, the romantic comedy ‘meet cute,’<sup>38</sup> and the femme fatale, to name a few. *Gone Girl* is grasping at various overlapping threads that articulate the ways we understand femininity, casting its net as widely as possible in its dissection of culturally resonant feminine subject positions.

Genre flailing becomes particularly legible through *Gone Girl*’s use of preposterous thriller conventions; for example, the novel’s revenge scheme relies on intensified violence and high-stakes manipulation that include Amy reporting two false rape accusations, framing her husband for murder, covertly inseminating herself to trap him in their marriage, and slitting the throat of an ex-boyfriend. These examples are a large part of why *Gone Girl* has been criticised for trading in misogyny. As many critics have indicated, they read uncomfortably as a greatest hits compilation of pervasive misogynist myths about female behaviour (Hess 2014; Morris 2014; Saner 2014). Indeed, part of what contributes to the reading of Amy as a ‘psycho bitch’ (2012: 441) is that she is characterised not only by her terrible deeds, but by the fact that these are terrible deeds that only women perpetrate. In this way, Amy’s violence and manipulation are feminised. She is not simply a villain; rather, she is a

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<sup>37</sup> The psycho bitch has roots in the femme fatale figure of classic 1940s and 1950s film noir, (for example, Brigid O’Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston 1941) along with the neo-noir films of the 1980s and 1990s such as *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven 1992). The classic film noir era was the focus of psychoanalytic, feminist and film studies theorists, who primarily critiqued the femme fatale figure as a ‘symptom of male fears about feminism’ (Doane 1991: 2–3). For analysis of the neo-noir era’s incarnation of highly eroticised and sexually dangerous femininities in films like *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne 1987), see Elaine Berlant and Marilyn Wechter’s article ‘Fatal/Fetal Attraction: Psychological Aspects of Imagining Female Identity in Contemporary Film’ (1992). Contemporary investigations of the femme fatale include Farrimond’s *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema* (2017) which examines the retro-noir film (as discussed above), as well as adolescent, bisexual and monstrous manifestations of the femme fatale. For a specifically postfeminist analysis of the femme fatale, see Samantha Lindop’s *Postfeminism and the Fatale Figure in Neo-Noir Cinema* (2015).

<sup>38</sup> A popular romantic comedy convention in which the romantic couple are introduced for the first time ‘in a way that’s charming, ironic, or just generally amusing’ (Carvill 2013, *Guardian*).

uniquely female villain. However, Amy's exploits are also examples of genre flailing, responding to her character's confinement in gender scripts as she attempts to leave the postfeminist cool girl behind and forge a new story for herself. The novel unfolds a series of escapes, each of which leads to another unforeseen trap. Initially, escaping the parental pressure to be perfect, Amy is confined by the cool girl persona she eventually rejects. She frames her husband for murder, retreats to a cabin in the woods where she is robbed, then seeks refuge with an ex-boyfriend, Desi, whose offer of food and shelter comes at the price of Amy's material freedom. The novel draws a contrast between Nick and Desi: Nick wants an uncomplaining wife who will not challenge his irresponsible behaviour (following his redundancy) or his choices (to move to his hometown). By contrast, Desi wants something altogether more sinister, namely to recreate the high-school vision of Amy he once knew by encouraging her to re-dye her hair blonde, limiting her food portions to control her weight, and threatening to notify the police if she leaves his gated mansion. Here the novel acknowledges that the postfeminist happiness trap, while damaging to Amy's psyche, is (marginally) preferable to being 'trapped in [my] Ozarks cabin,' or worse, physically 'trapped in Desi's mansion compound' by a man who practices 'control in the guise of caring' (390). This cycle of escape and confinement demonstrates the difficulty of rewriting one's own story according to generic conventions dictating social desirability. It also introduces freedom, in addition to social viability, as a driving force of the narrative. *Gone Girl* makes it clear that Amy is not willing to settle for suicidal viability; she demands the freedom to live.

To conclude, I would like to consider very briefly how Berlant's concept of genre flailing can help us to understand also the novel's final chapters, which stage Amy's return to Nick as equivalent to a resumption of postfeminist ways of living as a safeguard against falling through the cracks of genre into socially undesirable territory. In the novel's final scene, Nick and Amy appear reconciled as Amy explains that the following day is both her pregnancy due date and their anniversary, thus connecting motherhood and marriage as the two sustaining forces of their unhappy partnership. In this way, *Gone Girl* resorts to the traditional

signifiers of feminine narrative closure. However, these signifiers appear in a severely corrupted format as Amy is shown to return to her cheating husband, use his frozen sperm to inseminate herself and continue to 'pretend together that we are happy and carefree and in love' (2012: 457) as they await the birth of their child. Marriage and motherhood are not reproduced here as narratively satisfying outcomes; instead, they are refigured to produce not only dissatisfaction, but also genuine horror. By seeing off Amy in her final vision as a wife and mother, Flynn constructs a narrative in which a woman who strives to be socially desirable above all else can only turn back upon herself. Even though the protagonist has come to realise the futility of her masquerade, the end of the novel finds her enacting yet another script: 'we are on the eve of becoming the world's best, brightest nuclear family' (462). Amy's transformations, her identity-shifts, together with the extreme measures she has taken to destroy her marriage have all led her back to the normative model that instigated her revenge schemes in the first place. In this way, then, the final scene exposes the crisis of postfeminism, wherein its ways of living are produced not within affective structures of happiness, but as part of a feel-bad framework. The inevitably feel-bad outcome of the female quest for social viability within a postfeminist paradigm suggests that the ideal of postfeminist perfection is not worth striving for. When our quest for social viability is undertaken at the expense of our own desires, *Gone Girl* suggests, we are likely only to harm ourselves in the process. There remains a continual friction between the reasonable desire to be socially viable subjects, and our willingness when necessary, to relinquish the protection and security afforded to us by our alignment with the social order. The following chapter addresses this relationship in closer detail, examining the bonds we form to things that harm us, and how difficult, even impossible, it can be to sever our attachments to the genres that sustain and contain us.

## Chapter Two: Postfeminist Impasse and Cruel Optimism in *Girls* (2012–2017)<sup>39</sup>

This chapter argues that postfeminism operates as a relation of ‘cruel optimism’ (2011: 1), Berlant’s term for the enduring bonds we form to objects, relationships, fantasies and ways of living that harm us. By analysing the controversial television series *Girls* through the lens of cruel optimism, we can begin to perceive a shifting and contradictory dynamic that characterises women’s investments in postfeminist culture. Whereas the previous chapter used *Gone Girl* to examine an extreme and somewhat hyperbolic response to the imperative to comply with postfeminist cultural norms, here I look to *Girls* as an illustrative example of a more everyday context for exploring the same kinds of postfeminist fantasies centring on love, sex, work and friendship. Crucially, this chapter builds on the analysis of *Gone Girl*’s return to postfeminist convention by examining how *Girls* intensifies and protracts this same dynamic through its strategies of reiteration. While *Gone Girl* contravenes expectations that its protagonist’s transgressions and transformations will result in narrative progression, through its episodic medium *Girls* explores the shape of a recursive impasse in which commitments and investments in normative ways of living are continually formed, renounced and revisited.

Following Berlant’s methodology, I analyse *Girls* as a project expressing a particular femininity born of a particular cultural moment. Specifically, this chapter argues that *Girls* belongs to an emerging genre navigating the contradictions and complexities that coming of age in a primarily postfeminist media era entails. Using ‘postfeminist’ as a heuristic that captures the production and circulation of mutually constitutive fictional and lived genres, I will analyse three examples of how *Girls* is designed to showcase subjectivities primed and oriented towards ways of living marked by the generic conventions of postfeminism. In particular, my interest is the series’ interpretation of postfeminist tropes of work, marriage and

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<sup>39</sup> A version of this chapter has been published in *Reading Lena Dunham’s Girls: Feminism, Postfeminism, Authenticity and Gendered Performance in Contemporary Television* (ed. Meredith Nash and Imelda Whelehan 2017).

romance. My chief focus is the ‘rom-com run,’ a convention found primarily in the romantic comedy genre in which one member of the central couple makes a grand gesture by racing (typically to the airport or across New York City streets) to declare their love for their partner.<sup>40</sup> I read the series’ restaging of the rom-com run trope as a form of investment in postfeminist culture that drives the narrative at the same time as inhibiting its progress. Additionally, through analysis of two scenes emphasising marriage as a method or signifier of self-transformation and narrative resolution, I examine how *Girls* produces postfeminism as an impasse characterised by the return to failed fantasies of fulfilment. Prior to this, I compare key scenes from *Girls* and the quintessential postfeminist series *Sex and the City*. In doing so, I demonstrate how the economic and socio-cultural context by which each series is informed manifests not only in the narrative storylines, but also in their structure, overall indicating a significant shift in cultural imaginaries of girlhood, femininity, and female professional success. In summary, this chapter argues that *Girls* is an acute example of how maintaining optimistic faith in a postfeminist promise of fulfilment develops into a relation of cruelty. According to *Girls*, our investment in postfeminist ways of living is highly likely to thwart the fulfilment we desire and set out to achieve.

One of the chapter’s central aims is to examine the relationship between postfeminist generic expectation and the coming-of-age trajectory in order to explore how the recursive nature of cruel optimism manifests at the level of narrative structure. In particular, I will discuss *Girls* in relation to one of Gill’s key elements of postfeminism, namely, a culture of self-maintenance and the notion of the self as a never-ending project requiring continual work (2007: 149). This particular generic element of postfeminist culture resonates deeply with the coming-of-age genre, in which the most crucial element is an achievement of change or growth. Protagonists must undergo psychological and moral

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<sup>40</sup> For example, in *Love Actually* (Curtis 2003) ten-year old Sam races through Heathrow Airport security to confess his love for classmate Joanna, while *Two Weeks Notice* (Lawrence 2002) and *When Harry Met Sally* (Reiner 1989) both feature runs through New York streets. I compare *Girls*’ rom-com run sequence to *When Harry Met Sally* later in this chapter.

transformation, striving for happiness and satisfaction, at which point personal and narrative resolution is reached. Following four central characters—Hannah, Marnie, Jessa and Shoshanna—as they navigate their mid-twenties in New York, *Girls* plays on precisely this sense of generic potential through its premise and title. For as Katherine Bell (2013) notes, a narrative in which four young women make the move to the city in order to enlarge the scope of their selves and their worlds is enough to instil genre expectations of a certain kind of story. In this story, a girl becomes a woman, and gradually, through ‘one mistake at a time,’<sup>41</sup> some kind of growth and maturation will take shape. As Colling observes, ‘in the neo-liberal context, transformation is sold as self-empowerment’ (2017: 29). However, in this respect, *Girls* continually frustrates its audience and critics as the majority of the series takes a regressive ‘one step forward, two steps back’ approach to the progression of both its characters and narrative.

The first episode of *Girls* introduces Hannah off-centre, occupying the far right of the frame, eyes cast downward in concentration on a mouthful of spaghetti threatening its escape (Figure 2).<sup>42</sup> Significantly, nutritional sustenance is not the only thing escaping Hannah. What follows is a conversation in which Hannah’s parents inform her that their post-college financial support, which she has taken for granted for two years, is next in line to be withdrawn. Her parents have decided no longer to fund her life in the city. *Girls’* opening image makes for a somewhat unconventional introduction to a protagonist. For instance, the way Hannah looks down toward the corner of the frame is not so unusual a composition as to become stylistically distracting, but just enough to suggest a self-involved and self-limiting perspective. Within the context of the series as a whole, this initial shot is indicative of the way *Girls* often constructs Hannah in isolation from other characters, thereby foretelling the character’s self-absorption and lack of interest in the lives and interiority of others. Furthermore, by positioning Hannah’s face at the ‘wrong’ edge of the frame, *Girls* inverts the classic shot-reverse-shot set up popularised by

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<sup>41</sup> This quotation references the first season tagline accompanying the promotion of the series, ‘Living the dream. One mistake at a time’ (*Girls*. 2012. Season 1 [DVD]: HBO).

<sup>42</sup> For an account of the central role hunger, food and eating plays in *Girls* see Jane Hu’s (2012) article in *Los Angeles Review of Books* ‘Reality Hunger: On Lena Dunham’s “Girls.”’

Hollywood filmmaking, thus forgoing eyeline matching with the more traditional reverse shot of Hannah's parents that follows. This suggests a relational discrepancy in recognition and expectation between Hannah and her parents, as is confirmed by their conversation, which sets the tone and central dilemma for the series (Figure 3).



Figure 2 The opening shot of *Girls'* first episode (Dunham 2012: 1.1 'Pilot').



Figure 3 Reverse shot of Hannah's parents (Dunham 2012: 1.1 'Pilot').

The scene emphasises Hannah's consternation and her claim to continuing support, which derives from being 'so close to the life that I want, to the life that you want for me' (1.1 'Pilot').<sup>43</sup> As well as establishing the central conflict of the series as Hannah's struggle to 'become who I am' (1.1), this scene also effectively communicates the disparity between the life Hannah inhabits and the one she desires and feels entitled to. The life Hannah anticipates is what Berlant terms 'the good life' (2011: 2). In an attempt to capture and define the contemporary neoliberal condition, Berlant explains how subjects form optimistic attachments to ideals, objects, ideologies and political or social promises believed to enable the good life to materialise. The origin of such optimism is an anachronistic social imaginary invested in the hope that the fantasies we construct about our lives and the world will eventually "'add up to something'" tangible (2011: 2). Berlant's use of the term fantasy points to the vivid imaginaries individuals often construct about how their lives may unfold, the unconscious lure of attachments, as well as drawing attention to their increasing unsustainability. A small-scale example is the belief

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<sup>43</sup> The initial reference to an episode will follow this format, indicating title, season and episode number. All further references thereafter will refer only to the season and episode numbers.

that conventional living (a steady job, a traditional family) confers rewards such as access to basic requirements like food and shelter, as well as more abstract rewards like happiness and fulfilment (Ahmed 2010).<sup>44</sup>

In the US, conventional ways of living are inseparable from the pervasive fantasy of the American Dream of opportunity and prosperity for all, which remains an alluring mythological narrative of progress, despite mounting evidence to the contrary (Chafe 2012; Lewis 2012). Additional conventional American fantasies outlined by Berlant include the promise that meritocracy, upward mobility and democratic equality will allow us to obtain and maintain a good life (2011: 3). These good life ideals are bound up in the family, the state and public social institutions. Berlant details how such fantasies have begun to wear out under the ascension of neoliberalism in the US and Europe. The term neoliberalism is used in Berlant's work mainly as a heuristic for understanding the transformation of political and economic norms of social reciprocity and meritocracy since the 1970s (2011: 9). The good life that once seemed achievable as long as one adhered to conventional forms of living is now manifestly out of reach for increasing numbers of people, in large part due to the destructive effects of neoliberalism.

The opening scene's withdrawal of financial support disrupts Hannah's previously secure expectations of living and marks the first tacit reference in *Girls* to the effects of neoliberalism on a once-protected middle-class population. Mark Fisher (2014) describes *Girls* as one of the first television series to centre on 'graduates without a future,' a term used by Paul Mason in reference to a generation of young, highly educated people 'who can expect to grow up poorer than their parents' (*Guardian* 2012). Indeed, the series constructs Hannah's social class, secure American upbringing and her parents' stable middle-class income as the main factors structuring the life she expects to lead. Hannah's relatively privileged subject position is entwined with an implicit generational contract of progress. An

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<sup>44</sup> In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) Ahmed takes up a similar project to Berlant in her exploration and critique of the cultural role played by happiness as both a personal imperative and continually deferred promise. See the Introduction and Chapter One of this thesis for further discussion of Ahmed's work.

unspoken cultural narrative of continual progress promises each generation an improvement in their living conditions as compared to their parents. By opening the series in an upscale restaurant, scored by tastefully bland piano tones, *Girls* immediately communicates a sense of the comfortable, cataclysm-proof middle-class lifestyle to which Hannah's parents are accustomed, and which Hannah expects to inherit. The scene also works to suggest that the abrupt withdrawal of funds may not be entirely devastating to someone in Hannah's position. However, it indicates a breach of contract and introduces Hannah's first significant barrier to achieving a life similar to or better than the one enjoyed by her parents. In particular, the opening scene signals *Girls'* interest in exploring the impact of such a recalcitrant entry into the middle-class precariat. Until the fracturing moment of parental withdrawal, Hannah's social circumstances had implicitly promised her immunity from the semi-precarious life she goes on to inhabit throughout the series. Many critics have written on the subject of Hannah's 'entitled' response to her new-found precarity, in particular noting that the character's situation is more stable than that of many people worldwide (Rowles 2012; Shepherd 2012; Suebsaeng 2012). Although I remain sympathetic to this critique, I also consider Berlant's (2011: 20) insight that:

people's styles of response to crisis are powerfully related to the expectations of the world they had to reconfigure in the face of tattering formal and informal norms of social and institutional reciprocity.

As I have noted, the opening scene's set design constructs an anticipation of enduring middle-class comfort and security. Considering this in tandem with Berlant's observation, we can begin to understand how *Girls* communicates both Hannah's expectations, and the way that those expectations dictate her style of response in this particular scene, and throughout the series. The pilot episode constructs her family's withdrawal of reciprocity as a defining moment for Hannah, as she realises that the normative presumptions underpinning her social contract have been shattered. The prior security of Hannah's social position is fundamental to her acute sense that her protection from precarity has now been revoked, and with it her anticipation of a good life.

Berlant's central thesis is that 'a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' (2011: 1). Cruel optimism is therefore an affective state in which the desired object can appear to bring the individual closer to fulfilment or happiness, yet also acts as an impediment to the realisation of that fantasy (2011). For example, a desire for enduring and mutually supportive relations with institutions or political systems is not inherently cruel. Our optimism becomes cruel, according to Berlant, when the workings of an institution or political system inhibit such a relationship from forming. In other words, our optimism keeps us pointed in the direction of a promised good life designed to remain out of reach.

As Berlant demonstrates, some fantasies in particular contribute to our sense of self-continuity (2011: 15). Subjectivity is often organised around and in relation to such fantasies as a method of preserving our deeply held beliefs about ourselves as well as our ways of being in the world. Dunham's vision of an extended contemporary American girlhood initially appears to portray a traditional version of the self, defined by autonomy and individualism (Sandywell 1999; Weedon 1987). The traditional concept of selfhood envisages a trajectory culminating in fulfilment or completion. Yet it becomes apparent that *Girls* takes place not in relation to such a mythic upward arc, but in a neoliberalised world in which the terms and conditions of reciprocity have shifted. In this world, Hannah's subjectivity is exposed to a refusal of completion, closely connected to the problem of self-actualisation, which is beginning to supplant more traditional notions of self-fulfilment. Self-actualisation is becoming a key term in relation to contemporary postfeminist subjectivities. Within such scholarship, self-actualisation is associated with neoliberal individualism (Genz and Brabon 2009), self-entrepreneurship, (Chen 2010; Cronin 2000), consumerism (Cronin 2000; Fradley 2013), authenticity (Dejmanee 2016) and what Joel Gwynne terms postfeminist '(self)objectification' (2013: 79). Research suggests that self-understanding and self-definition through processes of actualisation marks a key shift in conceptions of selfhood, yet so far this particular dynamic has not been explored in detail. A subject seeking self-actualisation must make her self real/ity. Whereas traditional self-fulfilment is

constructed as an attainable fixed state of being in the world, self-actualisation is a never-ending process of iterative actions undertaken to establish and maintain selfhood (Cronin 2000: 276). Such actions can appear and feel like fulfilment. *Girls* constructs the search for self-actualisation as a continual process of self-preparation and engagement in life-building activities. While the search for self-fulfilment is geared towards eventual completion, our quest to self-actualise will always reach an impasse as its processes are constructed as interminable and inconclusive, engaging a lifetime of work on the self that forecloses arrival.

*Girls* characterises Hannah as deeply affected by the withdrawal of a good life she feels was promised to her. Although the concept of the good life does not look or feel the same for every individual, at its core exists a belief that compliance with a particular set of normative imperatives will secure certain rewards. Berlant describes this relation as 'a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us' (2011: 23). As a feminine subject, Hannah's character is hailed by a gendered promise of a good life, instilled with postfeminist assurances of fulfilment for (some) women who follow its catalogue of conventions.

### **Negotiating a Postfeminist Legacy**

As discussed in the thesis introduction, postfeminism has been theorised in many ways, most recently as a distinctly feminine manifestation of the neoliberal zeitgeist (Harris 2004; Gill 2007, 2008; Gill and Scharff 2011; McRobbie 2008). I also noted that while postfeminism is culturally ubiquitous and undoubtedly dominates the media archives available to women and girls over the last 25 years, it is certainly not the only women's discourse in cultural circulation (Retallack *et al.* 2016). In the broadest critical terms, a postfeminist text embodies and/or advocates the view that because the crucial but arduous labour of feminism is completed, women can now concentrate their efforts on enjoying themselves and 'having it all' (should they so choose). The only drawback is of course that the terms of enjoyment remain defined and limited by patriarchal perspectives on feminine desirability. The impact of postfeminism as a culturally dominant discourse is only now beginning to crystallise, coinciding with a media resurgence of multiple new strands of feminism,

as well as what Negra and Tasker term the 'recession-era' (2013: 344) in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.

In the introduction, I cited Berlant's understanding of genre as 'a loose affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take' (2011: 2). Our investments in particular genres are crucial in constructing our expectations of what might unfold, either within narrative fiction, or within our own lives. Similarly, in a recent article in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Joshua Adam Anderson (2015) writes that 'genre primes us and orients us toward a mode of apprehending things according to its own determinations. We don't know what to make of something that hasn't come with the metadata of genre affiliations; often we don't even know what to desire.' According to Anderson, genres are capable of orienting us toward desiring particular kinds of lives; in fact, without the guidance of genre, we have little concept of how to build our lives at all. If genres provide us with conceptual structuring principles for how our lives are most likely to unfold, we can begin to understand how a character like Hannah comes to assume that an imprecise yet affectively intelligible promise of a good life has been made to her. It is through genre, then, that complex affective structures like postfeminism offer subjects ways of living in which they are invited to invest their subjectivity.

Fictional and lived genres are intricately interwoven, each informing and maintaining the other's construction. As Tania Modleski argues, 'in our culture *all* women imbibe romance fantasies from a variety of sources' (1999: 48 original italics). Such fantasies are the staple of the romantic comedy, a genre promoting a particular variant on how to live a good life—not just any good life, but a uniquely gendered promise extended exclusively to feminine subjects. This promise is organised around resolutions to questions relating to the quest for 'the one,' often combined in contemporary romantic comedies with the perennial feminine conundrum of how to have it all. *Sex and the City* promised to deliver a pithy and sexually explicit exploration of these questions. As is well documented within postfeminist cultural media scholarship, texts like *Sex and the City* construct an aspirational feel-good experience of postfeminism in which agency, sexual

autonomy and empowerment via consumerism are unproblematically endorsed, valorised and most importantly, enjoyed (Adriaens 2009; Arthurs 2003; Gerhard 2005).

The series is now widely agreed to have been instrumental in defining the genre expectations of postfeminism that weigh heavily on the contemporary feminine condition explored in *Girls*.<sup>45</sup> Those expectations range from the accessibility of material pleasure found in designer clothing, cocktails and stilettos to the anticipation of a glamorous professional career. Although comparisons to *Sex and the City* are as inevitable as they are ubiquitous, what *Girls* in fact exposes is how much has changed in our cultural imaginary of women's lives in New York. *Sex and the City's* dazzling vision of the city is worlds apart from the ever-changing landscape of recession and underemployment that *Girls* negotiates. Fisher observes that '*Girls* retrospectively reveals that the key fantasy that structured *Sex and the City* had nothing to do with sex (or, for that matter, consumerism)' (*New Humanist* 2014). Rather, Fisher suggests, 'work was the central absence in the series; something that the characters were rarely seen doing, the silent background to their pleasures and misadventures' (2014). By contrast, a conspicuous absence of any professional career at all is explored to great effect in the early seasons of *Girls*, where unpaid internships, low-paid service industry jobs and stretches of unemployment are the norm of an increasingly neoliberalised economy. While *Sex and the City* may not have narratively foregrounded the labour involved in their jobs (Lotz 2006: 96), the series nonetheless features four female characters (Carrie, Charlotte, Miranda and Samantha) whose identity and concept of success are predicated largely on their hugely successful professional careers. *Girls'* first season in particular emphasises that the professional ambitions of *Sex and the City's* successful protagonists are initially shared by the current generation, especially in relation to creative work.

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<sup>45</sup> In a *TIME* interview, Dunham confirms the influence of *Sex and the City* on *Girls*, stating that her own characters 'are women who couldn't exist without *Sex and the City*' (Poniewozik 2012).

In particular, a writing career constitutes a core ambition in both series. One of the defining features of *Sex and the City* is that each episode is structured by Carrie's voiceover detailing her research on the sexual mores of Manhattan for her newspaper column. This recurring convention lends the series a sense of stability and structural cohesion that is strikingly absent from *Girls*, where Hannah's writing functions quite differently. For example, Maša Grdešić analyses how *Girls* uses Hannah's writing as a metafictional device, noting that 'Hannah's tweets, her diary, and her essays are incorporated into the main narrative, but their function is more actional than thematic' (2013: 357–358). Furthermore, in her analysis of Season 1, Episode 4 ('Hannah's Diary'), Grdešić explains that 'instead of becoming an autonomous narrative analogous to the main storyline,' the diary 'primarily advances the action: it plays a crucial role in Marnie and Charlie's breakup, and passages from it become lyrics to "Hannah's Diary," a song performed by Charlie's band' (2013: 357). By contrast, one of the primary functions of Carrie's writing in *Sex and the City* is precisely in sketching out each episode's central theme, with the four characters each representing a conflicting perspective or stance on the issue at hand (Nelson 2007: 90–91). Carrie's writing, therefore, is a central feature of the series and plays a specific formal role in guiding the audience through each episode's thematic debates. By contrast, the irregularity of Hannah's writing provides *Girls* the means to explore the challenges of making a living as a writer at the same time as structurally performing the inherent instability of finding creative work in a postrecessionary economy.

It is clear that writing does not provide the same kind of structural underpinning in *Girls*. There are long stretches of the narrative in which a writing career is sidelined altogether, most notably during Season 5 in which Hannah teaches high school English. This is indicative of how differently the concept of professional success operates in each series. Just as Carrie can famously rely on her job to fund an endless supply of haute couture, so too can the audience rely on the consistency of *Sex and the City's* episodic structure and sitcom genre conventions to introduce and resolve narrative conflict. In particular, these conventions allow the concept of 'work' to fade into the background, as Fisher (2014) suggests, despite the central

role of Carrie's voiceovers. Conversely, in the same way that Hannah cannot rely on her creative talents to provide opportunities for meaningful work, the audience cannot depend on *Girls'* structure or format to provide a permanent secure foothold. One of the primary ways *Girls* communicates a sense of the fractured instability intrinsic to living in a post-crash landscape is through its atypical structure, as I discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

Similarly foregrounding an attachment to the idea of creative work, *Girls* features a storyline in which Marnie is 'let go' from her job as an art gallery assistant and subsequently flounders in regaining traction in her chosen field (2.1 'It's About Time'). Marnie's aspirations clearly correspond with those of *Sex and the City's* character, Charlotte, constructed as effortlessly achieving her ambition to manage a successful art gallery, before choosing to quit her job in anticipation of motherhood in the episode 'Time and Punishment' (4.7). Beth Montemurro's analysis of this episode suggests that the negative responses Charlotte receives from her friends demonstrate that her

aspirations toward domesticity are clearly viewed as the "wrong" way of doing things or the wrong goals, and Charlotte herself is well aware of this. She becomes increasingly defensive throughout the episode as she justifies her decision to stop working and even lies in order to make her choice seem less frivolous (2004: n.p).

Montemurro argues that the way the episode positions Charlotte as 'the minority voice' is 'interesting and novel' as it allows 'the traditional feminine voice to be rejected rather than rewarded, while the voices of the career-focused workers-not-wives dominate' (2004: n.p). It is true that Charlotte's ambivalence is woven into the fabric of the episode, surfacing particularly in a scene where Charlotte demands that Miranda validate her choice, going as far as to argue that her decision stems from the gains of 'the women's movement' (4.7). However, the episode neatly wraps up the dilemma by presenting Charlotte's decision as ultimately optimistic, thereby carefully reconciling any tensions created by the conflict between the 'traditional feminine voice' and 'the career-focused workers-not-wives.' In this way, although the series briefly questions the traditional choice to stop working and raise a family, it ultimately validates it on a formal and narrative level. Narrative

validation is achieved through dialogue when Charlotte's replacement reassures her that she wishes her own mother had been at home more often. Here, the camera holds on Charlotte's bright smiling face—an indicator of her satisfaction at finally obtaining the external endorsement she had sought from



Figure 4 Charlotte (Kristin Davis) decides to quit her job in *Sex and the City's* 'Time and Punishment' (Star 2001: 4.7).

her friends. Upbeat jazz kicks in as she exits the gallery, smiling contentedly at a passing mother and baby (both visually coded in red and pink clothing), before striding toward the bright light in the background of the shot (Figure 4). These formal markers of Charlotte's satisfaction with her decision thus work to ameliorate any prior friction, cementing the notion that individual freedom of choice is paramount to *Sex and the City's* construction of femininity.

As Astrid Henry argues, through the reactions of Charlotte's friends who 'do not blindly validate Charlotte's choice just because "she chooses it,"' the episode offers an implicit critique of 'Charlotte's "easy" choice-based definition of feminism' (2004: 72). However, this is a typical strategy of the series, as Robin Nelson (2007) points out; *Sex and the City* is structured around the attitudes of its four protagonists rather than their personalities. Ways of thinking, viewing and understanding the world are therefore prioritised over identity or personal traits. Nelson explains that 'the types as characterised reiterate their typical response to situations they encounter and the thematic debate of each episode arises from their differing points of view' (2007: 90–91). Henry's argument that 'ultimately, the episode revolves around Charlotte's ambivalence,' albeit accurate in some respects, overlooks the way that the series' grounding in the comedy genre and strict sitcom format works to contain both the ambivalence and any implicit criticism that arises from it by constructing the decision as ultimately satisfying at a narrative level.

Unlike *Sex and the City*, which stages and contains conflict between the traditionally feminine 'choice' to leave the workforce and the legacy of second-wave feminist politics through Charlotte's decision to quit her job, *Girls* foregrounds the fractured conditions for creative work in an austerity economy. Broadcast in 2001, *Sex and the City* presents a scenario in which a 22-year-old woman steps eagerly into Charlotte's role as director of a prestigious art gallery. A decade later, *Girls* features a character of the same age who cannot even hold on to an assistant job at a much smaller gallery. Whereas Charlotte is constructed as successfully fulfilling her ambition and ultimately happy with her decision to quit, Marnie's unemployment is unforeseen and entirely beyond her control. This contrast provides further evidence of a shattered generational contract. As Fisher suggests, 'the four women might be privileged, but they are no longer privileged enough to get the work they thought was destined for them, which is now reserved for those who are even more comfortably off' (*New Humanist* 2014). It is important to note that Marnie's character is not fired or deemed unsuitable for her job, as demonstrated by her former manager's insistence that she is merely 'downsizing,' because 'I run a fucking art gallery, Marnie. I can't afford two employees' (2.1). Within the contemporary televisual imagination, jobs like Charlotte's are no longer constructed as coveted competitive positions which one can work harder to achieve. Rather, they have simply disappeared.



Figure 5 Marnie (Allison Williams, left), before she is 'downsized' by her manager (Christina Kirk, right) in 'It's About Time' (Dunham 2013: 2.1).



Figure 6 Awkward shot of Marnie (left) after she receives the poorly delivered news of her unemployment from her manager (right) in 'It's About Time' (Dunham 2013: 2.1).

*Girls* presents this scene within the limited framing of a city street, which although cluttered, remains fairly unremarkable until Marnie's manager abruptly delivers the news that she wanted to have a 'consolation lunch, like a last hurrah' (2.1) before realising that she has not yet actually informed Marnie of her job loss (Figure 5). Cutting to an awkwardly framed shot of the pair is disorienting, communicating Marnie's confusion as she receives the news of her imminent unemployment (Figure 6). Both the editing rhythm here, and the way that Marnie is confined within the tight composition of the frame, communicate the emotional turmoil and a sense that Marnie's world is contracting. Equally, her manager's attempt to smooth things over with the dialogue 'you're gorgeous and totally bright. You'll land on your feet' (2.1) is contradicted by the closed frame constraining Marnie and expressing the withdrawal of her access to New York's once-endless opportunities. In *Sex and the City*, by contrast, it is the enclosed space of the gallery that gives way to an expansive, brightly lit urban space. The lighting and framing suggest potential and new possibilities, inviting questions as to what lies ahead for Charlotte's character as well as hinting that perhaps Charlotte's commitment to her work limited rather than fostered her full potential. In coupling this scenario with episodic closure, the series announces Charlotte's resignation as a narrative event and as a moment of positive character development. *Girls*' 'letting go' scene is much briefer, and it takes place early in the second season opening episode as part of a sequence catching up with and reintroducing the protagonists. Its structural position suggests that unlike the weight given to Charlotte's predicament in *Sex and the City*, this does not rank as a significant narrative event in quite the same way. This indicates, as I have argued, that *Girls* significantly complicates the notion that the world of postfeminist pleasures experienced by Carrie and her friends is attainable by today's generation of young women (Nash and Grant 2017). Of course, at the same time, the narrative preoccupation with such pleasures demonstrates women's immeasurable investments in postfeminism as a source of fulfilment.

The unreliability of postfeminist markers of fulfilment in *Girls* is evidenced by ambivalence toward them as well as other varying states of attachment. The narrative situations that unfold during *Girls* (particularly those concerning the

relations between sex, love and romance) suggest that to renounce such postfeminist genres might be beneficial, as their conditions undermine whatever potential for fulfilment remains. Considering postfeminism as a relation of cruel optimism highlights *Girls'* exploration of ambivalent attachments to a style of femininity that has failed to provide fulfilment. According to Berlant (2011), once such an attachment is formed to a promise of fulfilment, relinquishing it comes close to losing the anchor for living itself. Remaining wedded to postfeminism may be the source of their unhappiness, but without its promises Hannah and her friends stand to lose the very possibility of feminine fulfilment itself. Irrespective of how subjects proceed, Berlant argues, 'massive loss is inevitable' (2012: 1).

As my analysis will demonstrate, *Girls* illuminates what it feels like to live the contradictions of the postfeminist promise. Dunham's generation retains the influence of second-wave feminism, has grown up in a postfeminist media age and is currently living through a resurgence of updated feminist politics. Above all, *Girls* details what it feels like to be stuck between these genres of living, unable to conceive of new attachments or genres that might actually satisfy. As old genres prove unreliable and in the absence of new ones that could viably guide the way, subjectivity is unable to ground itself. It is this disparity between the postfeminist promise of personal and professional fulfilment and its lived reality that elicits what Berlant terms 'impasse' (2011: 4–5). Impasse is a 'cul-de-sac' in which 'one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the *same space*' (2011: 199 original italics). This definition opens up the spatial implications of our attachments to good life promises. Impasse for Berlant is not a static subject position but a state of momentum with confined spatial boundaries. When we reach impasse, we keep moving, but there are limits to where or how far we can go.

### **Postfeminist Impasse**

There are two key ways *Girls* expresses a sense of postfeminist impasse. First, by restaging aspirational postfeminist conventions, as I will demonstrate through analysis of the rom-com run trope. Second, I analyse how *Girls* exploits the coming-of-age genre, establishing an expectation of growth and transformation that is

continually denied by the series' narrative and structure. In this section, I look at how *Girls* uses stylistic and narrative reiteration techniques to create a recursive storytelling structure that does not comply with traditional narrative convention. The circularity of the series contravenes the most fundamental narrative arc, the three-act structure that traces a path from initial problem to climax before eventual resolution. In this manner, the series produces the coming-of-age trajectory as a state of perpetual delay and regression.

One of the primary ways *Girls* creates a sense that transformation does not necessarily lead to progress is through its stylistic repetition of opening scenes across the series. For instance, the initial scene of the family dinner with Hannah and her parents is followed by an intimate shot panning across Hannah and Marnie's legs as they wake up together, entangled. Aside from conveying their close friendship, this brief scene gains significance from its replication in the first episodes of seasons two (2.1) and three (3.1 'Females Only'), and the season six finale episode (6.10 'Latching'), all of which open with a near-identical sequence in which the only alteration is Hannah's sleeping partner. This works on a narrative level to communicate the central relationship of each season, tracking Hannah's intimate relationships with Marnie, her ex-boyfriend Elijah, boyfriend Adam, before circling back to Marnie in the final season. More importantly, the repetition operates structurally to signal to the audience that *Girls* begins, once again, where it has begun once before. Relationships may shift and change; however, any narrative growth that may occur does not lead to the kind of development or progression we expect from coming-of-age genres. Season four (4.1 'Iowa') disrupts the pattern and creates another, echoing the pilot episode's family dinner. This time, Hannah is centre framed (Figure 7) in a much more traditional composition as compared to the series' opening episode, a formal indicator of change that suggests a kind of emotional stability absent from the pilot (Figure 2). Hannah raises a glass to celebrate her acceptance at a prestigious graduate school—an achievement that appears to bring her closer than ever to the good life imagined at the beginning of the series. Comparison of these scenes further illuminates *Girls*' model of narrative regression. Through formal repetition, the scene foregrounds growth and

transformation at the beginning of season four, yet this is reversed by narrative events occurring only four episodes later as Hannah returns to New York, having intentionally alienated her graduate student cohort and subsequently abandoned the programme. Thus, stylistic reiteration of the opening sequences creates a cyclical structure, in which character and narrative development is severely obstructed, projecting a trajectory of fulfilment and forward momentum that never quite materialises.



Figure 7 Hannah (Lena Dunham), centre-framed and smiling in celebration, in 'Iowa' (Dunham 2015: 4.1).

*Girls'* atypical structure is essential to its interrogation of the concept of self-transformation as the key to unlocking personal fulfilment. Similar to the stylistic repetition of opening sequences, the series also uses reiteration to construct idealised feminine milestones as moments of frustration rather than resolution. In his examination of normative family discourses in television, Gary Needham observes that sitcoms typically correlate narrative closure to a sense of 'upbeat family togetherness' so that consequently 'happy families and happy endings are one and the same thing' (2009: 148). Comparably, postfeminist media culture draws together milestones of idealised femininity such as heterosexual romance and traditional marriage in such a way that the happy couple becomes synonymous with the happy ending. With this in mind, I examine the reiteration of the failed marriage trope in *Girls*, and how it is used to signify and subsequently inhibit the concept of self-transformative coming-of-age.

The series features two wedding sequences, the first of which takes place during the finale of the first season (1.10 'She Did'). This placement might typically suggest the aforementioned happy resolution; however, the wedding in question is that of Hannah's impulsive friend Jessa to a boorish financier she has known for only two weeks, and which ends in divorce four episodes later (2.4 'It's a Shame About Ray'). Having successfully skewered any sense that marriage might equate to the pinnacle of feminine satisfaction and accomplishment, the season five opener features a second example of ill-advised matrimony, this time used as a device to suggest a fresh start for Marnie's character (5.1 'Wedding Day'). As Pilot Viruet observes of the episode's conclusion, 'it's a nice, optimistic ending— even if we know *Girls* will never let this last' (*Vulture* 2016). This comment suggests that an audience now attuned to *Girls*' modus operandi might be in a position to predict the ambivalent, essentially unstable outcome. Indeed, far from a fresh start, another divorce looms only six episodes later.

Since marriage remains a key signifier of both idealised femininity and conventionalised adulthood, to achieve this milestone would be a clear indicator of the passage from girlhood to womanhood. The way *Girls* constructs marriage as a milestone of feminine coming-of-age that is evidently desirable yet patently unattainable indicates a continued investment in (at least) the fantasy of conventional marriage, if not perhaps the reality. Here, the concept of 'double coding' (Colling 2017: 8) is important when considering how *Girls* constructs postfeminist impasse. Colling explains that double coding is a form of irony that works to revisit the 'already said' (Krutnik 1998: 28 in Colling 2017: 8). She cites Umberto Eco's description of it as the result of a specifically postmodern quandary:

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her "I love you madly", because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still there is a solution. He can say "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly". At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly it is no longer possible to talk innocently, he will nevertheless say what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence (Eco 1992: 227 in Colling 2017: 8).

Colling goes on to clarify that girl teen films which use fairy-tale realism in contemporary settings, such as *Freaky Friday* (Waters 2003) or *A Cinderella Story* (Rosman 2004), ‘use cinematic markers of enchantment’ which work as ‘invitations to enjoy another world that will end “happily ever after”’ but that also ‘cannot be delivered earnestly in the twenty first century context’ (2017: 26) Double coding techniques, according to Colling, are essential to this genre ‘because where Eco’s lover cannot say “I love you,” girl teen films equally cannot outright say “happily ever after”’ (27). By double coding their use of fairy-tale conventions through self-conscious irony, girl teen films are able to evoke the pleasures of particular tropes at the same time as disavowing them.

Double coding, then, is what allows *Girls* to produce the affective pleasures of the wedding ceremony (particularly through costuming and set design) even as it satirises and undercuts those same pleasures. In this way, reiteration of the failed marriage is suggestive of postfeminist impasse as the narrative begins to take place ‘paradoxically, in the *same space*’ (2011: 199 original italics). Scenarios, images and tropes of growth and self-transformation accumulate, yet the narrative does not progress. Regardless of the ‘content’ of these images—that is, irrespective of whether the series appears to support or undermine marriage itself—their reiteration creates a sense of narrative recursion by returning to the same trope, the same institution, the very same fantasy that *Girls* has already informed us is ‘not working’ (Berlant 2011: 263).

### **The Rom-Com Run**

This section examines the final episode of the second season, which culminates with an updated version of the rom-com run trope, a crucial sequence in which the male lead rushes across city streets (typically New York, the quintessential romantic comedy locale) to demonstrate his love for the female lead and prove himself worthy of hers. To select but one famous case in point, Rob Reiner’s *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) includes a classic example of the rom-com run in completion of the traditional three-act structure in which the central problem is neatly posed by the film’s signature tagline: ‘Can men and women be friends?’ The first act suggests

perhaps not, which is then reversed in the second act when Harry and Sally do indeed become close friends. Subsequently, having slept together, Harry and Sally drive the narrative to the inevitable apex preceding the resolution of the third act. After a brief separation, reconciliation follows as Harry races to declare his love for Sally. The run is the decisive act, a visual manifestation of resolution that signals narrative conclusion and promises closure. The happy couple and the happy ending are indeed 'one and the same' (2009: 148), as Needham suggests.

While seemingly aspiring to this kind of neat emotional resolution, *Girls* inserts narrative indicators that serve to undermine such a happy reading. For instance, the sequence begins with Adam, Hannah's on-again-off-again boyfriend, alone in his apartment, demonstrating his inclination toward anger and destruction as he tears down the construction project he has been working on. Adam's actions are in response to something that happened in the previous episode (2.9 'On All Fours'), which sparked a divisive debate among commentators as to whether a scene between Adam and his then-girlfriend Natalia depicted rape or was merely an example of unpleasant sexual conduct (Becker Stevens 2013; Hess 2013; Lyons 2013). Rather than stake a claim in this debate and attempt to deliver a verdict myself, I read this scene instead as an indicator that *Girls* is by no means staging the typical context or catalyst for a romantic reconciliation. Although the romantic comedy structure hinges upon a hitch or obstacle that threatens to thwart the burgeoning romance of its protagonists, this typically takes the form of a miscommunication between the two, or a failure of the leading man to fully commit (Abbott and Jermyn 2009; Deleyto 2009). Unlike these examples, which are usually played for comedic effect, Adam's character is constructed as aggressive, destructive and potentially violent. Thus, from the outset, the series jeopardises the very notion of his viability as a leading man. Equally, season two's emphasis on Hannah's fear that she is 'unravelling' (2.10 'Together') sets her apart from the prototypical romantic comedy heroine. As the scene continues, Adam answers a video call from a distraught Hannah who cannot, or is perhaps opting not to, conceal the physical symptoms of her rapidly deteriorating mental health. Commenting on the return of Hannah's obsessive compulsive disorder in 'It's Back'

(2.8), Erica Lies observes that ‘Hannah’s symptoms aren’t sitcom-cute’ (*Vulture* 2013). As Stayci Taylor notes, there is a tendency within romantic comedies to characterise female protagonists who are otherwise ‘perfect’ as having one flaw (typically clumsiness) designed to create ‘audience appeal’ and enhance ‘likeability’ (2015: 65). It is therefore notable that *Girls* constructs Hannah’s mental illness as a genuine anxiety disorder rather than a quirky or reassuring flaw intended to make her character ‘softer, warmer or nicer’ (Jacey 2010: 31) as is often the case for romantic comedy heroines (Jacey 2010; Taylor 2015).<sup>46</sup> Having established that neither character is especially compatible with typical romantic comedy conventions, *Girls* then stages the now-iconic rom-com run with an apparent sincerity that disturbs the established rhythm of *Girls*’ cynically-pragmatic sexual politics.

As Adam sprints shirtless across New York streets, narrowly avoiding collision with oncoming traffic, the surges of a mawkish instrumental soundtrack work hard to elicit the requisite emotional response from the audience, conjuring a sense of enduring romance. The final vision of the season is Adam tearing down Hannah’s door, the camera following him into her bedroom as the music slows and he lifts Hannah from beneath her covers. They kiss as the camera slowly retreats and the screen fades to black. The staging constructs Adam as the figurative knight in shining armour, thereby appearing to cast Hannah as the archetypal damsel awaiting his entrance. Therefore, although Adam’s character may not physically or emotionally resemble his romantic predecessors, he nonetheless becomes affectively linked with them in undertaking this heroic journey. Here, the concept of double coding works slightly differently than the examples Colling provides. In her girl teen films, ‘happily ever after’ must be coded as ironic or tongue-in-cheek. By contrast, *Girls*’ rom-com run is shot and scored to evoke the earnest pleasure of the happily ever after trope, with the dark streets, dynamic succession of rapid cuts and

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<sup>46</sup> Similarly, *Girls*’ construction of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) as distressing for both the character and the audience is especially notable in a television landscape in which OCD is most typically used as a source of humour. For examples of television in which OCD is primarily used to provoke laughter, see *Glee* (Murphy *et al.* 2009–2015) and *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre and Prady 2007–). For a more expansive study of OCD tropes and comedy, see Paul Cefalu’s (2009) article ‘What’s So Funny About Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder?’

directional right framing closely emulating the lighting, editing and framing choices at work in the corresponding scene in *When Harry Met Sally*. When viewed in relation to the recursive model I have outlined, it becomes clear that the rom-com run trope appears to resolve the season narrative in *Girls* while simultaneously restaging the rom-com genre.

One of the ways the series emphasises the futility of the postfeminist fantasy is in staging Adam's grand heroic gesture as simply returning both characters to where they have already been. The dynamic onscreen spectacle of the run itself appears to signal a forward momentum, presenting Hannah with a viable romantic partner and the audience with a satisfying conclusion to a season of television. In this way, *Girls* double codes the rom-com run as a form of pastiche. Richard Dyer's understanding of pastiche is that it 'imitates formal means that are themselves ways of evoking, moulding and eliciting feelings, and thus in the process is able to mobilise feelings even while signalling that it is doing so' (2007: 180). In other words, *Girls* signals its attachment to fantasies of postfeminist romance, just as it has done with marriage and work, by activating their particular affective pleasures at the same time as constructing those fantasies as festering from within. This is no conventional happy ending, merely another cyclical lurch of the impasse. The romantic comedy model teaches us to accept the run as signifying both happiness and resolution, neither of which is present in *Girls*. Expectations remain unsatisfied and fulfilment out of reach. Moreover, viewers are very well aware that as one season ends, another commences. Instead of finite closure, the loop begins anew. There is no ending, no climax, only momentary respite. Where the romantic comedy film concludes, *Girls* exploits its televisual medium by allowing the narrative to circle back into the incessant processes of self-actualisation.

If impasse is indeed 'a space of time lived without a narrative genre' (Berlant 2011: 199), then this implies an unmooring from the anchors of living that genre provides us with. Impasse is therefore a space in which we learn to adjust to the loss of a fantasy (2011: 11). *Girls* explores this loss at a narrative level by constructing the rom-com run as an impasse, an indicator of Hannah's return to the promise of a

romance she already knows isn't working. One crucial aspect of a relation of cruel optimism is a lack of alternatives, for if there were other viable options, it would perhaps not be so difficult to let go of idealised fantasies of what our lives should be like. *Girls* constructs a similar shortage of options by gradually estranging Hannah's character from her friends, family and even her infatuated neighbour. The close relationships between Hannah and her friends that were a staple of the first season have begun to fray. In episodes eight ('It's Back') and nine ('On All Fours') of season two in particular, the series emphasises Hannah's atomisation by focusing on other character arcs, shifting Hannah to the margins and foregrounding her seclusion as her anxiety heightens.

In this moment, Hannah's vision of her awaited good life seems further than ever from her lived reality. Adam's arrival, therefore, represents to Hannah, and crucially, to the audience, the very possibility of happiness itself, despite her (and our) knowledge that their previous attempts at a relationship were not fulfilling. Another role played by genre is that it guides us toward an expected conclusion. To live without a genre means living without a clear idea of how a situation is likely to unfold, and importantly, end. Typically, the decisive act that signals a clear outcome of narrative and character completion (that is, in *Girls*, the run), instead of heralding the resolution anticipated by the viewer, exposes impasse. A closer look at the actual state of play reveals narrative stagnation. Nothing *happens* in season two (which is a widespread critique of *Girls* in general). There is turmoil and insecurity. There are shifts and adaptations, yet no discernible progress is ever being made.

*Girls* displays an increasing awareness that postfeminist genres do not deliver on their promises, that following their lines will not map a path toward fulfilment. However, the rom-com run also reflects that although *Girls* does not entirely believe in the prospect of finding fulfilment in such worn-out generic promises, the longing for them to succeed persists. Adjustment for Hannah equals further entrenchment of her commitment to a promise she knows is false. Meanwhile, adjustment for the series *per se* resides in the creation of a new genre of impasse that articulates the inherent difficulties of detaching from the postfeminist promise.

The postfeminist genre, much like Adam, runs its course; it even arrives. Ultimately, however, the postfeminist romantic fantasy finds no foothold in *Girls*, as it is usurped by the new contemporary genre of impasse, which finds it cannot accommodate the happy couple.

### **Inconvenient Conventions**

Berlant argues that the function of cultural and societal conventions can be reduced to disciplinary measures seemingly intended to direct a populace toward cruelly optimistic genres of living. Onscreen, the repeated mediation of such conventions often manifests as a simplistic or derivative cliché. Yet Berlant also accounts for the appeal of norms, and our fascination with convention as being a kind of ‘aspirational anchor’ (2012: 3), a way of tethering ourselves to the world. Consequently, the rom-com run can at once retain its outdated gender politics and function as an aspirational image of femininity that points in the direction of familiarity, stability, and flourishing (2011: 3). Subjects can desire postfeminist normativity, even as it inflicts suffering upon the desiring subject. Or, as Berlant attests, ‘it is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working’ (2011: 263). At the same time, falling for a false promise is not only inconvenient; it is embarrassing. To acknowledge that we have misplaced our optimism feels less like a failure of genre to live up to and fulfil our expectations than our own failure to reap the rewards it promised. Perhaps the promise was never valid or viable in the first place. Still, losing hold of the fantasy that fulfilment resides in postfeminist genres has the capacity to devastate the sense of self-continuity that is derived from our attachments to genre (24). *Girls* shows us that the rom-com run doesn’t lead to the happy ending hoped for, yet it reproduces it all the same.

This rom-com run scene in *Girls*, then, expresses a particularly complicated and contradictory set of genre pleasures. As Berlant (2013) observes, ‘aesthetics is one of the few places we learn to recognize our emotions as trained and not natural’ (n.p). Personally speaking, upon viewing the scene for the first time, I found myself in the uneasy position of recognising that I am aesthetically trained to find relief in

the powerful image of a woman saved by a man, despite the fact that I believe myself to be firmly aligned with a feminism profoundly critical of both the desire and the image. *Girls'* repetition of the romantic comedy staple establishes a sense of self-continuity that imparts an assuring recognition of femininity while placing postfeminist pleasure in immediate conflict with feminist critique. While it would be easy to dismiss this tension, a more nuanced understanding can be derived from the insight that in repeating postfeminist tropes, *Girls* does not 'become' a romantic comedy. Rather, *Girls* deploys and subsumes the romantic comedy into its own uncomfortably stretched-out genre of impasse, painfully detailing the present condition of femininity.

Like Berlant, *Girls* tracks an extended 'crisis ordinariness' (2011: 10), or an unremarkable, ongoing absorption of catastrophe into the everyday. There is a pervasive sense in *Girls* that something unintelligible has gone terribly wrong. That something, which remains imperceptible to the characters in *Girls*, is expressed affectively to the viewer by Dunham's televisual mediation of the overwhelming impact of postfeminist genres on Hannah and her peers. The rom-com run is no longer a singular, exceptional event that ruptures the ordinary, or a symbol of ultimate romantic love, as *Girls* distends the ostensible moment of completion into an unconsummated stretched-out shape of the 'usual' (58).

To conclude, I would like to reiterate that articulating the ways that specific tropes deviate from precedents that work within a particular tradition enables us to be, according to Berlant, 'reflexive about contemporary historicity as one lives it' (2011: 5). Jackie Stacey interprets contemporary historicity as a feeling that occurs when subjects are unable to respond to an event using 'existing affective genres' (2015: 252). The present, according to Stacey, 'becomes most visible when it fails to live up to its promises (in which we had invested so much, psychically and economically)' (2015: 252). I argued at the beginning of this chapter that *Girls* is constructed in relation to and as a response to the dominance of postfeminist cultural discourses. Rather than dismiss such normative investments as simply 'bad objects,' my consideration of postfeminism as a relation of cruel optimism proves a fruitful

method for engaging with the hopeful pleasures, ambivalent desires and conflicts arising from our fascination with and aspirations toward convention. *Girls'* meticulous enactment and unravelling of conventional postfeminist fantasies offers an important cultural understanding of the cruel hopes that direct feminine desires toward patently false promises. When *Girls* finds that femininity is no longer entirely intelligible through the lens of the romantic comedy, it is compelled to find new methods of sense-making. The calculated re-articulation of the rom-com run functions to unfold the boundaries of the romantic comedy genre, thereby creating its own entirely new genre, which assumes shape through its deviations from the normative model. In turn, the creation of the new genre expands the potential of the old. As *Girls* repeats and exposes its genre mechanics, it begins to dawn on us that the romantic comedy as a dominant postfeminist narrative masks the impasse at its core.

This chapter illuminates a particular resonance between *Girls'* reiterative construction of postfeminist tropes and fantasies and Berlant's concept of cruel optimism. Which is not to say that *Girls* simply confirms what Berlant has already told us. For what *Girls* does, first, is explore the particular dynamic of cruel optimism in the context of postfeminist media culture. In this way, the series constructs a historically and culturally specific feminine condition, detailing the impacts of postfeminism as a dominant cultural discourse. In other words, *Girls* produces a distinctively feminine form of impasse, thus shading in the details of Berlant's concept. Second, the type of impasse constructed by *Girls* expands on the definitions offered by Berlant. In *Girls*, postfeminist impasse is expressed through recursion, a continual turning away from and returning to normative convention. The structural rhythms of the series, centred on the reiterative anticipation and denial of growth or catharsis, do not make for traditionally 'satisfying' viewing. In this way, *Girls* constructs a particular dynamic of impasse not described or explored by Berlant. For this reason, it is vital to bring the two into conversation with one another. Whereas Berlant provides the vocabulary for the feeling or relation of remaining committed to harmful conventions, *Girls* gives us the shape of a culturally specific response to postfeminist convention. With this in mind, it is

important to note that I do not propose that *Girls* encompasses a universal perspective on postfeminism, but rather that the series' significance lies in the way it constructs a complicated and conflicted relationship to hegemonic feminine conventions. Chapter Three follows this thread with a view to exploring, not the late postfeminist girlhood constructed by *Girls*, but a rather more inscrutable type of femininity that has emerged from the same cultural moment. *Appropriate Behaviour* is often read as analogous to *Girls*, yet the impasse it produces stems less from an inability to cut loose from harmful genres and more from a desire for a generic path to follow.

### **Chapter Three: ‘Being without a cliché to hold onto can be a lonely experience’: Generic Isolation in *Appropriate Behaviour* (2014)**

While there is no vast chasm between *Girls* and *Appropriate Behaviour*, neither are they as similar as media criticism has suggested (Freeman, *Guardian* 2015). When *Appropriate Behaviour* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2014, it attracted a largely positive reception and critics were eager to construct Desiree Akhavan, the film’s star and director as ‘the next Lena Dunham’ (Setoodeh, *Variety* 2014; Smith, *New York Post* 2014). In part, this manufactured relationship between the two is a standard marketing ploy intended to ensure Akhavan’s film a wider audience by its affiliation with the furore surrounding *Girls*. Akhavan herself is alert to the oft-repeated fact that unlike male creators whose work stands for itself, female creators are more likely to be compared to one another (Freeman 2015). In this case, Akhavan’s directorial debut is judged favourably. Media construction of Akhavan as the ‘Iranian bisexual Lena Dunham’ (Freeman 2015) is evidently equally intended as positive, though Akhavan is understandably keen to refute the assimilation of her own subjectivity and creative vision into Dunham’s. In a *Guardian* interview, Hadley Freeman (2015) highlights the absurdity of the media seeking to rigidly demarcate difference in terms of Akhavan’s heritage and sexuality ‘while at the same time insisting she is exactly like someone else (the new Dunham!).’ What these common associations drawn between Akhavan and Dunham do suggest is that their creative works function as part of the same genre, despite the fact they do not necessarily share traditional genre conventions. Such a construction serves to create expectation, as a viewer’s existing knowledge of *Girls* is likely to anticipate and shape their response to *Appropriate Behaviour*.

The sustained media association of *Appropriate Behaviour* with *Girls*, and comparisons between Akhavan and Dunham, have certainly made me reluctant to contribute to this particular debate by creating further dialogue between the two texts. The spotlight on Akhavan’s Iranian heritage and bisexuality as the sole points of interest and difference has supported a facile engagement with any observable qualities of her filmmaking. There are indeed superficially similar premises underpinning both: they are set in New York, explore extended girlhoods, and are

directed by and star their creators. In particular, this latter point provokes an extratextual level of engagement in that Akhavan and Dunham are subject to ongoing interrogation regarding the slippage between their on- and off-screen personae. However, this chapter argues that a sustained examination of *Appropriate Behaviour*, its mode of cultural enquiry, and the concerns arising from the film might prove a more fruitful endeavour than comparison, in part to resist and counter the apparent critical consensus that Dunham's work is a categorical reference point against which all other girl-related film and television should be measured.

*Appropriate Behaviour* is primarily a character study following a single protagonist, Shirin, in the aftermath of a breakup with her girlfriend, Maxine. Although Shirin's romantic life is the primary focus, this is framed by her family, social and professional relationships, situating the central relationship within a wider context. The story of their relationship is told in a series of non-chronological flashbacks that structure the film. The film's structure diverges into dual narratives: flashback sequences allow the viewer to piece together the fragments of Shirin's relationship, whereas the present-day narrative follows Shirin in its aftermath. In *Queer Girls, Temporality and Screen Media: Not 'Just a Phase'* (2016), Whitney Monaghan reads the film's parallel narratives as an example of queer temporality, or a formal refusal of normative time. Monaghan links the film's structure to its narrative questioning of the traditional milestones of linear progression—what Jack Halberstam terms 'those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely birth, marriage, reproduction, and death' (2005: 2), suggesting that the 'dual narratives seem to obscure teleological progression in favour of awkwardly flowing along in their own time' (2016: 156). The awkward narrative flow Monaghan identifies works in opposition to what Elizabeth Freeman terms 'chrononormativity,' defined as the way time is used to 'organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity' (2010: 3). Her explanation provides a way of understanding how our lives tend to unfold according to a particular timeline, dictated and reinforced by institutional and cultural expectations of when certain events are supposed to occur. In a society structured by chrononormativity, Freeman argues, 'the state and

other institutions, including representational apparatuses, link properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change' (4). 'Properly temporalized' individuals are those who achieve their milestones and meet their targets on time. The legibility of individuals' lives therefore depends upon their adherence to temporal normality. In other words, for an individual's life trajectory to make sense, it must fit within the ideological framework structuring their broader society. Equally, in narrative terms, those stories that conform to traditional storytelling structures of movement, change and closure are those that culturally 'make sense.'

In regards to *Appropriate Behaviour*, chrononormativity comes into play in two ways: first, at the narrative level, as Shirin's life unfolds at a pace that makes her unintelligible to her family. She does not make sense to them, as she is uninterested or incapable of living her life according to the traditional milestones of adulthood. Second, at a structural level, Monaghan notes that while for her, Akhavan's dual narratives are a point of interest, many critics feel differently. For instance, Stephen Holden of *The New York Times* criticises *Appropriate Behaviour's* 'lack of an ending or even a sense of direction' (2015). Similarly, the choice of descriptors, from 'haphazard' (Merry, *Washington Post* 2015) to 'unambitious' (Rooney, *The Hollywood Reporter* 2014) suggest that evidently, critics are unappreciative of *Appropriate Behaviour's* asynchronous and deliberately directionless structure. Just as Shirin becomes illegible to her family, so too does the film to some commentators, unaccustomed perhaps to the way that queer narratives tend not to fit so neatly into traditional storytelling structures and instead favour 'extremes of temporal experience: asynchrony, discontinuity, belatedness, arrest, coincidence, time wasting, reversal, time travel, the palimpsest, boredom and ennui' (Needham 2009: 153).

It should be noted that this chapter operates somewhat atypically compared to the others, in that it does not directly address the postfeminist problematic. As demonstrated by chapters one and two, the demands of generic convention and the social pressure to live certain kinds of lives can be constricting. However,

*Appropriate Behaviour* shows us that the lack of genre to guide the way can be equally devastating. If the thesis as a whole is concerned with what happens *after* postfeminism, this chapter abandons the frame of postfeminism almost entirely to demonstrate that sometimes the impact of a culturally dominant discourse is in fact barely perceptible compared to other more pressing anxieties that arise in the search for social belonging. However, *Appropriate Behaviour* does make brief reference to aspects of postfeminist culture, for instance, by casually affiliating Shirin with *Sex and the City* and the fantasy series *Twilight* (Meyer 2005–2008). As I discuss later, rather than signalling a deep-rooted connection to postfeminist genres, these moments are designed principally to highlight Shirin's incompatibility with Maxine, who eschews normative feminine culture. It is particularly telling that the film makes these references nonchalantly, suggesting that while postfeminism is tangibly present as one of the genres structuring Shirin's life, it is far from the primary or most pressing one. The question of how postfeminism feels does not therefore appear to be wholly irrelevant to *Appropriate Behaviour's* concerns; however, the film suggests that neither is it especially urgent. Instead, *Appropriate Behaviour* expresses the difficulties in negotiating one's own subjectivity in relation to disparate social groups, exploring how living without a convention or a cliché can fuel isolation from communities to which one ostensibly belongs.

Through close readings of key scenes, the film's two primary concerns emerge. First, Akhavan's visual construction of Shirin as isolated from the other characters in the film, despite her numerous and varied attempts at social connection. In this regard, the film uses several formal techniques to construct Shirin as out-of-place, which I explore in a reading of the film's opening sequence, and two key scenes that articulate Shirin's family dynamics. The film's understanding of social isolation is directly linked to the concept of transformation and resolution, which the film appears to aspire to and simultaneously foreclose. I compare the opening and closing sequences in order to examine this expectation of change more closely. As well, I provide a reading of the failed threesome and the coming out sequences as key segments of *Appropriate Behaviour* signalling the potential for transformation before destabilising it.

### **‘Nobody knew what the future would look like for me’**

In my analysis of *Girls*, I noted that to live without genre would entail living without knowledge of how a situation might develop, or reach completion. Of course, no one’s life unfolds outside culture, and therefore no one truly lives without genre—how could that be possible? However, what the film expresses is a sense of feeling isolated from genre, the uncertainty caused by operating without a guide or generic path to follow. *Appropriate Behaviour* does offer two generic paths that Shirin could take: Iranian-American conventionality (as epitomised by Shirin’s brother, Ali, and his fiancée Layli), and the politicised queer sexuality that her ex-girlfriend Maxine embodies. For instance, Layli seems to represent all Shirin is not. She is polished, polite and professional, with an appropriately middle-class career as a surgeon—unlike Shirin, who lacks a steady job and is uninterested in finding a respectable middle-class boyfriend to marry. However, the film steers clear from suggesting that Shirin’s bisexuality is the reason she doesn’t quite fit into her family’s ideal ways of living. Rather, she simply doesn’t, and the film (wisely) does not offer an explanation as to precisely why this might be the case. Although her being bisexual plays a role, the film makes it clear that Shirin’s queerness extends beyond her sexuality. Indeed, there is a sense that Shirin does not belong to the two primary genres that structure her life—not because they are in opposition to one another, but because she cannot find a place within either.

The notion that genre provides a framework for how a situation may unfold or develop is conveyed by Akhavan in a press interview, as she says that her filmmaking is informed by growing up without a sense of what her future would look like:

When I came out to my family, none of us had ever met an Iranian gay person that we knew of [...] it was unspoken completely, so we were all in shock and nobody knew what the future would look like for me (Kermode, *Eye For Film* 2015).

Akhavan’s words resonate with those of Ahmed, who writes that ‘the more people travel upon a path, the clearer the path becomes’ (2017: 46). Akhavan articulates a sense that because she did not know anyone who had travelled upon her particular

path (or even one like it), the route toward her future was unclear. Needham expresses a comparable notion that 'queers themselves can be conceived of as existing outside the logic of linear time, as having no future, as being written out of history' (2009: 153). The markers of life progression that might typically structure one's future are disrupted, as though prior to coming out, Akhavan's future was foreseeable. Because queerness was 'unspoken completely,' there is no history and no pre-established generic guide to draw upon. However, it is worth noting that Akhavan does still anticipate a future of some description; shock and uncertainty do not indicate that no future at all lies ahead. Rather, once Akhavan speaks of her own queerness, her projected linear progression toward a knowable future becomes, if not lost entirely, then certainly indeterminate.

In a similar fashion, the film tracks Shirin's search for a genre to help her make sense of what her life *could* look like. This search is of course also characterised by a desire for the good life Berlant identifies. However, in *Appropriate Behaviour* that life is far less informed by the dominant norms of postfeminist femininity than it is in a series like *Girls*. As noted, in certain respects *Girls* and *Appropriate Behaviour* both engage with similar subject matter. Their protagonists struggle with dating and relationships, where to live, and how to find meaningful work in a postrecession era in which financial difficulties are a matter of course for even the once-protected middle-classes, living spaces are often shared by necessity rather than choice, and work is irregular and precarious. They therefore have similar material problems and drives, but their methods for coping diverge. As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the primary ways *Girls* makes sense of Hannah's life is through the postfeminist genres she grew up on and cannot detach from. By contrast, *Appropriate Behaviour* is structured by a desire for genre itself, as expressed through the film's tagline: 'Being without a cliché to hold onto can be a

lonely experience.’ The film recognises that the desire for generic convention is important precisely because it is how we make sense of our lives.<sup>47</sup>

Elaine Marks understands this desire and pursuit of genre, as demonstrated by her study of French lesbian writers in ‘Lesbian Intertextuality’ (1979). Through the key literary strategy of intertextuality, Marks seeks to make sense of lesbian textual practices. In the chapter’s epigraph, Marks cites Julia Kristeva (1969) who coined the term ‘intertextuality’: ‘every text is absorption and transformation of a multiplicity of other texts’ (in Marks 1979: 353).<sup>48</sup> With this in mind, *Appropriate Behaviour*, of course, does not operate in a vacuum; however, unlike *Girls*’ intertextual relationship to *Sex and the City*, *Appropriate Behaviour* does not immediately appear to be informed by the same recognisable ‘anxiety of influence.’ The film’s most recognisable interlocutor (aside from *Girls*), identified by Akhavan as a primary influence, is Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* (1977), which Tamar Jeffers-McDonald describes as a ‘radical romantic comedy,’ (2007: 67) a subgenre defined by its emphasis on formal and narrative self-reflexivity. *Annie Hall* is notable for its deviation from the well-established romantic comedy convention of ‘happily ever after,’ as the central couple part ways for good rather than reasserting their relationship. Similarly, *Appropriate Behaviour*’s focus on the breakdown of a relationship rather than a reconciliation is a refusal to smooth over or disavow something that is no longer working, instead choosing to linger over and scrutinise the wreckage. Because the film is neither emulating nor deliberately opposing a specific generic lineage in quite the same way as a series like *Girls*, its sense of loss or disappointment is much more difficult to pin down to an attachment to an affective structure like postfeminism. *Appropriate Behaviour* is not led by genre, and it is not working through desires and attachments for false postfeminist

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<sup>47</sup> This dilemma is perhaps indirectly linked to the dominance of postfeminist media culture, which is not only detrimental due to its false ideological promises, but also in the way that it stifles or subsumes anything that does not correspond to its conventions—mirroring the way that the discourse on *Girls* seems to subsume *Appropriate Behaviour* into its own orbit.

<sup>48</sup> In the 1980 edition of *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Roudiez and trans. Gora et al.) the quotation reads ‘any text is the absorption and transformation of another’ ([1969]1980: 66).

fantasies. In other words, an affective relation of cruel optimism is not at stake here.

Instead, *Appropriate Behaviour* reflects on how we are to build lives without knowledge of what those lives might look or feel like. To return to the observation of Andersen's from the previous chapter, 'we don't know what to make of something that has not come with the metadata of its genre affiliations' (*Los Angeles Review of Books* 2015). We do not know what to make of an object, a text, a person that does not provide information about its genre. Where does it belong? What are its conventions? What should (or could) our expectations be? This speaks to the way Shirin is constructed as someone who does not seem to know how to build a life. There are paths available to follow, yet they do not seem appropriate to her. Without the detailed guidance that genre supplies, Shirin does not know what to make of herself. In her analysis of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Ahmed writes:

to follow the paths of life (marriage, reproduction) is to feel that what is before you is a kind of solemn progress, as if you are living somebody else's life, simply going the same way others are going. It is as if you have left the point of life behind you, as if your life is going through motions that were already in motion before you even arrived (2010: 71).

Were Shirin to follow Layli's more socially normative path or Maxine's political footsteps, the film makes it clear that she would simply be 'living somebody else's life.' Ahmed continues by arguing that although Mrs Dalloway has followed conventional paths that promised her happiness, she feels differently once she has arrived and that 'for Mrs. Dalloway, to reach these points is to disappear' (2010: 71). The implication is clear: if we follow a laid-out path simply because it is expected of us, if we live someone else's life, we are likely to lose ourselves in the process. *Appropriate Behaviour* is about a character who expressly does not want to live someone else's life. Shirin does not want to disappear into a reality that is not her own. Yet she is keen to discover her own conventions, a cliché or a path to follow. The film plays out this tension between, on the one hand, seeking the comfort of generic precursors and, on the other, insisting on embarking upon a path of one's own.

The film's opening shot holds on a close-up of Shirin's face as she travels on a New York subway train, the unusually long duration of the image seemingly at odds with the movement of the camera as it lurches with the motion of the train. Here, use of a handheld camera destabilises the static composition, so that Shirin's face is never entirely accommodated by the frame as she instead shifts slightly in and out of shot. Despite this only-slightly awkward composition, the shallow focus of her surroundings marks Shirin's face as the most expressive element within the frame, directing attention toward her interiority rather than her environment, as Shirin herself is doing at that moment. This shot, in tandem with the title, subtly introduces Shirin's character as at odds with her social environment. Both the film's title and composition hint at the unease that lies ahead. By comparison, the next shot is cramped as it awkwardly confines Shirin to the right of the frame (Figure 8). Again, the slightly sharper focus on Shirin specifies her character as the principal subject matter. Yet although the camera's focus is on Shirin, this long shot is overwhelmed with visual information in the mid- and foreground that emphasises the relationship between Shirin and her surroundings. A group of children visually dominate the centre of the frame and their excited chatter fills the aural diegesis. The decision to include the dark window of the train to Shirin's right, its blurred edges encroaching on Shirin's bodily space, creates a sense of spatial capture. Here, Shirin is constructed as trapped, not by the camera or the framing, but by her environment. There are pockets of space within the cluttered frame: an empty seat in the far left and an area of breathing room directly behind Shirin that is quickly obstructed as one of the children leans back, laughing with his friends and further hemming her in. The blocking and composition create a sense that Shirin is isolated from other people, as well as confined by her surroundings.

This contradictory doubling works throughout the film, which is careful not to construct Shirin as completely isolated from others; nor is she entirely trapped either. As this introductory sequence foretells, there are pockets of air, moments that appear to build toward a resolution that never arrives. If the initial sequence conveys that Shirin's interiority is the focus of the film, the series of shots that follows establishes Shirin's breakup with Maxine as the secondary focus, as well as

the trigger that sets the scene for the film's action. Coming-of-age conventions impose an expectation that the inciting incident will initiate a trajectory of growth and transformation, often enabled by epiphanic moments of encounter or realisation. Coming-of-age films therefore typically turn on the protagonist gaining a crucial piece of information that instigates a change in outlook or circumstances. When *Appropriate Behaviour* is considered in relation to coming-of-age conventions, every action or scene is inevitably viewed as either furthering or delaying Shirin's progression.



Figure 8 Shirin (Desiree Akhavan) rides the subway in *Appropriate Behaviour's* (Akhavan 2014) opening sequence.

The second and penultimate scenes of the film also parallel one another in their suggestion and denial of resolution. In the second scene of the opening sequence, Akhavan introduces Maxine's character. Shirin is packing the last of her belongings, while Maxine stares intently at her magazine, scarcely glancing in Shirin's direction. However, Maxine makes sure to tell Shirin to dispose of a gift that she feels uncomfortable keeping after the break-up. As we witness the collapse of their relationship, the scene is filmed statically, with white vertical lines of a doorway bordering the frame causing the already small bedroom to appear all the more cramped. The restricted space of their once-shared bedroom gives way to an expansive long shot, positioning Shirin as small in the centre frame as she crosses an empty street. Akhavan's use of wide-angle shots in which Shirin seems to disappear into grey Brooklyn streets is one method of creating psychological

distance between the film's protagonist and the audience, formally echoing Shirin's oscillation between cynical detachment and a longing for intimacy. Furthermore, although Shirin sets off positioned in the centre of the frame, as she crosses an empty street the camera pans left, tracking Shirin's lateral movement from right to left of the screen. As Louis Giannetti finds, directional movement from right to left scans as slightly amiss, or in his words, 'inexplicably tense and uncomfortable' (2007: 112), as viewers tend to read images from left to right (Egizii *et al.* 2017). Similar to the opening shot on the train, it is significant that the scene reads as only somewhat out of kilter, demonstrating Akhavan's method of composing shots that are not strikingly dissonant, yet contribute to an overall sense that all is not quite right.



Figure 9 Shirin walks away from the camera, strap-on dildo swinging by her side, in the title shot of *Appropriate Behaviour* (Akhavan 2014).

The scene then cuts from this desolate image of Brooklyn to Shirin's unwanted gift to Maxine: a strap-on dildo, now discarded in a dumpster. After a moment of hesitation, Shirin salvages it, the shot of Shirin striding onward with the dildo swinging by her side indicating a playfully bold sense of self-assertion. As she does so, a heavy bassline kicks in, signalling a momentum that is somewhat contradicted by the directional framing. Shirin walks, once again from right to left, but this time away from the lens, suggestive of withholding emotional or psychological connection. After all, Shirin is not only walking away from Maxine, or from the camera, she is also walking away from the audience (Giannetti 2007: 112), signalling

perhaps that the film is unconcerned about holding its audience at a reserve from the protagonist. However, Monaghan reads this scene as an example of ‘radical girlness’ (2016: 55), a concept she links to queerness to suggest that films like *Appropriate Behaviour* ‘eschew the logic of forward-moving, linear and teleological temporality’ (161). Monaghan’s analysis offers another lens to think about Akhavan’s filmmaking. Just as deviating from the more conventional directional framing is likely to mildly unnerve an audience, similarly, in the film, Shirin’s inability to follow the paths available to her frustrate those around her. Accordingly, on the one hand, the awkward directional framing might suggest emotional reticence; however, it also marks Shirin out as a character who walks unexpected paths, someone who is not content with ‘simply going the same way others are going’ (Ahmed 2010: 71), despite the uncomfortable feelings their nonconformity might generate.

The film’s title overlays the image of Shirin walking away, both anticipating the social missteps of its protagonist and calling into question the very notion of ‘appropriate behaviour’ (Figure 9). The title’s ambivalent meaning offers a useful key to the film itself; on the one hand ‘appropriate’ refers to a fixed set of norms and expectations, while on the other it describes something belonging to oneself, seizing and appropriating norms and conventions as required. Akhavan portrays Shirin as rarely capable of adapting to or acting according to her different social environments, the role of middle-class Iranian-American daughter directly conflicting with that of the ideal ‘queer’ woman that Maxine’s character exemplifies. In the first instance, Shirin’s way of living is too aimless, too alien, so much that it frustrates her family, particularly her brother who cannot understand Shirin’s divergence from his own normative path. However, Shirin finds Maxine’s attempts to ‘broaden [her] horizons’ by reading queer literature, and her insistence that coming out to her parents is the key to asserting Shirin’s queer identity, equally stifling. Maxine’s character functions in part as an aspirational figure of ultimate queer perfection or self-actualisation. Essentially, Maxine tries to politicise Shirin, implying that Shirin could become more appropriately queer if she read the right books, attended activist meetings and came out to her parents. Shirin is caught

between these styles of living: her non-heteronormativity, lack of a steady job, and the shared apartment her brother disparages as a 'refugee camp,' marking her as 'too queer' for her family to comprehend. Yet the film also constructs Shirin as not nearly queer enough for Maxine; as Shirin quips, she is not quite ready yet for Leslie Feinberg's queer classic *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), having not yet finished the much-derided *Twilight* fantasy series. This is one of two instances where the film intertextually references postfeminist culture in order to demonstrate the cultural and political differences between Maxine's and Shirin's characters. In the second example, Maxine professes to 'hate' *Sex and the City*, finding it 'boring,' where Shirin finds it 'pretty fucking entertaining.' While not a huge divide between the characters, the film clearly aligns Shirin with two postfeminist texts that are often perceived as feminine 'guilty pleasures' (Petersen 2012), or criticised for their gender politics and traditional narratives (Merskin 2011; Siegel 2002; Taylor 2011). Shirin is therefore coded as less overtly political, or more casually complicit with normative feminine culture than Maxine, who staunchly disavows it.

*Appropriate Behaviour* at first seems to be telling a story in which resolution entails Shirin fully committing to either way of living and leaving the other behind. In other words, precisely the dilemma resisted by Feinberg's semi-autobiographical protagonist in *Stone Butch Blues*, who accordingly decides to remain in the sphere of the in-between, rejecting the edicts of hetero- and homonormativity alike. The argument instigating Shirin and Maxine's breakup messily summarises Shirin's options from Maxine's point of view: either Shirin can continue in a 'creepy codependent relationship' with her parents and settle into the life of a good Iranian daughter, or Shirin can come out to them and live the queer life that Maxine's character embodies. Maxine's dialogue here, in particular the use of the term 'codependent' to pathologise Shirin's relationship with her family, is typical of the notion Ahmed identifies, that 'custom and culture become things that this brown queer child has to leave behind' and that 'happiness is assumed to require getting out' (2017: 52). As Ahmed continues, 'in the case of a brown migrant family, the family is imagined as a dead weight: there is an expectation that her family will be more oppressive, less tolerant; less supportive of her freedom' (52). Later in the

film, Maxine's surprise that Shirin's family is unaware of her bisexuality is met with sarcasm by Shirin:

I'm sorry, what country is it that you get stoned to death if you're convicted of being gay? Oh, yeah. Wait, I know. It's Iran. The country that my entire family comes from.

*Appropriate Behaviour* alludes to the prejudiced perception that immigrant families respond negatively to their children's non-normative sexuality. Yet the film itself refutes the notion that Shirin's family is what stands in the way of either her bisexuality or her happiness. Shirin does in fact come out to her family, the ambiguous outcome of the scene working against any traditional notions of catharsis, but also negating any impression that her family might be intrinsically less tolerant or supportive. Instead, as this chapter will demonstrate, the film sidesteps the issue of choice, and in doing so evades the classic narrative of forward momentum and resolution. Instead, *Appropriate Behaviour* illuminates the isolating effect of feeling trapped within and between two ways of living, with the conventions of either Shirin cannot fully comply.

In combination with the intimacy of the opening close-up, the use of a claustrophobic medium shot on the train and the tensely filmed conversation between Shirin and Maxine, the opening sequence effectively conveys the shifting dynamic between intimacy and emotional distance, isolation and confinement that recurs throughout the film. Overall, the film's opening articulates a convergence of ambivalence and contradiction. Akhavan's visual style at times seems set in deliberate opposition to key compositional elements such as sound or narrative content. The closing sequence of the film clearly demonstrates Akhavan's contradictory polysemous aesthetic. Its reiteration of the opening sequence both invites comparison and signals a change in Shirin's outlook. The film's conclusion communicates that something has changed, though it is unclear how or what exactly. In essence, the film is about someone whose circumstances *appear* to change yet essentially remain the same. The appearance of change is first expressed in the penultimate scene, which frames an old taped-up cardboard box in centre screen. Unlike the opening sequence, this time Shirin walks towards the

camera, her blurred figure coming into sharp focus as she hurls the strap-on into the box, discarding the object signifying her relationship with Maxine. The symbolic rejection is once again set against the formal construction of the shot: although Shirin moves from an indistinct figure in the background of the shot into acute focus, her head disappears from the frame as she exits screen-left, the camera lingering on the box rather than remaining with Shirin.

In the scene that follows, Shirin is once again travelling on public transport, now accompanied by Crystal whose narrative function throughout is the typical best friend role, providing a counterpoint to Shirin's isolation from others. The bleached-out sunlight framing them is in direct contrast to the darker palette of the opening scene, an evident marker of change. They are framed in what appears to be a conventional two-shot, excluding the vertical handrail cutting the screen in half and effectively separating them. Although the strong lighting and inclusion of Crystal leads the viewer to conclude that the requisite change has occurred, the composition suggests that even when Shirin is in the company of her best friend, she is still alone (Figure 10). Akhavan inserts further formal indicators of change. As the train slows, the film cuts to a subjective shot of Maxine on the platform. The train shudders to a halt, the camera movement positioning Shirin directly in centre frame for a reaction shot. Shirin is rarely centre framed throughout the film, and this compositionally balanced shot in particular contrasts with the cluttered framing of the opening sequence, signalling a brief moment of emotional equilibrium (Figure 11). After a stilted wave goodbye, the camera holds a contemplative medium close-up shot of Shirin for almost a minute, as Electrelane's rhythmic bass and electronic organ overlays and merges with the diegetic soundtrack, continuing into the closing credits. The formal composition up until this point is highly suggestive of a resolution, not only for Shirin herself, but also for her relationship with Maxine. The choice of Electrelane's song 'To the East' (2007) is noteworthy, as its opening lyrics ('I saw you / waiting for the train / And you disappeared') are more than a little on the nose, providing a direct account of the preceding scene. 'To the East' uses its upbeat melody to contrast and conceal its more melancholy lyrical content concerning the speaker's desire to reconcile, most likely with a romantic partner.

Furthermore, the musical choice recalls Shirin and Maxine's happiest moment of the film, the flashback sequence in which they fall in love is scored non-diegetically to the Electrelane song 'Oh Sombra!' (2004), another apposition between love and melancholy. The form of both the film and its closing song is in conflict with our knowledge of their narrative content, complicating a reading of the film's conclusion as purely indicative of transformation or growth, even though it does not entirely preclude such a reading altogether either.



Figure 10 Shirin and Crystal (Halley Feiffer) ride the subway in the film's closing scene (Akhavan 2014).



Figure 11 Shirin's brief moment of equilibrium in the final shot of the film (Akhavan 2014).

### Asymmetric Reciprocity

Although opening and closing sequences are 'formally privileged' (Bordwell and Thompson 2013: 58) and therefore often demand close attention even without the formal repetition used by *Appropriate Behaviour*, the film in its entirety unfolds a richly complex coexistence of conflicting aesthetics in which Shirin's difficulties cannot be easily essentialised or determined. Reciprocity comes to the fore as one such ambivalent element characterising the film, in addition to drawing together the predominant problems in the film of intimacy, detachment and a refusal of catharsis. Early in the film, Akhavan introduces Shirin's family during a scene in which asymmetric reciprocity plays a key role in establishing Shirin's detachment from them. Similar to the film's opening shot, the scene introducing Shirin's family foregoes the more conventional establishing shot designed to clarify spatial location. Instead, Akhavan opts for a pair of intimate close-ups presenting decorative plates of pastries and fruit, food intended for sharing, which tellingly no one consumes during the sequence. Use of shallow focus in the first shot hints at the presence of an empty chair in the background of the frame. Akhavan uses shot-

reverses to follow the rhythm of the conversation, cutting primarily between a two-shot of Shirin's brother Ali and his girlfriend Layli, and a three-shot of Shirin and her parents. Both reveal additional detail of the setting such as the ornate furnishings indicating Shirin and Ali's comfortable, middle-class upbringing. The main difference the intercutting reveals is that Ali and Layli are afforded much more breathing room than Shirin and her parents, whose tightly framed three-shot emphasises the uncomfortably cramped space they occupy (Figure 12). For the most part, this scene emphasises the unity of Ali and Layli by framing them together in the two-shot, whereas their companionship is contrasted by the reverse three-shot of Shirin and her parents. While her parents Nasrin and Mehrdad are seated together frame left, sharing one another's space, Shirin is positioned to the far right of the sofa, creating as much distance as is possible between herself and her father, her hand at one point briefly escaping the perimeter of the shot. The decision to frame Shirin with her parents, yet also as clearly separate from them, resonates even more than if she were sat alone in the empty chair alluded to in the first shot. There is an implied lack of reciprocity in their relationship; the three share a frame, yet Shirin prefers to sit apart.



*Figure 12* Shirin sits apart from her parents in an awkward family scene (Akhavan 2014).

Use of gesture and body language is central to the complex interplay of antagonism and defence, connection and refusal that follows. Reciprocity (or lack thereof) emerges as key to the two central relationships the scene cuts between. The

scene's dialogue is largely a series of mutual provocations between the two siblings, beginning with Shirin's negative response to Ali's vivid medical anecdotes, which only further provokes his insistence on showing her photographs of a sex reassignment surgery he has performed. Despite Layli's efforts to intervene, Shirin extends the provocation to include Layli in the sibling rivalry, insinuating that unlike Ali, who as a urologist, is 'dealing with life and death situations,' Layli's career as a plastic surgeon is in the service of vain and shallow housewives. With deadpan comic effect, Shirin's assumption naturally backfires, as she learns that Layli in fact specialises in burn treatments. What is significant here is the response to Shirin's misjudged barb. The reaction shot is of Ali and Layli, hands clasped together, echoing two previous shots in which Layli bridges the space between them with a supportive gesture. Although sat separately, Ali and Layli each use physical gesture to come to the other's defence, united now by their body language as well as the framing of the scene.

The family scene also establishes the misalignment between Shirin and her family's standards of success, which might partially account for the distance between them. Similar to Ali and Layli's supportive gestures, Nasrin and Mehrdad both reach out to Shirin in a comparable way, attempting to mitigate Ali's derisive comment that Shirin is doing 'jack shit' with her Master's degree in journalism. Ali's scorn recalls Freeman's chrononormative model, which demands that our use of time must be productive, in such a way that 'the past seems useless unless it predicts and becomes material for a future' (2010: 5). To Ali, Shirin's education is irrelevant as it resides firmly in the past and has not provided the requisite material for her future in the way his own degree has led to a productive career in medicine. Along similar lines, Nasrin attempts to mine Shirin's history for potential, as she proudly recounts Shirin's high-school swimming success. Mehrdad agrees that 'this body's made for swimming, look at these shoulders' as he touches Shirin's shoulder, a gesture that emphasises both his words and his affection for her. As a result, Shirin's prior achievement is mapped onto her present-day body, as though Mehrdad is attempting to bridge the physical divide between father and daughter, as well as the intangible disconnect between Shirin's past ability and her future prospects. In

the same way, Shirin's hands inspire Nasrin, who takes hold of them, proposing a career in hand modelling. Once again, physical gesture suggests the possibility for connection between Shirin and her mother. At the same time, however, it also implies that if the relevant material cannot be extracted from Shirin's past, perhaps she ought to simply make use of whatever is available to her in the here and now. Although her facial expressions register a resigned embarrassment, grimacing as she attempts to put an end to her parents' misguided attempts at support, Shirin does not avoid her parents' casual physical affection; however, neither does she return it. In the context of this scene, Ali and Layli's cohesive relationship functions narratively not only as a foil to Shirin's lack of professional ambition, but as aspirational image of the connection Shirin seeks throughout the film. Their characters' gestural reciprocity suggests that separation can be surmounted. Layli and Ali reach out and overcome the distance between them, but Shirin cannot, or does not yet wish to do the same.

As well as drawing attention to paths not taken, and pursuits Shirin is capable of, yet evidently not (yet) embarked upon, this scene effectively conveys that the distance between Shirin and her family is not in fact that great a divide. Although Akhavan's audience is likely conversant with the pop culture norms and generic conventions surrounding sibling rivalry and middle-class family aspirations toward professions such as medicine, there is little sense created by this scene that Nasrin and Mehrdad are disappointed in Shirin, or compare her unfavourably to her brother. The scene's blocking and composition work to suggest that Shirin feels simultaneously detached from as well as trapped within her family structure, yet offer no easy explanation as to why this might be. Instead, evidence of Shirin's detachment is granted uneasy coexistence with her parents' well-intentioned support. Within the context of awkwardness in American comedy,<sup>49</sup> Adam Kotsko points out that feelings of unease and discomfort are often generated by 'the fact of being an outsider who is misread as an insider' (2010: 72). Kotsko's observation lends an apt description to Shirin's situation in *Appropriate Behaviour*. The family

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<sup>49</sup> Which I explain in more detail later in this chapter in a section on the film's comedic aesthetics.

scenes in the film in particular raise an impression that Shirin's family perceive her as someone who ought to fit in with their ways of living, and they consequently cannot fathom why she does not. It is this sense of Shirin's mistaken identity that produces an affective unmooring, for neither her parents, nor Shirin herself appear able to access an appropriate frame of reference.

Akhavan uses a second family-oriented sequence to build on the first by further establishing character dynamics and hinting once again at one of the tensions driving the film: that Shirin's family is unaware of her bisexuality. In the first scene, Shirin's father teases her by asking if there are 'any boys we should know about' to which Shirin's exasperated reply is 'no, no boys at all.' This time, Shirin is caught off guard, as she responds to Nasrin's reference to her 'sexy [male] roommate,' as though her mother had been talking about Felicia, her female roommate. Although no direct comment is made, in these early scenes it is easy to infer that the distance between Shirin and her family is an effect of her sexuality, either due to her difference from them, or Shirin's closeted preservation of sameness, though neither of these readings is fully supported by later events in the film. This scene reiterates Shirin's detachment from her family, though unlike the first sequence which used the three-shot framing for emphasis, this features an isolating shot-reverse sequence in which Shirin alone inhabits the frame, as opposed to Nasrin, who at first appears solo and is later joined by Ali. A comparison of the reverse shots used in the conversation between Shirin and her mother show that although both are slightly awkward, Nasrin's framing is much more visually balanced than the chaotic composition of Shirin's. The vertical framing of the initial medium shot of Shirin is very tight and is overwhelmed by the dynamic use of angular line in the space. Shirin is almost entirely surrounded by her jumbled possessions and the asymmetric diagonals of boxes and interior furnishings. Each slanted angle or horizontal line intersects with another, or else is interrupted, the way that Shirin's body obstructs the neat right-angled wooden panelling. Tension is achieved through the friction between the disorganised composition of Shirin's environment and the ordinary context of the scene. Much like the opening sequence on the subway train, this visually crowded shot includes marginal scope for escape in the

right foreground that is almost immediately occupied by another box. Shallow focus creates the sense that Shirin is withdrawing into her environment, an effect further compounded by the peach colour of her t-shirt coordinating with that of the boxes that surround her. By contrast, Nasrin stands, one arm akimbo corresponding to the folds of the curtain screen left, creating a much more balanced composition. However, as Nasrin turns to face the dark expanse of space frame left, her eye-line reminds us that in a medium shot like this one, Shirin would typically fill the space. Instead, Ali enters to occupy the frame with Nasrin, which further reinforces Shirin's separation in the reverse sequence. Moreover, framing Nasrin and Ali together encourages the audience to forge connections between them, rather than between either of the two with Shirin.

In these two scenes, the blocking, framing and composition all work to subtly construct relationality as being fraught with tension, with the second scene establishing a spatial sense of Shirin's non-normativity that compounds her temporal atypicality as regards to conventional milestones. Moreover, Shirin's relationship to normativity is figured as being misalignment with her family's, as shown in a short scene intercutting between Shirin and Mehrdad, and Ali and Nasrin, each sibling sniping about the other to their parents. Although shot for comedic effect of the juxtaposition of their differences (their attitudes toward marriage and conventionality) and similarities (the way each speaks about the other), a closer look at this short scene illustrates how it functions to deepen understanding of each character's relationship to the family unit. The scene in Shirin's bedroom continues after Nasrin and Ali have left the room. Although Shirin moves nearer to talk to her father and her posture indicates a level closeness between them, the film uses reverse cuts here, in contrast to its capture of Ali and Nasrin who are once again sharing the frame as they unpack in the kitchen.

Both siblings feign concern for the other; however, when Shirin says she is worried about her brother, Mehrdad simply tells her to mind her own business. Ali's assertion, however, that Shirin has 'no goals or aspirations, she takes nothing seriously, she's becoming a loser' is reinforced visually as his dialogue overlays two

close-up images of a burnt oven tray and a spiral of flypaper. Furthermore, Nasrin agrees with Ali, saying 'you don't think I'm doing my best? She's not easy.' Here, the film summarily dismisses Shirin's concerns, whereas Ali's are supported by both dialogue and visual imagery. Moreover, Ali and Nasrin's conversation is rooted in the present tense. Nasrin says 'I think [Shirin] has self-esteem issues,' as opposed to Shirin whose dialogue, spoken in a hushed tone as though telling a ghost story, cautions, in the conditional mood, that her brother 'would do anything to please [their parents]' and that 'one day he could pull a gun on his co-workers.' Shirin does not truly believe any of her assertions, and neither does the camera, as nothing has indicated that any of her concerns are likely to translate into reality. Similarly, when the film cuts to Mehrdad's reaction shot, his expression is incredulous, and although he does not refute Shirin's claims, this is perhaps because it would be unnecessary to do so. Ali does not require defence here, so when Shirin, in full flow, asserts that she simply doesn't 'want [Ali] to find himself 20 years from now, fat and bald...' Mehrdad's only reaction is that 'the men in our family don't go bald,' effectively puncturing Shirin's narrative in which her brother becomes imprisoned by normativity.

The film is evidently uninterested in maligning socially conventional lives while drawing attention to the ways in which happiness and the attendant good life are associated with normativity, or as Ahmed puts it, how happiness often 'involves a way of being aligned with others, of facing the right way' (2010: 45). Ahmed suggests that when happiness is linked to normativity, it comes to mean 'living a certain kind of life, one that reaches certain points and which, in reaching these points, creates happiness for others' (2010: 48). The film here emphasises her family's perspective that if Shirin would simply face the 'right way' (presumably by aspiring and working toward conventional life goals), she would be able to fulfil the potential her family perceive to be at risk of being wasted. In this way, the film underscores not only that Shirin is out-of-sync with her family's way of living, but also that her misalignment and apparent lack of ambition in reaching those 'certain points' (an appropriate career, a romantic partner) is perceived as a denial of happiness, both Shirin's own and her family's.

Karl Schoonover, in his examination of the synergies between queerness and the concept of 'slow cinema,' argues that because queerness abides by an atypical temporality, it 'often looks a lot like wasted time, wasted lives, wasted productivity' (2012: 73). Shirin's way of living appears to look much like this to her family, her brother worrying that in not reaching the expected milestones Shirin is wasting her potential. In this way, Shirin's queerness seems to render her illegible to her family, who cannot conceive of a temporal logic beyond the dominant model Freeman describes as 'time-as-productive' (2010: 5). Much like the earlier scene in which Shirin's family describe her potential in the past tense, Ali's perception is that Shirin has the capacity to be conventional, suggesting that 'it's not like she's dumb or super unattractive, I mean she's perfectly capable of being normal.' The intercutting highlights Shirin's arguable inability to fulfil expectations of living a successful life. The film as a whole is devoted to Shirin's search for an attachment to hold onto, evoking the reassurance of having a path laid out for one to follow, that no matter how restrictive or problematic the norms of a genre of living might be, at least one knows what to do and how to be. *Appropriate Behaviour* gestures toward the coming-of-age narrative in a way designed to produce a desire to see Shirin either devise or slot into her own genre, or to find a way of living gracefully among the two she already inhabits. However, the film ultimately suggests that the genres of Iranian-American conventionality and queer sexuality are not in conflict; it is in fact Shirin herself who is at odds with both.

### **Comedy of Discomfort**

One of the key ways the film articulates Shirin's incongruity is through its construction of awkwardness. Kotsko notes the rising trend in awkward or cringe comedy designed to induce social discomfort, from the painfully uncomfortable British series *The Office* (Gervais and Merchant 2001–2003) to HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (David 2000–), in which Larry David's transgression of social etiquette 'inspires morbid fascination' (2010: 1).<sup>50</sup> According to Kotsko, one of the defining

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<sup>50</sup> Along similar lines, see *Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship* (2014), Jason Middleton's study of the variety of ways awkwardness manifests in the documentary genre.

characteristics of awkwardness is its capacity to spread; as he argues, ‘you can’t observe an awkward situation without being drawn in: you are made to feel awkward as well’ (2010: 8). Awkwardness is therefore defined as an inherently social phenomenon, linked to the violation of implicit norms. A relevant example in this regard is Shirin’s date with Sasha, the law professor she invites for a drink. In the first instance of awkwardness, Shirin’s invitation is extended while in the presence of onlookers, thus creating social pressure for Sasha to accept. As well, the audience is aware that Shirin’s overture is primarily a ploy to make Maxine jealous. It is therefore clear that from the outset their encounter is founded upon social discomfort, which only increases as their date progresses. Silence is the primary technique used in this scene to create an awkward and uncomfortable atmosphere, both diegetically and for the audience who must bear witness. As Kostsko suggests, the discomfort spreads outward to the onlooker. First of all, the scene holds on reverse close-ups of Shirin and Sasha for a little *too* long, neither of them speaking for the duration. Although their silence could perhaps be construed as typical first-date nerves, Akhavan’s choice to open their scene together without dialogue sets an uneasy tone that is maintained throughout their conversation, which contains several awkward silences.

Silence is constructed as awkward in this scene primarily through editing rhythm. For example, Sasha points out that she could not have refused Shirin’s invitation because of ‘all those people’ (in the queer justice group). Shirin attempts humour to smooth over her violation of the social contract, with the deadpan line: ‘I will invite them all to our wedding.’ Her dialogue here is the beginning of a pattern, preceding a series of three silent shot-reverses (Sasha-Shirin-Sasha). As the audience is likely to interpret reverse shots as conversational ‘turns,’ the camera therefore appears to offer each character an opportunity to speak, which they subsequently (awkwardly) decline. In this instance, it is not necessarily that Shirin has behaved outrageously; rather, it is the editing, pacing, and prolonged use of silence where three conversational turns appear to be missed that creates an uncomfortably long pause in place of the anticipated verbal response. The withholding of verbal cues in particular produces a sense of Shirin’s

inappropriateness; so do the use of prolonged silences and Akhavan's straight-faced, deliberately underperformed style of delivery.

In addition to its construction of awkwardness, *Appropriate Behaviour* shifts into a more vulnerable register, with scenes often incorporating both styles and thus demonstrating the limits of the deadpan aesthetic. The unsuccessful threesome sequence is exemplary of Akhavan's skill in merging a comedy of discomfort with a semi-tragic vulnerability. The scene is somewhat unexpected, as in the aftermath of Shirin's disastrous date with Sasha, she meets a couple, Ted and Marie, at the same bar, and accepts an invitation to go home with them. A street scene interrupts the preamble in the bar, the handheld camera swerves to follow Shirin and Marie as they run together, hand-in-hand, in what is perhaps the most uninhibited scene of the film. Here, the setting draws a distinction between the film's use of street scenes in the opening and closing sequences in which Shirin appears alone.

Conversely, this interlude appears to herald a potential for resolution or at the very least to dispute Shirin's joke that she is only 'one bad romantic encounter away from moving to France and changing [her] identity.' As with Shirin's other relationships, she is far from an outcast figure in this scenario. The bond between Shirin and Marie is evident, though tellingly, the camera's focus on the two of them excises Ted from the frame altogether. Unlike Shirin's date with Sasha, this encounter arises organically and seems promising, until it turns sour. Akhavan uses the same editing rhythm to highlight the resulting awkward silence when Shirin mocks Ted's latex outfit, creating a similar uneasiness as a prelude to the sex scene. As in the earlier example, it is possible to imagine the interaction preceding in an entirely different way, perhaps with a partner who more closely matches Shirin's sense of humour. As Kotsko argues, 'we are only able to identify someone as awkward [...] because the person does something that is inappropriate for a given context' (2010: 6). Kotsko's explanation places responsibility for awkwardness on social situations themselves rather than individuals as the perpetrators of awkward or inappropriate behaviour. It is therefore conceivable that in another context, Shirin's humour might be reciprocated. Instead, her joke falls flat, and Shirin's unwitting reinforcement of the divide between herself and others generates a

detached comedic discomfort that converges with the almost entirely non-verbal would-be sex scene between the three characters.

Once again, the blocking of the actors expresses the extent to which Shirin is wholly out of her element. Shirin's irreconcilability is exemplified in close-up, as she watches Ted and Marie kiss, their bodies obscured by shallow focus. Shirin makes the first of several unconvincing attempts to persuade herself of an attraction to Ted, hesitantly leaning in to kiss his shoulder before self-consciously retreating. The defining image of the scene and perhaps the film itself transpires as part of the same take as Marie pushes Ted further into the shot, capturing a compelling image of Shirin framed between the couple's indistinct faces (Figure 13). If shallow depth of field is often used to isolate the audience's attention on one element of a composition, in this case it effectively conveys Shirin's increasing disengagement. She cannot disappear into the moment, as Ted and Marie do; therefore she remains acutely in focus. There are no deadpan quips or dramatic breakdowns included here, the camera's scrutiny capturing Shirin at her most vulnerable as she realises that once again, her presence is inappropriate, and she dresses and leaves the apartment. Any hope sprung from the potentiality of Shirin's genuine connection with Marie is shattered during this sequence. Although the film holds us in the ambiguous space between progression and its undoing, the failed threesome sequence exemplifies this dynamic while also pushing at the boundaries of its deadpan aesthetic to construct a sense of unforeseen fragility.



Figure 13 Shirin, framed between Ted (Christopher Baker) and Marie's (Robyn Rikoon) kiss in *Appropriate Behaviour's* awkward threesome scene (Akhavan 2014).

### Genres of Self-Disclosure: Coming Out

In this final section, I examine how the film plays with our expectations regarding genres of self-disclosure or coming out. To do so, I use Nicholas Holm's characterisation of the deadpan comic mode as 'a lack of aesthetic and affective markers that conventionally help guide audience interpretation—not just facial cues and body movement and comportment, but a wide range of visual, linguistic and even audial markers' (2017: 105). Holm acknowledges that deadpan is typically understood as an 'emotionless and expressionless presentation of self' (104). However, he argues also that a wider conceptual account is required to take into account the cultural politics of deadpan humour. One example Holm uses is the increasing absence of a laugh track to emphasise punchlines, as he suggests that withholding anticipated formal comic markers provides the audience with fewer cues to interpret, and therefore contributes to a flattened or recessive comic mode (106). In order to explore its political potential, Holm connects deadpan to Berlant's concept of 'flat affect' (2015: 193). Berlant classifies flat affect as an 'underperformed emotional style' (199) in which an individual's presentation cannot be affectively linked to their internal state. More importantly, Berlant defines flat affect as a 'recession from melodramatic norms' (2015: 193) which demand that emotion be performed with overt intensity. Crucially, flat affect is not characterised as a refusal or withholding of emotion *per se*; rather it signals a refusal to perform certain types of emotions demanded by the dominant affective structure (Berlant 2015; Holm 2017). I argue the film's reversal of expectation regarding genres of self-disclosure registers as precisely this kind of refusal.

As Margaretta Jolly notes, the concept of coming out continues to hold traction in fictional and autobiographical narratives (2001: 467), typically focusing on self-disclosure as a process of painful yet ultimately uplifting self-discovery or an inspirational story of tolerance and acceptance. Moreover, despite the post-closet framework that emerged during the late 1990s, arguing that particularly for Americans coming out had become normalised and played a less significant role (Seidman *et al.* 1999), coming out is still fundamentally linked to the experience of being/becoming gay (Jagose 1996; Meeks 2006). In this model, narrative conflict

and momentum is therefore generated via a character's sexuality, and narrative closure is attained through the coming-out process. In regards to the film, one of the key conflicts is Shirin's reluctance to be open with her parents about her relationship with Maxine. However, as each flashback details, this is far from the only difference between their characters, and the film makes it clear that Shirin coming out to her parents earlier would likely not have saved the relationship. As this section demonstrates, if coming-out genres demand narrative momentum and transformation through the process of self-disclosure, *Appropriate Behaviour* thoroughly deflates those expectations through its refusal to perform coming out as an event that provides either the protagonist or the audience with a sense of resolution.

Shirin's coming out takes place over the course of two scenes, as she tells Ali and Nasrin separately. Both scenes take place during a New Year party, recalling an earlier flashback sequence in which Shirin introduces Maxine to her parents as a friend rather than a romantic partner. The setting is significant, as associating coming out with the auspices of the New Year invites the potential of a fresh start for Shirin. In contrast to the many instances of single reverse shots in the film, here Shirin and Ali share the frame for just over a minute, though for the most part each character remains on their own side of the screen, with a dark empty space separating them. After apologising to Ali for her negative response to his engagement, Shirin taps his shoulder, momentarily closing the space between them. The physical gesture combined with the apology suggests a moment of potential transformation, particularly when read in relation to the earlier scene in which Shirin does not reciprocate her parents' gestures. However, their physical communication remains similarly one-sided: Shirin directly faces Ali for the duration of the scene, whereas he continually turns away, urging her to join the party with him. On the one hand, the scene can be read as having a positive outcome as Ali does not say anything overtly disapproving. It can equally be argued that Ali's indifferent response of 'and that's a thing?' in response to Shirin's declaration of her bisexuality, along with his objections to telling their parents, opens up the capacity for a negative reading. What is more significant is that Ali's terse dialogue

and casually dismissive tone are both in keeping with his character, as established early in the film. Within the context of the film as a whole, Ali's reaction is not truly a reaction at all; instead, it constitutes a non-response. Like much of the film, information is received and assimilated, and nothing really changes. Shirin is not suddenly rendered 'appropriate' by her disclosure. The understated rhythm of the scene is particularly relevant in terms of generic conventions that demand coming out to be an event, regardless of the reception. As well, coming out is viewed by Bonnie J. Dow as a 'stock storyline' mainly interested in the effects on personal relationships (with heterosexuals) or narratives of acceptance and tolerance (2003: 261). Ali's non-response forecloses a reading of the scene as an event, and their relationship resumes, intact. Akhavan then separates the two coming-out conversations with two quick cuts to what almost appear to be filler shots: a waiter hands a drink to a guest, and a couple chat on the busy dancefloor. Meanwhile, the party continues, unchanged.

Unlike Shirin and Ali's conversation, the second coming-out scene between Shirin and her mother uses a series of isolating reverse shots. For the most part, the two characters occupy their own half of the screen, though once again gesture plays an important role as Shirin's outstretched arm extends into Nasrin's half of the frame. Similar to the scene with Ali, Shirin opens the conversation with an apology, this time for burning her mother's scarf. For the duration of the scene, Shirin speaks English and her mother responds in Persian. Crucially, Nasrin's mode of communication does not alter in response to Shirin's statement: 'Mom, I'm a little bit gay.' While it is possible to infer Nasrin's codeswitching as a method of social distancing, her bilingualism is in fact established early and continues throughout the film. As well, Nasrin responds to the apology in Persian in advance of Shirin coming out rather than switching from English. Where Ali is exasperated, appearing to interpret Shirin's sexuality as simply one more example in a litany of ways that Shirin refuses to be normal, Nasrin's reaction is a patent denial, simply saying 'No. You're not' and then silencing her with a 'Shh.' Her response does not lend itself easily to a positive interpretation; however, the disavowal registers similarly as a non-event where neither the situation nor their relationship is altered.

If we assume that coming out has conventionally been a moment of truth-telling in lesbian and gay cinema (Martin 1998: 281), *Appropriate Behaviour* makes this same connection when Ali cannot see the point in Shirin telling their parents now that her relationship with Maxine has ended. By saying that ‘it’s a pretty big thing not to be honest about,’ Shirin counters Ali’s conflation of her sexuality with the relationship itself. Not coming out, accordingly, would be to live a lie—as knowledge of the ‘real’ Shirin depends upon it. As expectations around the coming-out narrative dictate, the viewer may be anticipating a cathartic resolution to emerge from the process. However, the film instead relates the implausibility of catharsis arising from the act of coming out. As Butler asks, ‘what or who is it that is “out”, made manifest and fully disclosed, when and if I reveal myself as a lesbian? What is it that is now known, anything?’ (1993: 308). Shirin’s honesty is not a revelation or a liberation; she acquires no truth or self-knowledge. It simply happens, and the film moves on to its closing sequence. In this sense, Shirin’s sexuality is not incidental, but neither is it a problem to be resolved. As I have demonstrated, the two scenes work somewhat differently, yet both have the same narrative function in deflating any anticipation of growth or change as the expected result of coming out. They also parallel the two key family scenes, but this time it is Shirin’s attempt at forging a connection that goes unreciprocated. This relation of mutual non-reciprocity leaves Shirin’s character in much the same position as when the film began. This poses a question of why, exactly, does coming out signal the absence of character development? As with the rest of the film, there are no straightforward answers to be found. One suggestion might be that if coming out typically signifies a rebirth of sorts for the queer character, perhaps *Appropriate Behaviour* is simply reluctant to situate such self-redefinition as a ‘prize’ one attains by integrating within heteronormative society.

*Appropriate Behaviour* might not feature a protagonist who undergoes a fundamental transformation; however, the narrative is also not at an impasse in the same way that *Gone Girl* and *Girls* reach a kind of paralysis, caught in the cracks between postfeminist aspiration and reality. Perhaps to an audience trained to perceive forward momentum and transformation as the only acceptable way to

deliver narrative satisfaction, the film falls short. However, as Monaghan suggests in her comparison of the opening and closing sequences, *Appropriate Behaviour's* 'lack of direction does not mean that the film cannot end on a hopeful note' (2016: 157). The film appears to sidestep expectations of transformation and growth, while still managing to deliver a sense of closure for its protagonist. Freeman argues that within chrononormative societies 'having a life entails the ability to narrate it not only in these state-sanctioned terms but also in a novelistic framework: as event-centered, goal-oriented, intentional, and culminating in epiphanies or major transformations' (2010: 5). *Appropriate Behaviour*, however, reminds us that stories do not need to culminate in major epiphanies to be deserving of resolution. Shirin's life might not make normative cultural sense, yet Akhavan ensures that Shirin's nonlinear, off-centre way of living aligns with filmic convention. The film is structured to deliver narrative closure, despite very little (if indeed any) growth or change occurring. Shirin remains awkward, at times inappropriate; her self-disclosure does not radically alter her family dynamics, and she might always feel alone, even with the people she loves. This suggests that for Shirin's story to come to a close, nothing *has* to change. According to Halberstam, 'queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience' (2005: 2). In this way, the film offers a vision of a hopeful future independent of normative convention. Queer stories and queer lives might unfold in unexpected rhythms—perhaps not even endeavouring a movement toward typical goals and milestones, or including radical shifts and transformations—but they can still achieve moments of satisfaction, fulfilment and hopefulness.

With my reading of *Appropriate Behaviour*, I sought to work somewhat against the grain of the previous chapter, making a departure from the difficulties of shaking loose the firm grip postfeminist genres can claim over feminine subjectivity, and instead exploring the challenges of feeling isolated from popular or normative genres. Therefore, where Chapter Two examined the impact of devastating attachments to postfeminist culture through the frame of cruel optimism, this

chapter is concerned with what it might be like to feel detached from normative genres, especially those genres to which we ostensibly belong, and with which our social others appear to seamlessly align. While establishing that postfeminism is not the sole defining frame for making sense of girlhood and femininity, this chapter also emphasises that belonging, isolation, and a simultaneous disillusionment with and desire for social and generic convention remain crucial. In doing so, Chapter Three finds its connection with the previous two in its articulation of the ways in which contemporary genres are preoccupied with exploring subjectivities produced in disalignment with their social environments.

## Chapter Four: Suffering, Resilience and Defiance in *The Hunger Games* (2008–2010)

This chapter explores how the postfeminist legacy of agency and empowerment manifests in contemporary girlhood coming-of-age genres as an imperative toward resilience. A diversity of news and popular media increasingly construct women and girls as possessing a particular aptitude for resilience.<sup>51</sup> A popular example includes the Netflix series *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (Fey and Carlock 2015–) which uses surreal comedy aesthetics and a heightened sartorial colour palette to construct protagonist Kimmy as upbeat and optimistic as she perseveres in her transition to life in New York after escaping a 15-year imprisonment by a doomsday cult leader. Plot premises and trajectories such as these are common to resilience genres, which often use feel-good aesthetics to offset the disturbing or unpleasant subject matter that shapes their protagonists' subjectivity and traumatic coming-of-age experience.<sup>52</sup> Suzanne Collins' best-selling trilogy *The Hunger Games* is particularly instructive in this regard, as the narrative requires that its heroine practise resilience, not simply to overcome adolescent trauma or to achieve adult accomplishment, but to secure her continued survival. I have therefore chosen to use the series as an illustrative case study, primarily to examine the intersection between resilience and contemporary femininity. In particular, I shall look at how social viability for women and girls increasingly relies upon their capacity to perform resilience. As Chapter One demonstrated, social viability within discourses of postfeminist empowerment is predicated on female subjects at once performing and concealing traditional femininity to present their conformity with feminine social norms as freely chosen and agentic. Traditional femininity is figured as 'damage' under this paradigm—something for women to quietly overcome. By

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<sup>51</sup> Examples of relevant recent news items include the *Huffington Post* article 'What International Day Of The Girl Means To Me,' positing that one of Africa's defining qualities as a continent is its 'resilient women and girls' (Ojewumi 2016). Along similar lines, see the *News Deeply* article 'Refugee Women Resilient Despite Discrimination' (Collins 2016) or the *Atlanta Business Chronicle* reporting that resilience is essential for 'a woman to be a change maker in business' (Kendall 2018).

<sup>52</sup> See also *Precious* (Daniels 2009), which closes with an upbeat musical sequence underpinning the resolution provided by the coming-of-age trajectory, both of which work to construct the protagonist's resilience against the horrific acts of rape, sexual abuse, familial neglect and systemic institutional violence committed against her throughout the narrative.

contrast, resilience as a newly conventionalised feminine norm requires women and girls to reveal their feminine damage in order to overcome it (James 2015: 82). Before exploring this in further detail, I will provide an overview of resilience scholarship, culminating in an in-depth account of sound studies scholar Robin James' work in *Resilience and Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (2015).

Resilience has emerged as a key attribute across many fields and modes of enquiry.<sup>53</sup> Mark Neocleous' article 'Resisting Resilience' (2013) details the broad scope of resilience discourse beyond the academy. In particular, Neocleous dates the increased focus on the term 'resilience' to around 2007, when it began to supplant 'security' as the chief focus of governmental social and national strategies. Ben Whitham (2013), by contrast, argues that resilience came to be an integral feature of security discourse rather than supplanting it. Regardless of whether it displaced the prior discourse on security entirely, it is important to note that resilience becomes a primary focus across multiple social, political and cultural spheres at this particular historical juncture.<sup>54</sup> Such increased focus on resilience sees it heralded as the solution to all conceivable problems, ranging from the introduction of resilience training in British schools to the Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness US military programme, which includes modules designed to instil resilience in military employees and their families (Neocleous 2013: n.p).<sup>55</sup> My objective in this chapter is to examine the links between contemporary femininity and resilience discourse. If resilience is a wholly desirable attribute (Martin and Sunley 2015: 1), a quality individuals or populations are encouraged to cultivate,

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<sup>53</sup> See Vlad Mykhnenko (2016: 192–194) for a comprehensive overview of how different academic disciplines define and debate resilience. Mykhnenko's research includes definitions from engineering and materials science, computer science, ecology and environmental studies, psychology, medicine and dentistry, business and economics, public administration and social work and other social sciences. I have included this list here to illustrate the expansive scope of resilience discourse across a diversity of contexts.

<sup>54</sup> Its rise to discursive ubiquity is matched only by that of its twin, 'sustainability.'

<sup>55</sup> The Centre for Military Health Policy Research published a report titled 'Promoting Psychological Resilience in the U.S. Military' (Meredith *et al.* 2011) which states that the CSF programme 'features a strategy to increase the overall resilience in the force by enhancing soldiers in the physical, social, spiritual, and family dimensions' (33), thus demonstrating the pervasive reach of resilience discourse into all spheres of life.

then this suggests from the outset that the priority is in encouraging individuals to adjust their attitudes and beliefs, as opposed to working to change structures and social environments. It is important to note that resilience does not entail rigidity, but rather a kind of elasticity or ability to endure against all the odds. In traditionally gendered terms, the flexible endurance of resilience appears to sit more closely with femininity than masculinity. The desirability of resilience also poses questions about who we expect to perform resilience. Put differently, are certain types of femininity constructed more often in relation to resilience than others? Conversely, what happens to those who can't or won't perform resilience?

Colloquially, resilience is understood as the ability to 'bounce back' from adversity. However, this definition has been widely disputed within resilience scholarship. Vlad Mykhnenko's (2016) comprehensive cross-disciplinary examination of resilience literature reveals that although 'resilience [...] emerges as a complex and contradictory multi-disciplinary concept, with multiple meanings' (2016: 191), as a concept it straddles two broad strands of thought. First, there are those scholars who believe that resilience means that individuals and systems must remain the same in the face of adversity, summed up by Andrew Zollit and Ann Marie Healy as 'the capacity of a system, enterprise, or a person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances' (2012: 7). Under this model, though circumstances are subject to change, a person or system either retains a baseline of stability throughout, or is able to activate a 'restoration of normality' as part of its 'post-crisis recovery' (Mykhnenko 2016: 191). The second view entails adapting positively to adversity or undertaking a process of transformation towards a more sustainable and productive path (Martin and Sunley 2015: 13 in Mykhnenko 2016: 191). Within this paradigm, there is a focus on personal or systemic adaptability, implying that both internal and external conditions are subject to change. The two strands seem set in opposition, with one prioritising internal coherence and the other transformation. However, as Ron Martin and Peter Sunley point out, resilience discourse 'tends to portray systems as responding dichotomously to shocks, either recovering to original state or pushed

to a new state, whereas in reality response is a complex mix of continuity and change' (2015: 8).

I would concur that at an individual or systemic level there are likely to be elements of retaining core stability that work alongside the ability to change and adapt to one's circumstances. Martin and Sunley also acknowledge that 'the concept of resilience is easily captured by neoliberal ideology, to prioritise the status quo, and importance of self-reliance, flexibility and role of "self-correcting" market adjustments' (2015: 10). Likewise, in *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century* (2004), Anita Harris finds that young women have a 'special role' and 'have become a focus for the construction of an ideal late modern subject who is self-making, resilient, and flexible' (2004: 6). According to Harris, girls' rapidly increased access to education and employment coincided with the political and social conditions of globalisation, producing the idealised figure of the 'future girl' (1), who emerges from this specific set of historical circumstances. Within this framework, the future girl 'is imagined, and sometimes imagines herself, as best able to handle today's socioeconomic order' (2). In other words, popular social and cultural narratives produce the girl as an 'ideal' subject, since adolescent femininity is envisaged to be the only gender identity *not* in crisis under neoliberalism. The highlighted qualities of flexibility, self-reliance and self-correction are therefore imagined to be abilities that girls can access and cultivate more easily than boys. Resilience discourse is part of this same cultural context in which the self-making future girl operates. For Harris, resilience is one of many idealised traits the future girl must develop in order to succeed (i.e. become a socially viable subject) within a neoliberal model. Similarly, as my analysis will demonstrate, resilience is key to the success of Katniss, the protagonist of *The Hunger Games*, both within the narrative of the trilogy and with respect to her popularity as a heroic figure in the wider culture.

This chapter draws heavily from the research of Robin James (2015), who analyses manifestations of resilience discourse in contemporary pop music aesthetics, and how these are tied to neoliberal capitalism. Similar to Berlant, James considers

neoliberalism hegemonic, meaning that it constitutes a pervasive set of ‘common sense’ ways of thinking about the world and its power structures without being an entirely totalising force. James explores the ways that resilience discourse underpins neoliberal ways of thinking, and how individuals and systems are evaluated based on how resilient they are. Working from a Marxist model to construct her concept of resilience, James argues that structures and systems are measured by their ‘health’ (2015: 8) and encouraged to capitalise on any deficits or ‘damage’ they may endure (7).<sup>56</sup> Essential to James’ concept of resilience is not simply the ability to bounce back or remain unmoved by adversity, but also to be able to turn one’s trauma, suffering or lack of resources into surplus value. Accordingly, resilient individuals are able to turn less into more, nothing into something. When James describes resilience as the ‘new means of production’ (4) she is observing that one of the ways we create value in our society is through being resilient, that is, by overcoming adversity and turning less into more (7).<sup>57</sup> If resilience creates societal value, then something is required to be resilient against in order to produce that value. Consequently, within this model, any trauma, crisis or adversity becomes necessary or even desirable to maintain the means of production. One’s viability as a social subject depends upon the capacity to convert trauma into a valuable resource, that is, to turn a negative into a positive.<sup>58</sup>

Before outlining James’ theoretical framework in more detail, it is first important to note that the kind of suffering or damage James refers to, and that I take up in this chapter, derives from long histories of difference-based oppression and ongoing structural inequalities. Importantly, James’ interest in exposing neoliberalism’s instrumentalisation of suffering as something that can be put to ‘work’ intersects

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<sup>56</sup> Although the use of language like ‘damage’ is redolent of trauma theory, James’ concept resonates more with Berlant’s ‘crisis ordinariness’ (2011: 10), designed to capture the unremarkable absorption of such damage into the everyday. As James puts it, the damage inflicted by neoliberalism manifests not as the shock of a singular traumatic event but rather is always already incorporated in the routine of the entirely unexceptional everyday.

<sup>57</sup> In this chapter, when I use terms like ‘our society,’ I am referring primarily to the UK and the US.

<sup>58</sup> This type of thinking is affiliated with what Barbara Ehrenreich identifies as a ‘mass delusion’ (2009: 13) within contemporary America in which positive thinking is advanced as the primary method for achieving personal and professional success. As she puts it, in this paradigm ‘optimism is the key to material success, and if you can achieve an optimistic outlook through the discipline of positive thinking, then there is no excuse for failure’ (8).

with Ruti's critique of systemically induced suffering. The context of Ruti's analysis is her intervention into the debate between Lee Edelman and Berlant in *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2014) centring on the role of queer negativity, nonsovereignty and optimism. Ruti outlines that while both, to varying degrees, 'endorse notions of queer negativity,' (135) their approaches diverge, as Edelman remains steadfastly wedded to 'a strictly Lacanian notion of constitutive alienation (or lack-in-being),' while 'Berlant is interested in the material and affective effects of more concrete forms of alienation' (135). Ruti calls attention to these two distinct forms of alienation in order to differentiate between the two fundamental levels upon which people's lives often 'don't work.' As she points out, there is a vast chasm between a life that 'doesn't work' because, as Edelman observes, 'life, in some sense [...] is structurally inimical to happiness, stability, or regulated functioning' (Berlant and Edelman 2014: 11 in Ruti 2017: 137) and one that is structurally inhibited from 'working' by virtue of social class, race or gender. Ruti's critique acknowledges that while negativity certainly does fundamentally constitute subjectivity through such a foundational lack or alienation from ourselves, antisocial queer theory (such as Edelman's) too often 'turns entirely ordinary components of human experience into scenes of extraordinary suffering, thereby distracting attention from the kind of context-specific suffering that actually *is unbearable*' (141 original italics).

Ruti is clear that our focus ought to be on this context-specific, or what she terms circumstantial trauma, derived from difference-based oppression and structural inequalities. Furthermore, Ruti's sharp response to Edelman's myopic refusal to acknowledge what should be a rather rudimentary point is unequivocal: '*of course* life is never going to "work," existentially speaking; of course none of us will ever be perfectly happy, stable, or fully functioning. This is an ontological given' (2017: 137 original italics). At the same time, she argues that Edelman refuses to 'concede what Berlant readily recognizes' (137), which is that 'this predicament is quite different from the realities of lives that "don't work" because there are systemic roadblocks—such as racism—to their flourishing' (137). Demarcating forms of suffering in this way acknowledges that while there are unavoidable forms of alienation and suffering, the trauma caused by systemic racism, sexism and global

economic injustices derives from specific historical and socio-economic circumstances, which therefore can and should be altered. Ruti's critique also aids me later in this chapter in modifying James' theories of resilience, which I now return to.

Outlining a cycle of resilience at an individual level, James explains that first, adversity of some kind must be instigated, and second, the adversity must be overcome, and, crucially, this heroic feat is then broadcast to others. In this framework, resilience only matters if others can see it. Consequently, the person who overcomes adverse circumstances gains a higher status and significant increase in their social, economic, political or psychological resources. Any one individual's personal resilience contributes in turn to overall societal resilience, further entrenching a common sense notion that adverse circumstances are simply the way things are. James, therefore, is defining a very specific form of resilience, which is not simply about bouncing back. Rather, an individual's 'resilience labour' (that is, the work they do to overcome their adversity) generates excess value that sustains the dominant system. One result of this process is that adversity and oppression produced by neoliberal economic and social policies and practices become naturalised. In this way, James distinguishes her concept of resilience from other forms of personal recovery (2015: 7). Although James does differentiate between her understanding of resilience and other personal healing strategies or therapies, *Resilience and Melancholy* does not touch upon the tension between critiquing the practice of resilience itself and what such a critique might mean for those individuals who (must) practise resilience. As the feminist scholar Natalia Cecire observes in her blog post on James' book, at an individual level, although a perpetual cycle of trauma and healing may be harmful to perform, it remains 'the best deal on offer' (2015: n.p original italics) for many people, as the alternative is to simply absorb trauma and gain nothing in return.

Rather than analysing resilience at an individual level, James works from a Foucauldian conception of biopolitics as a governmental system prioritising 'vitality, health, and sustainable flourishing' (2015: 8) for some populations, while neglecting

others. James' central argument is that resilience has become a marker for inclusion within systems of social and political power, thereby updating traditional hierarchies of identity-based oppression. Traditionally, oppressed groups such as racialized populations were automatically excluded, whereas it is now a given that neoliberal capitalism operates an all-inclusive regime through popular ideas about multiculturalism and diversity (Melamed 2006; Sheth 2009; Titley and Lentin 2011). This means that one's gender, race or sexuality are no longer the marker for inclusion; instead, resilience is. According to James, resilient populations who can overcome their identity-based adversities/oppression '*in socially profitable ways*' (2015: 15) are accorded some measure of privilege. Meanwhile, those more precarious populations who cannot (or will not) overcome their oppression in socially profitable ways are further marginalised.

### **Femininity**

One of the aims of this chapter is to analyse the ways we culturally construct and understand contemporary femininity through resilience discourse. James' argument on how resilience is gendered looks at how feminine ideals have shifted. If traditional normative femininity was overtly centred on fragility and passivity,<sup>59</sup> contemporary femininities continue to presume fragility as a baseline, yet now women are encouraged to overcome their gender by practising resilience. As James puts it, 'women are always-already damaged by patriarchy' (2015: 82), meaning that the negative effects of institutional/structural patriarchy are regarded as the default setting, and women become responsible for working resiliently to become healthy subjects and overcome their gender deficits. Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg's widely critiqued book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013) exemplifies this phenomenon, in which entrenched systemic barriers to workplace inclusion can (and should) be overcome by an elite minority focusing on what 'women can change themselves' and their self-created 'internal obstacles' to professional success (2013: 10). *Lean In* not only captures feminism but remakes it

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<sup>59</sup> As James and many others have pointed out (Begum 1992; hooks 2000; Mitchell 2016), traditional femininity generally excludes non-normative embodiments of alternative femininities such as working-class, non-white, queer or disabled.

in a distinctly neoliberal image, thus contributing to a shift in popular understandings of feminism (what it is, who it's for). One of the ways feminism comes to be thought of is as a movement of the self, concerning an individual's resilient striving to get ahead.<sup>60</sup> Along similar lines, Harris describes escalating social concern regarding the self-esteem (or lack thereof) in 'white, middle-class young women who are supposed to succeed, or who are perceived to have everything and yet cannot overcome psychological obstacles to their own guaranteed success' (2004: 32). Once again, the 'problem' is located within young women themselves, whose 'personal, psychological barriers to feeling confident and optimistic, being able to achieve, and developing internal resilience, strength and self-belief' (32) are perceived as holding them back from achieving success.

James has produced a study of contemporary pop music that traces the rise of resilience discourse and how it has become entwined with femininity. Outlining the aesthetics of resilience, James argues that aural damage is intentionally generated through musical gestures like soars, glitches, stuttered vocals and other discordant noisemaking produced so that a spectacle of restoration and renewal can ensue. Accordingly, the musical gestures James analyses are key to the process of embodying the resilience we desire for our own lives. James looks at the UK number one hit Calvin Harris (ft. Florence Welch) song 'Sweet Nothing' (2012) as an example of pop music resilience discourse, analysing both its lyrical narrative and musical composition. James interprets the lyrical content about a woman who is 'hollowed out' and 'running on fumes,' and who—because all she's got is 'nothing' (2015: 1) must find a way to capitalise on a void. More significantly, through soars, drops and manipulations of speed and pitch, the song '*performs* the process the lyrics merely describe' (1). James' analysis finds that 'this is a song, not so much *about* nothing as *made of and with nothing*' (1). Accordingly, the musical gestures that work to build something from nothing help us to perform the resilience we ourselves wish to embody (4). In other words, the character in the song undergoes the process of

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<sup>60</sup> In 'The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism' (2013) Catherine Rottenberg uses Sandberg's bestseller *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (2013) as an example of how neoliberalism produces feminist subjects in order to displace liberal feminism.

resiliently creating something from nothing, and the listener too experiences that very same process because of the form and structure of the song and its musical gestures.

Along similar lines, I am interested in exploring the role popular literature plays in constructing resilience. As already discussed, one of the ways resilience discourse manifests in pop culture is through narratives of overcoming trauma and adversity, and the construction of female characters who are capable of turning obstacles into opportunities, transforming their damage into strength. In doing so, their resilience labour in overcoming adversity generates excess value for the institutions that committed the harm in the first place. In this section, I examine some of the ways in which *The Hunger Games* instils and embodies resilience discourse, as outlined by James. I then consider ways that the franchise complicates the notion of feminine resilience.

*The Hunger Games* is set in a dystopian future post-apocalyptic American society. A totalitarian government stages an annual contest in which the children of the disenfranchised population are selected by weighted lottery to participate in a televised fight to the death until a sole victor remains.<sup>61</sup> The story of the first novel (*The Hunger Games* 2008) details how one young woman, Katniss Everdeen, wins the game and inadvertently sparks the revolution that unfolds over the next two instalments, *Catching Fire* (2009) and *Mockingjay* (2010). The publication of the first novel coincided with the economic downturn of 2008, capturing the attention of a

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<sup>61</sup> *The Hunger Games'* intertextual reference points include the 'death match' genre, for example *Death Race 2000* (Bartel 1975), a satirical action film, in which a totalitarian government organises a Transcontinental Road Race where drivers must compete as to who can kill the most pedestrians. Similarly, the science fiction film *The Running Man* (Glaser 1987) features a television series of the same name in which convicted criminals attempt to escape professional mercenary killers. While these examples construct the death match primarily as a form of entertainment and population control, *Battle Royale* (Fukasaku 2000), on the other hand, the film to which *The Hunger Games* series concept is most often compared, tells the story of a young high school student forced to compete with his classmates in a fight to the death. In *Battle Royale* the death match is created in response to harsh economic conditions and anticipation of youth rebellion. The Hunger Games, similarly, are a form of punishment for a previous rebellion against the Capitol. What distinguishes *The Hunger Games* is its emphasis on televised spectacle and surveillance culture in addition to standard genre conventions of population control.

global audience not only due to its sales figures, but also due to its swift, pervasive cultural influence across a diversity of socio-political contexts. For instance, in the US, Black Lives Matter protestors in Ferguson reportedly took inspiration from *The Hunger Games* using the slogan 'If we burn, you burn with us' to graffiti a local monument (Bates, *Daily Mail* 2014). On a level more in keeping with the oppressive dystopian setting of *The Hunger Games*, Thai protestors using the three-fingered salute from the series faced arrest as the silent gesture of solidarity and resistance was banned by the Thai military (Gilbey, *Guardian* 2014). The wide appeal of the series is due at least in part to its thematic diversity: *The Hunger Games* offers a richly complex exploration of economic inequality, freedom of expression, surveillance and governmental control, the effects and ethics of war, the sovereignty and construction of the self, and the role of narrative spectacle in perpetuating and subverting oppression. Its ability to touch upon such a wide range of themes must be seen as integral to the series' success as 'an all-purpose metaphor for life as a young person in the post-recession era' (Suderman, *Vox* 2015). The popularity of Katniss as the central figure of this revolutionary tale constitutes a key element of its cultural resonance and makes the trilogy perhaps the most prominent example of a recent phase in dystopian fiction in which young women are seen to lead the resistance.<sup>62</sup>

In this section, I discuss the parallels between *The Hunger Games* series and resilience discourse. To do so, I return briefly to James' consideration of neoliberal biopolitics, and how any subjects' inclusion within dominant power structures is determined by a population's overall resilience. The trilogy is set in a fictional future nation, Panem (an obvious reference to *panem et circenses*), which has the wealthy and technologically advanced Capitol as its centre of power. The Capitol exerts a totalitarian regime over the surrounding twelve districts, whose residents live in varying levels of poverty. In addition to the already-harsh living conditions, the

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<sup>62</sup> Young adult dystopian fiction with female protagonists includes works such as the *Delirium* trilogy (Oliver 2011–2013), the *Divergent* trilogy (Roth 2011–2013), *Uglies* (Westerfeld 2005), as well as Julie Bertagna's trilogy (*Exodus* 2002, *Zenith* 2003 and *Aurora* 2011). Please see also *Female Rebellion in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction* edited by Sara K. Day *et al.* (2014) for a more detailed discussion of the wider impacts of this new dystopian girlhood genre.

Hunger Games are a form of adverse damage inflicted upon the population, created as a punishment for past rebellion against the Capitol. However, each year one individual is afforded the opportunity to 'overcome' this adversity by winning the games, their victory broadcast to the nation, with mandatory viewing. By granting the victor access to improved living conditions, increased food rations and income, members of a disenfranchised population become nominally included within the dominant power structure. The victor's labour (participating in the games, killing rival children, creating a sensational media narrative) generates value for the government and its system of oppression while simultaneously cementing that system as natural and inevitable. As James explains, individuals whose ways of living support dominant/hegemonic social structures are rewarded while others, whose lives do not in any way contribute towards the long-term sustainability of social institutions, are not worth investing in. Thus, a feedback loop is created: resilient individuals are supported because their health contributes to society's overall health. The more support they receive, the healthier they become. In other words, resilient people, who overcome adversity, are worth the resources that are invested in them because they will produce additional resources that in their turn support the regime.

Of course, our inherited circumstances are not equally weighted. Histories of social control and oppression like slavery or patriarchy mean that some groups start out with fewer resources of resilience at their disposal. As James outlines, populations who possess fewer resources to begin with inevitably tend to receive less investment from the prevalent power structures. Correspondingly, the topography of Panem society illustrates how even among the disenfranchised population, some groups stand a better chance of winning the games than others. Districts 1, 2 and 4, which are geographically closest to the centre of power, have more resources at their disposal. As a result, their children are healthier, stronger and train for the competition with a clear sense of purpose, considering it an opportunity to bring glory to their community. According to Katniss' narration, children from these wealthier districts are known as 'Careers,' as they manage to make a vocation out of the games, and that 'like as not, the winner will be one of them' (Collins 2008: 94).

Katniss, of course, is from District 12, Panem's poorest region where residents who work in the coalmines are compensated with subsistence wages and subject to sickness, starvation and death (2008: 28). Collins illustrates how the deck is stacked against the poorer districts so that their tributes are at a distinct disadvantage in terms of physical health and fitness. In addition, one of the ways Capitol citizens exert their power over the rest of the districts is through sponsoring tributes they favour by providing them with resources valuable to survival in the arena. Katniss worries that 'if no one sponsors me, my odds of staying alive decrease to almost zero' (105). Traditionally tributes from her district 'rarely get sponsors' (56), thus demonstrating how a system of ritualistic sponsorship determines the outcome of the game and its participants' chances of survival. What all these details demonstrate is that resilience discourse is embedded into the very world-building of Collins' novels at a fundamental, deep-structural level.

The lines of inclusion within systems of power and domination are clearly drawn in *The Hunger Games*, with the games demonstrating how existing social hierarchies reproduce themselves. At first glance, the dystopian premise of a state-sanctioned death match between disenfranchised children may appear outlandish or reductive. Yet this narrative device also illustrates Berlant's observation in *The Female Complaint* that 'extreme genres' can work as 'forms of realism' to express the materiality of social suffering, particularly when such suffering is historically inherited (2008: ix). In other words, the premise of the trilogy might indeed be outlandish (even for science fiction); however, the novels resonate with their audience precisely because the suffering they express feels like social realism for a generation who have come of age in a context characterised by rapid technological change, globalisation, war and recession. The congruence I have outlined between the trilogy's construction of entrenched systemic inequalities and the mechanics of resilience discourse suggests that the novels are designed to *feel* like an amplified version of the injustices and inequalities endemic to our own society.

Interestingly, along similar lines, the literary critic Jane Elliott is interested in the recent emergence of genres of self-preservation and survival that stage extreme

scenarios and force their protagonists to undergo ‘enormous suffering’ (2013: 83) by instrumentalising their capacity for agency. The existence of choice (any choice, no matter how restrictive, unappealing or outright deplorable) appears to signal the presence of agency. Yet in Elliott’s key literary examples—including Yann Martell’s *Life of Pi* (2001), Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005)—the context in which the choice is made is what renders agency in itself as suffering. According to Elliott, these popular novels explore a seemingly unquestionable form of neoliberal logic, which she describes as a complex and interlocking ‘chain of assumptions and equivalencies [that] posits interiority as the possession of interests; interests as the motivation for choice; choice as the engine of action; chosen action as measure of agency; and agency as a sign of personhood’ (88). As Elliott illustrates, these assumptions and their common sense circulation within the wider culture contribute to the making of neoliberal subjectivity, demonstrating how neoliberal forms of domination work to mobilise agentic activity, thereby capitalising on the positive connotations of agency. Subjects in her chosen texts are compelled to action through choice and self-interest in extreme situations that intensify the workings of agency. Similarly, I regard *The Hunger Games* as an immensely useful illustrative case study because of the way it magnifies the relationship between feminine resilience, on the one hand, and the coming-of-age trajectory of contemporary girlhood, on the other, through its extreme generic emplotment of life and death stakes.

### **Death**

According to James, dominant power structures ‘actively incite death and damage’ (2015: 9). While a resilient population is more likely to be able to recoup and repair itself, perhaps even gain a profit from their damage, ‘precarious populations exhaust all their resources in their constant struggles to stay barely alive’ (9). This not only means society invests more in resilient populations, but that precarious populations are actively diminished as part of this process. James explains that ‘resilience discourse is a biopolitical technology that reinforces the line between those fit to live, and those whose death is necessary for society’s ongoing health’ (9). At a core level, James argues, the distribution of resources and power across a

society puts every citizen's life or death at stake. Shortly after, James addresses her readership more directly to reinforce the urgency of her argument, which is that 'when power demands that you *live* [...] *death* seems like the obvious way to fight back' (11). James outlines an alternative, deliberately counterintuitive approach, suggesting that if 'power banks on your death' and the loss of your life is already accounted for, then choosing the method, timing and duration of that death becomes a means of disrupting resilience imperatives (11). In other words, those who are compelled to live can fight back with 'death' and those left to die have the option of dying in the 'wrong' ways, or at the wrong time (11). In this context, 'death' includes any practice that does not contribute to the overall health of dominant power structures, or as James puts it, "'dying" means more than just physical death; "dying" means living a supposedly unviable life, a life that isn't profitable for [multi-racial white supremacist patriarchy]' (50).<sup>63</sup> This is closely linked to Ruti's concept of defiant agency, or moments when we risk our social viability, as I will shortly outline in more detail. What James is suggesting is that if some lives are already considered less viable to begin with, rather than striving to become socially viable through practising resilience, individuals can instead deliberately increase their unviability, or go 'into the death' (50), as James terms it. She proposes that 'one of the main ways to go into the death, to practice melancholic subversion, is to take care of yourself in non-resilient ways—for example, getting a regular, full night's sleep rather than constantly pushing the edge of burnout and exhaustion' (21). Directly linked to this idea of 'death' as unproductive or socially unviable practices that are useless to the advancement of neoliberal ways of thinking and living is James' development of melancholy as a disruption to normative practices of resilience. If we are compelled toward overcoming our trauma so that the structure that inflicted the trauma may reap the benefit, James suggests that perhaps a melancholic refusal to simply 'get over it' is the key to undermining resilience narratives.

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<sup>63</sup> Here James refers to MRWaSP (pronounced 'Mr. Wasp'), her acronym for 'Multi-Racial White Supremacist Patriarchy,' or as she puts it, 'early 21<sup>st</sup>-century globalized Western race/gender/sexuality/capitalist hegemony' (2015: 12).

James' conception of melancholia is an update of Sigmund Freud's (1917) classic theory. She positions resilience as a contemporary update of mourning, or what Freud termed the failure to resolve and accept loss or lack. Where previously trauma was to be resolved, James argues, trauma is now something we can recycle and exploit to gain social capital and inclusion. In this context, melancholia no longer means the failure to resolve loss, as it did for Freud; rather, James terms melancholy the failure to achieve resilience 'enough' or 'in the right direction' (2015: 19). If resilience is the marker of inclusion into dominant hierarchies, then this of course categorically excludes those who are not resilient enough. For James, one way of practising melancholy is to invest in those who are excluded from or less able to practise resilience as they have fewer resources at their disposal. For instance, James details how a group of Occupy activists bought \$14.7m of Americans' personal debt in order to absolve the debtors from repayment, thus releasing individuals from the burden of exorbitant medical bills. According to the *Guardian*, the group purchased the debt at the significantly lower (yet still substantial) rate of \$400,000 (Gabbatt 2013). Thus, the group invested their funds into something that would not (and was never intended) to produce a return for the buyer. In other words, if government or social systems are not investing in their citizens' wellbeing, either financially or through the provision of healthcare, then, rather than encouraging individuals in financial debt to be resilient and overcome their difficulties, other better-off individuals can invest their own resources into removing the debt—thereby eliminating the original adversity once and for all.

I summarise James' use of the term melancholy here because it is integral to her concept of resilience. However, I will also explain why I do not intend to use the same kind of terminology in this chapter. Although James goes on to clarify that melancholy is not in direct opposition to or somehow outside of resilience (2015: 20), this claim is somewhat contradicted by the way resilience is set up as the norm which melancholic practices are then capable of subverting. While I agree that it is important to problematise resilience discourse (especially when deployed as an individualist solution that naturalises oppression), I also suggest that rather than giving in to a simple resilience/melancholy dichotomy, there are perhaps modes of

resilience that are not only useful but downright necessary to survival within both our own white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and in Collins' fictional totalitarian state. If Cecire is correct to assume that resilience is often the 'best deal on offer' (2015), then it makes sense to consider ways of performing resilience which acknowledge that systemic trauma is not (or should not be) natural and inevitable, but that it nevertheless currently constitutes the reality for many people. To do this, I introduce two models of agency that map onto and elucidate the types of resilience constructed by *The Hunger Games*. First, I integrate James' work with Elliott's to explain why instead of what James designates simply as 'resilience,' I choose to introduce the idea of 'suffering resilience.' Second, I use Ruti's (2017) model of defiant agency to explore how *The Hunger Games* constructs moments of 'defiant resilience.' This section will also begin to explain the relation between resilience and agency, something I shall return to in more detail in Chapter Six.

### **Suffering**

First, in order to explain why I develop the concept of suffering resilience, I return to and make use of Elliott's discussion of suffering agency. Arguing that the demand for subjects to embody and demonstrate agency has been exacerbated by rapidly increasing structural inequalities, Elliott offers an insight into the imperative toward cultivating an active, agentic subjectivity. Adopting the Foucauldian viewpoint that neoliberal governance works through the agency of subjects rather than against it, Elliott develops the term 'suffering agency' to describe the intertwining of agency, choice and domination (2013: 88) through which neoliberal paradigms are reinforced. Agency for Elliott is a utopian ideal: we strive to capture it in our daily lives and to embody it in our interactions on personal and institutional levels, yet its availability grows ever more diffuse. The type of agency Elliott describes counterintuitively as suffering recalls Berlant's notion of sovereignty as an inadequate fantasy (2011: 97). Both call into question the fraught nature of agency itself (what does it look or *feel* like?) and complicate the simplistic binary that would suggest agency is either a fully installed and measurable characteristic (we are completely free agents) or is entirely absent (we are simply victims of oppression). Elliott in particular interrogates the intrinsic value of agency as an

‘index of the political good’ (87). She argues that a subject’s capacity to act is imperative; therefore, rather than restricting agency, the scope of available choice is narrowed. The choices we make can be our own, and yet ‘still feel both imposed and appalling’ (84), meaning that agency can be clearly read and even experienced as agency, yet somehow becomes tantamount to self-inflicted subjugation. Elliott casts agency in its current incarnation as an elaborate neoliberal fiction, experienced as a suffocating trap rather than a clearly discernible—let alone fully graspable—form of power.

The characteristics of neoliberalised agency identified by Elliott are comparable to those of resilience discourse as outlined by James. For instance, the demand to perform resilience rises in line with increasing systemic inequalities. Resilience is understood as having intrinsic value, yet it hinges on a false sense of the subject’s sovereignty and can equally be experienced as a trap rather than empowerment or liberation. Elliott’s concept of suffering agency offers a deeper and more nuanced understanding of resilience discourse. What James describes is how neoliberal culture captures and warps resilience as our capacity to resolve suffering is transformed into a capacity to extract value from it. Neoliberal socio-economic policies and practices inflict suffering on populations, who are then encouraged to be resilient and capitalise on their trauma, thus accruing further value that upholds those same neoliberal policies. It is evident that, within a neoliberal model, both resilience and agency rely on suffering to create social value. James makes it clear that the imperative toward resilience naturalises contextually-specific forms of suffering (such as racism), constructing them as individual, rather than structural or social problems. This speaks to why I find suffering resilience a more useful conceptualisation in this chapter: it foregrounds that systemic oppression is what naturalises this contextual suffering, steering discussion away from resilience itself becoming the ‘problem’ to eliminate. If all subjects are formed by and within resilience discourse to varying degrees, it makes sense to consider not how we can somehow repeal our social training, but rather how we can use it in ways that allow us to preserve the benefits of our resilience rather than yield to it in ways that harm us.

## Defiance

This section explains Ruti's model of agency in order to develop a concept of defiant resilience. Working within a Lacanian framework (and also drawing on Slavoj Žižek's 2005 interpretation of Lacan), Ruti argues that:

even when we feel overwhelmed by the webs of power that surround us, we possess a degree of autonomy as long as we are willing to surrender our symbolic supports, as long as we are willing—even temporarily—to genuinely not give a damn about what is (socially) expected of us (2017: 45).

As Ruti explains, subjects are viable when they conform to dominant social expectation. Authentic autonomy, then, only arises when a subject is 'willing to honor its inner directive even at the risk of losing its social viability' (45). Being able to separate normative fantasies and ways of living from our own 'genuine' desires proves crucial to this formulation of agency but remains a task that Ruti admits is as challenging as it is necessary. If agency is enacted during moments when subjects risk their social viability (especially, though not only, on behalf of others), then accordingly any act of defiance that relies upon adhering to social expectation will eventually fail. Within this model, identifying and then following one's inner directive regardless of the expectations of the social order is key to defiant agency. Defiant resilience operates similarly, referring to moments in which individuals overcome or capitalise on trauma, but do so in ways that either risk their social viability, or oppose normative power structures. The concept of defiant resilience recognises the existence of contextual suffering and oppression, while at the same time acknowledging that survival often requires us to be resilient against these forms of trauma.

James is clear that when she refers to death, she means socially unviable or unproductive practices. However, because *The Hunger Games* works within the extreme genres identified by Berlant and Elliott, it establishes a narrative in which life and death are genuinely the stakes at play. Death in this context, then, becomes literal. In this respect, the trilogy can be read in relation to what Emily McAvan calls the 'tendency of postmodern texts to literalize metaphorical concepts' (2012: 35), exemplified by the critically acclaimed television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

(1997–2003) and its spin-off series *Angel* (1999–2004). In *Buffy*, ‘all the hidden feelings of high school’ (7.16 ‘Storyteller’ 2003) manifest literally as, for example, in the season one episode ‘Out of Mind, Out of Sight’ (1997: 1.11) in which a girl who feels ignored by her classmates eventually becomes invisible. This approach is likely to appeal to the demographics ‘expected to be most resilient,’ which James argues are ‘multi-cultural millennials, teen and college-aged girls’ (2015: 165). In literalising the stakes of life and death through the concept of the Hunger Games, Collins creates a society maintained and fuelled by death. The system relies upon the annual ritualised slaughter of 23 children. However, to keep the system running smoothly, a specific type of death is required, a death that provides entertainment value. To emphasise this, Collins designs the games in the style of a contemporary reality television series: from the lottery selection process to the interviews in which tributes are encouraged to win over the audience who will later ‘vote’ for them by sponsoring them in the arena. In this way, audience enjoyment is maximised through orchestrated media spectacle. The final tribute effectively symbolises ‘life,’ not only their own or that of the games, but the life of society in its entirety. As far as the remaining 23 contestants are concerned, their deaths create more social value than their survival. Literalising life and death explicitly foregrounds the workings of biopolitics, and how systems of power reproduce themselves through the deaths of some subjects that support the lives of others. Therefore, as James suggests, dying in the wrong way or at the wrong time has the capacity to upend this entire system, as the examples I read from the first novel will serve to demonstrate.

In this section, I analyse the climactic scene of the first novel, in which Katniss’ threat of death allows her (and Peeta) to live, thus constituting an act of defiant resilience that the Capitol cannot profit from. First, I briefly discuss the novel’s delineation between the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ kinds of death within the Hunger Games system. Katniss’ narration details that an arena within a barren landscape means that contestants are more likely to become environmental fatalities, dying of thirst or exposure rather than the brutality the Capitol audience are accustomed to. Within such an environment, the contestants are unable to create the desired social

value through actively killing one another and diminishing their precarious population. When ‘half of [the tributes] died of cold,’ there is evidently ‘not much entertainment in that’ (2008: 40); audience satisfaction is reduced and therefore the ‘health’ of the society declines in turn. Such ‘quiet, bloodless deaths’ (40) are not the affectively sensationalised type the Capitol is keen to promote because the same kind of value cannot be extracted for its regime of power. Along similar lines, Katniss narrates how, for example, ‘cannibalism doesn’t play well with the Capitol audience’ (142). Although ‘there are no rules in the arena’ (142), evidently a contestant who cannibalises his fellow tributes renders their deaths inviable, not ethically, but aesthetically. As these examples demonstrate, not all deaths create equal value within the given system.

In The Hunger Games system, social viability means producing the right kind of death (entertaining) or the right kind of life (as an exception). The first novel’s climax centres on Katniss using poisoned berries to stage a double suicide, an act that invokes entirely the wrong kind of death, as it removes the possibility of a winner to symbolise the life of the system. During the competition, a rule change announces that two contestants have the opportunity to win the games (and their lives) if they are from the same district. This prompts Katniss to ally with Peeta, and together they make it to the end of the games, where the rule change is subsequently rescinded. As part of the Hunger Games system, both Katniss and Peeta are each compelled to live—to privilege their own life above the other’s and for their victory to further sustain the Capitol’s rule. To yield to this imperative would mean acting in accordance with the desire of the social order by demonstrating how individual resilience can work to uphold the hegemonic power structure. Resilience becomes a sustaining force as it maintains the existing social environment. By contrast, Katniss is keenly aware of the power that resides in creating the wrong kind of spectacle, of dying in the wrong way, or at the wrong time:

Yes, they have to have a victor. Without a victor, the whole thing would blow up in the Gamemakers’ faces. They’d have failed the Capitol. Might possibly even be executed, slowly and painfully while the cameras broadcast

it to every screen in the country. If Peeta and I were both to die, or they thought we were . . . (2008: 338)

This scenario also constitutes an instance of suffering agency. Katniss is compelled to make a choice between two options (either kill Peeta and win the games, or sacrifice herself), both of which are ‘imposed and appalling’ (2013: 84). Instead, Katniss devises a third option, threatening to kill both Peeta and herself together by eating the poisoned berries, a narrative device demonstrating that one possible response to being compelled to resiliently live is to threaten death. Or, as Žižek puts it, ‘in a situation of the forced choice, the subject makes the “crazy,” impossible choice of, in a way, *striking at himself*, at what is most precious to himself (Butler *et al.* 2000: 122 original italics). Žižek is interested in how a ‘radical gesture’ (122) such as self-striking (including but not necessarily suicide) can constitute agency. Ruti explains this further, saying that ‘in such a scenario, the subject seeks to alter the basic coordinates of its predicament by destroying what it most values; it purchases its freedom at the cost of cutting itself off from what it holds most dear’ (2017: 49). This is precisely what the poisoned berries signify: the willingness to destroy her own life is what grants Katniss her freedom, which is to live, but more importantly to live on her own terms and to act in accordance with her inner directive, rather than operating solely and wholly within the conventions of the games. Most importantly, if Katniss and Peeta were indeed to commit suicide together, their deaths would in turn signify the death of the Hunger Games: the absence of a victor would expose a broken system. Rescinding the rule change is designed to force Katniss and Peeta to make an appalling decision, namely to perform agency (through the choice and act of killing the other) that feels like suffering rather than liberation, and to perform resilience (by becoming the sole victor who symbolises the life of the system) that naturalises that suffering.

This key scene illustrates why James’ concept of melancholy is not useful when analysing the types of resilience *The Hunger Games* is interested in. If melancholy is the failure to achieve the right amount or kinds of resilience, we can see that Katniss’ act of threatening suicide is certainly the wrong kind of resilience. However, she *is* performing resilience, and it is important to recognise this. Katniss’ heroism

stems from her resilience in this moment, manifesting as her defiance of the demand to suffer agency and her ability to transform her resilience into a spectacle the Capitol cannot extract value from. In capitalising on the threat of death, Katniss and Peeta are both able to live. The system continues but is fundamentally altered as Katniss' resilience does not create the right kind of life. What the audience will remember is not the continuation and life of the Hunger Games, but that two people were able to keep their lives, instead of one. The system's production of a sole victor has been exposed as an arbitrary construction. In gaming the system, Katniss manages to preserve the gains of her own defiant resilience rather than suffering resilience to create value for the Capitol. My analysis of this scene clarifies why Ruti's and Elliott's models of agency together are useful in making sense of the novels' understanding and construction of resilience, as they are not producing a melancholic subjectivity, nor advancing melancholy as a mode of resistance in the way posited by James. Certainly, Katniss goes 'into the death' (or threatens to), but this is not a melancholic act; it is a defiant one, as I have demonstrated. It is significant that Katniss is still produced as a resilient subject, one who uses and capitalises on her suffering—and that *how* she does so is important, as she turns a traumatic scene of suffering agency to her own advantage and disrupts the power structures that orchestrated her suffering in the first place.

This scene is also central to how the novel constructs the process of coming of age. In *The Hunger Games*, coming of age is not (only) about social inclusion, or the trajectory from girlhood to womanhood; rather, it is figured as simply managing to stay alive. As well, it is important that Katniss' coming of age is linked not to her entry into and acceptance within society, but her role in tearing down that society. Katniss' role as the instigator and figurehead of revolution recalls Ruti's observation that 'collective social mobilization relies on subjects who have the ability to stick to their desire in the face of the demand that they capitulate to the desire of the [social order]' (2017: 64). In this way, the novels suggest, much like Harris' concept of the future girl, that young women are perhaps particularly well-suited to this endeavour. If girls and women are trained in resilience discourse, as James outlines, then it makes sense that they might be uniquely equipped to use that training to act

in ways that defy the social order. *The Hunger Games* constructs its vision of girlhood in such a way to acknowledge that resilience is often necessary to surviving systemic oppression at the same time as advocating defiance against that oppression. Just as Katniss' mentor Haymitch reminds her to 'remember who the enemy is' (2009: 159), equally we also must not lose sight of the enemy, that is, the neoliberal policies and practices that produce and perpetuate oppression—and not resilience itself.

The example above explores the idea that individual resilience is capable of undermining rather than sustaining systems of power. I will now read a second key scene, the structural turning point of the first novel, which catalyses Katniss' heroism and her ability to perform defiant resilience in the berries scene. This second scene also highlights a form of unviable death, which in this case is that of Rue, Katniss' friend and ally in the first arena, who is brutally killed by a competitor. I use this scene in two ways. First, I explore the significance of Rue's death in developing Katniss' inner directive through her ability to seize control of the processes of interpretation and meaning-making. Second, I analyse Rue's character's narrative function in relation to the series' racial politics. Ordinarily, Rue's murder would be precisely the kind of gruesome drama the Capitol would exploit for its own ends. However, Katniss' response in honouring Rue by wreathing her body in flowers and concealing her wound serves to highlight Rue's humanity, a show of solidarity that once again creates the wrong kind of spectacle. Katniss (rightly) suspects that the Capitol will not wish to broadcast this act of care:

they'll have to show it. Or even if they choose to turn the cameras elsewhere at this moment, they'll have to bring them back when they collect the bodies and everyone will see her then and know that I did it (2008: 234).

The Capitol retains the ultimate power over whether Rue lives or dies; however, the novel constructs a moment in which Katniss is able to seize control over the interpretation of Rue's death. The generic conventions of the games dictate that each death is broadcast to generate maximum social value, which is a process that Katniss disrupts. Here, the novel emphasises the importance of seizing the means of production, and, for a fleeting moment, Katniss manages to shape the narrative

constructed by the Capitol. She transforms the signification of Rue's death into loss and mourning, dignity and care, rather than simply an ephemeral and entertaining spectacle. Thus, the novel demonstrates that although the government maintains its control over the fate of its citizens and Rue's death cannot be prevented, Katniss' actions preclude the Capitol from extracting value from it. In other words, although we cannot extricate ourselves from systems of power and domination, our actions within those systems still matter immensely. Here, we return to James' idea that timing and duration of death, while not exactly acts of resistance in the traditional sense, constitute a way of preserving some semblance of selfhood, an attempt at sovereignty even when denied autonomy. However, it is important to note here that *The Hunger Games* series does not afford all girls this semblance of sovereignty, the opportunity to die on their own terms and to create meaning. Instead, these opportunities cut across racial lines in both the novels and the films. It is therefore vital to examine the franchise's questionable racial politics.

Providing an incisive account of the post-racial politics at play in *The Hunger Games* films, Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Emily D. Ryalls (2014) critique the role Katniss plays as 'the person who gives Rue's death meaning' (2014: 402). Their argument that 'race is configured as irrelevant, while at the same time whiteness is centered'<sup>64</sup> (400) applies equally to the novels. Dubrofsky and Ryalls highlight how Rue, as a black character, serves the principal narrative function of 'innocent sacrifice' (401), a role which enables Katniss to shine as a 'great white saviour' (402).<sup>65</sup> In the berries example, Katniss threatens the wrong kind of death through defiant resilience. This scene is a little more difficult to classify. Katniss takes care of Rue in a non-resilient way, and therefore the scene can be read along the lines of

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<sup>64</sup> Katniss is described in the novels as having 'olive skin,' 'straight black hair' and 'gray eyes' (2008: 8). However, the casting of Jennifer Lawrence (a white, blonde, blue-eyed actress) in the film adaptations cements the popular conception of her as a white character. Iris Shepard and Ian Wojik-Andrews note that Lawrence's casting is typical of 'Hollywood-centric movies that employ white actors and actresses to play non-Caucasian roles' (2014: 197).

<sup>65</sup> For further analysis of the 'narcissistic fantasy' (2003: 33) of the white saviour in Hollywood films such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Mulligan 1962) and *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999), see Hernán Vera and Andrew M. Gordon's *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness* (2003). For further analysis of the white saviour in film see Bernardi 2007; Chennault 1996; Giroux 1997; Moore and Pierce 2007; Rodríguez 1997; Stoddard and Marcus 2006.

melancholy, the failure to capitalise in socially profitable ways rather than the defiant resilience Katniss performs later in the novel. Narratively, this moment is closer still to Rue's defiant agency, as Katniss acts, for the first time, in a way that does not conform to the conventions of her social environment. However, although Katniss' act of care means that value cannot be extracted from Rue's death, the novel's structure relies on it to spark the growth of its protagonist. As the focal character, Katniss drives the narrative, taking precedence over Rue as a secondary character, whose primary value stems from her death. In this way, Rue's death marks a structural turning point in which the death of a black child facilitates white self-knowledge and politicisation. In other words, black death fuels white resilience. James urges her readership to invest in minoritised populations, or those less able to practise resilience against contextual forms of trauma. In contrast, the novel invests in the inevitability of white resilience. While *The Hunger Games* makes considerable effort to construct a series in which female agency and desire drive the narrative, Rue's death scene demonstrates how such narrative agency is produced at the expense of black femininity. Katniss' heroism is produced through defiant acts of resilience in which trauma is overcome and capitalised upon. In turn, Rue's narrative role is as the trauma that catalyses the heroine's agency. In a sense, Rue's character function is death. *The Hunger Games* not only centres the formation of white feminine subjectivity, but also constructs white coming of age as reliant upon the sacrifice of black girlhood. The novel extracts value from this sacrifice, using it to develop the protagonist's inner directive, which I will now discuss in more detail.

Before Rue, Katniss' resilience is constructed in the way James describes, through her ability to take 'negatives' like growing up in extreme poverty and turn them into 'positive' traits in the arena. As she says herself, 'that the Careers have been better fed growing up is actually to their disadvantage, because they don't know how to be hungry. Not the way Rue and I do' (2008: 206). As this quotation indicates, Katniss' initial characterisation emphasises her capacity for resilience. She transforms childhood deprivation into resourcefulness; therefore, she is able to turn nothing into something (James 2015: 1). For much of the first novel, Katniss'

inner directive aligns with that of the social order; within the constraints of her world, survival is all that matters. In this sense, Katniss' desire is to survive the trauma inflicted upon her, and accordingly she starts off playing by the Capitol's rules unthinkingly, as alternative options do not occur to her.

Rue's death is the point at which Katniss develops her own inner directive and her desires shift out of alignment with those of the social order. Importantly, Katniss' shifting inner directive is the result of her social bonds and connectivity with others, namely Rue and Peeta, but also her experience of trauma and suffering inflicted during her time in the arena. *The Hunger Games* registers this shift affectively: her character is keenly aware that concealing negative emotion and managing affect will play better on camera. Panicking at an injury that leaves her temporarily deaf in one ear, she realises that 'I can't let my fear show. Absolutely, positively, I am live on every screen in Panem' (2008: 220). In this case, Katniss actively performs restraint, not in her own mind but in her facial expression, indicating that how she feels is irrelevant compared to whether she conforms to the Capitol's model of a valuable tribute, someone worth investing in. Katniss is determined to present as worthy of investment, and so she acts according to the rules of the Games. This is comparable to the ways in which most individuals act according to societal norms in order to earn, deserve and preserve a sense of social inclusion. Initially, there is no tension between the desires of the Capitol and Katniss' own desire to stay alive.

However, after Rue, Katniss' veneer of social acceptability begins to crack. Where previously her main priority had been 'the acquisition of food' (2008: 307), she now develops her own inner directive as she begins to behave in ways that demonstrate Ruti's observation that 'there are parts of our being that the [social] order tries to discipline but that it can never completely colonize' (2017: 48). For example, Katniss abandons her performance of strength and affective restraint for the cameras; instead, she grieves, noting that 'for several hours, I remain motionless,' having 'lost the will to do the simplest tasks' (2008: 237). In this instance, Katniss performs the 'wrong' affect, indicating that her focus on creating social value in exchange for her life has evaporated. In another example, Katniss finds that she is no longer

willing to perform romantic gestures in exchange for parcels of audience-sponsored food. Instead, she prioritises her privacy and integrity of self 'even if it means losing food' because, she says, "whatever I'm feeling, it's no one's business but mine' (293). In this way, Rue's death marks a structural narrative turn, the point at which Katniss finds she is no longer able to view the Hunger Games exclusively in terms of survival, and her own desires begin to take precedence. Under her emerging inner directive, Katniss is unable to reduce the games to life and death in the way that the social order encourages her to.

In contrast, Katniss' earlier characterisation as a calculating cost/benefit analyst is summed up in her exchange with Peeta the night before they enter the arena.<sup>66</sup> Katniss struggles to understand Peeta when he tells her, 'I want to die as myself. Does that make any sense? [...] I don't want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I'm not' (2008: 140). Collins illustrates here how Katniss has little use for anything that has no impact on her immediate present survival, as she tells Peeta to focus on 'staying alive' (140). After Rue, Katniss finally understands Peeta's desire to 'maintain his identity. His purity of self' (140). This shift in Katniss' characterisation is the point at which she becomes aware of the power of symbolism, and of ideology. Wreathing Rue's body in flowers does not alter either Rue's or Katniss' own material circumstances in any tangible way. Katniss remains trapped in a system not of her own making in which she will have to fight to kill in order to win. As such, Katniss' politicisation shows her that there are actions she can take within the framework of the games to broadcast the idea that Rue is a person, and her death is not entertainment. Overall, Rue's death marks the point at which Katniss' resilience shifts from suffering to defiant. She continues to overcome her trauma, to turn weaknesses into strengths, but in ways that those in power cannot extract value from. It is the development of Katniss' inner directive (that is, her capacity to act according to her own desires) that enables her to redirect resilience in this way. Moreover, that the development of

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<sup>66</sup> The simultaneous present-tense narration constructs Katniss' characterisation as someone 'boxed in the present' (Jauss 2011: 100), which corresponds to her survivalist attitude as she is most concerned with her material present, that is, how things are in the here and now.

Katniss' inner directive and defiant agency are produced through suffering suggests that, from a narrative perspective, trauma is essential to the construction of a resilient character.

### Structure

I have analysed how *The Hunger Games* constructs forms of suffering and defiant resilience through its narrative and characterisation. This section considers the relationship between trauma and resilience in the trilogy's narrative structure. To do so, I draw on Katheryn Wright's (2016) analysis of *The Hunger Games* in relation to Joseph Campbell's influential arguments regarding the hero archetype and the mythic structure of the hero's journey.<sup>67</sup> Wright finds that although it is certainly possible to interpret Katniss' character arc according to Campbell's monomyth, such a reading ultimately downplays her unique heroism and does her character a disservice (2016: 10). Instead, Wright defines Katniss as a 'new heroine' (3), by which she means an 'emergent subjectivity rather than as a universalising archetype' (16). As Wright argues, the monomyth works to 'normalize one particular coming-of-age storyline, a narrative belonging to a heterosexual, male-identified body, a single version of the hero's journey' (11). In essence, the monomyth amplifies the socially valuable qualities of masculinity during the mid-twentieth century. Consequently, the conquest of obstacles and the mastery of a world inhabited by male heroes become firmly rooted within the narrative structure of the hero's journey. As a historically specific structure, the monomyth produces male characters as heroes. In this light, Wright seeks to 'explain why a character like Katniss is considered heroic in the historical context in which she is a part' (11) since 'the traits and qualities that define heroism align with the cultural values of a time and place' (15). Wright identifies the potential to use a unique set of skills, a capacity 'to "heal" rather than to "master" the narrative world' (14) in addition to the heroine's ability to connect with other people, her environment and the technology available to her (16). Much like the monomyth, the new heroine's

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<sup>67</sup> While Campbell's monomyth is outlined in greater detail in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), broadly speaking it comprises three stages, 'separation—initiation—return' (1949: 23), in which the hero must depart from their ordinary life, face trials and defeat obstacles, before finally returning home and re-integrating within their community.

story amplifies the socially valuable qualities of femininity in our contemporary moment, which in turn crystallise in narrative structure. Having identified resilience that manifests in spectacles of overcoming suffering as a particular socially valuable quality for female subjects to possess, I now consider the extent to which resilience discourse is rooted in the narrative structure of *The Hunger Games*. To do so, I rely on James' observation that intensification is 'the underlying logic of resilience discourse' (2015: 46). To support her argument, James draws on Jeffrey Nealon, who explains that 'in a world that contains no "new" territory—no new experiences, no new markets—any system that seeks to expand must by definition *intensify* its existing resources, modulate them in some way' (Nealon 2007: 63 original italics). James' analysis of musical patterns and song structure finds that there are 'different tactical approaches to the same underlying strategy of building and exacerbating sonic and affective tension' (2015: 29). Similarly, I will concentrate on how Collins consolidates narrative tension through an intensification of trauma.

The trilogy is traditional in its overall structure, with each instalment organised strictly into three acts. When we are introduced to Katniss, her everyday world mirrors a state of 'crisis ordinariness' (Berlant 2011: 10), which means that her trauma is entirely routine. Collins uses the first chapter to lay the foundations of Katniss' world, living under near-constant surveillance in the confines of her district, which is described as a place 'where you can starve to death in safety' (2008: 7). What this introduction indicates is that the novel's point of departure, in which Katniss volunteers for the Hunger Games to spare her beloved younger sister, is not the incitement of Katniss' trauma. Katniss' character trajectory, then, is not from a relatively 'undamaged' state to a 'damaged' one; rather, her a priori damage is intensified. In this way, the narrative ratchets up the tension and trauma in its second act, as Katniss' experiences in the arena are where the most damage is inflicted, primarily through the death of Rue, as I have already shown. Accordingly, the damage perpetrated in the first book sets up the newly intensified status quo of everyday crisis in which the second novel begins.

*Catching Fire* repeats the same basic narrative formula as the first novel, as Katniss enters a second Hunger Games arena and faces new and more appalling horrors. The basic structure of the trilogy follows a trajectory of everyday crisis, an intensified trauma, which in turn intensifies the state of everyday crisis, a re-intensified trauma, which in turn re-intensifies the everyday crisis, and so on. Structural analysis indicates that *The Hunger Games* relies on an intensified model of continually inflicting and overcoming damage. However, for a discussion about the narrative structure of resilience, the trilogy's conclusion and epilogue are important factors to take into account as well, as they can both complicate and shed light on the function that the infliction of such extraordinary trauma serves. As Katniss is the focal character, whether or not her trauma is superficially 'healed' or not is key. On the one hand, the concluding chapter, in which Katniss returns home after the war and slowly learns to cope with its aftermath, includes several things that might suggest healing. For one, Collins concludes by resolving the series' love triangle, reuniting Katniss and Peeta because he symbolises 'rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again' (2010: 371). Narratively, a reader is likely to desire a hopeful ending for Katniss, and in terms of a resilient reading experience, the conclusion indeed appears to deliver.

However, the epilogue, which reveals a glimpse of Katniss and Peeta's life twenty years later, complicates this understanding of 'rebirth' and 'destruction,' or life and death. At first glance, it appears that Collins uses the epilogue to cement the idea of rebirth by writing an incongruous pastoral scene of Katniss watching her children play in a meadow. Susan S. M. Tan analyses the epilogue's 'invocation of childhood innocence' (2014: 29), initially by engaging with its reception in both online reviews and critical discourse. Both sources, Tan notes, point to a frustrated reader response (30) to the trilogy's epilogue, and that such an ostensibly happy ending rings false, given the prior narrative events. Tan quotes Katherine R. Broad, who argues that in the end, 'Katniss' rebellion serves to keep her an appropriately gendered, reproductive, and ultimately docile subject' (2013: 125 in Tan 2014: 30), a reading that certainly echoes my own response upon reading the trilogy for the first time.

However, while I do not wish to entirely dismiss Broad's analysis of the series' gender politics, Tan presents a compelling argument that 'Katniss' nameless, faceless offspring, who should suggest the continuation of life, point instead to its continual potential for disruption' (30). Drawing on Tan's analysis, I examine the epilogue as a discrete element of the text, with an internal structure of its own, which completes the overall structure of the trilogy itself.

The epilogue follows a sequence of life and death referents that read as point and counterpoint. For instance, the opening description of Katniss' children playing invokes the 'happily ever after' ending of a typical romance narrative. Yet this evocation of life and futurity is promptly undermined by Katniss' admission that 'it took five, ten, fifteen years for me to agree. But Peeta wanted them so badly' (2010: 372). This reinforces Collins' early establishment of Katniss' strong aversion to having children (2008: 10), as even winning the Hunger Games would not ensure her children's exclusion from them (2008: 307). The reader is made conscious that such a domestic outcome is not necessarily one that Katniss herself desires, an awareness that disturbs a reading of reproductive fulfilment in the opening sentence. Collins goes on to explain how the joy Katniss feels at the birth of her child does not erase the abject terror of pregnancy. Neither does that joy prevent the unease of carrying the next child, which is described as 'a little easier, but not much' (2010: 372). This tension between the pleasure and horror of the continuation of life, the epilogue suggests, cannot be easily resolved. Indeed, it reads more as if Katniss acquiesces to the continuation of life instead of instigating and looking forward to her own future.

The next paragraph continues the sequence. Although the Hunger Games have been abolished, the arenas torn down with memorials built in their place, Katniss worries how to 'tell [her children] about that world without frightening them to death?' (2010: 372). A societal structure fuelled by children's death is eliminated so that a society predicated on the flourishing of its citizens might grow. This indicates the triumph of life over death, yet Katniss' worries suggest that the legacy of death will always remain, as the past bleeds into the present. Collins then duplicates the

opening stanza of the lullaby Katniss sings to Rue as she is dying in the first novel. Lyrically, the lullaby invokes the natural imagery of a green meadow, in which children are protected from the kinds of danger Katniss has encountered. At the outset, this use of repetition recalls the turning point of the series, in which Katniss' politicisation shifts her understanding of the world. At the same time, the song's inclusion further accentuates the uneasy co-existence of life and death, neither's presence revoking the other. Tan examines Rue's death in terms of the opposition between child and adult in the series. As Tan points out, although Katniss herself as an adolescent already complicates such a binary, the label 'child' is never applied directly to her character. Rather, it is Katniss' sister Prim, and her ally in the arena, Rue, who are most closely associated with a 'Romantic, traditional vision [...] of childhood, each standing as a figure closely aligned with the natural world' (2014: 32). Tan's analysis further explores the 'slippage of signification' through scenes in the series 'where to "read" the signifier of "child" which should yield "Prim" in fact evokes "Rue," and even further, Rue in the moment of death' (34). This fundamental altering of 'child' as a signifier as it becomes yoked to 'death' further troubles a reading of the epilogue as a happy, carefree conclusion to Katniss' story. Collins herself emphasises this shift in signification when she notes that although Katniss' children may anticipate the security and love promised by the song as a matter of course, they also 'don't know they play on a graveyard' (2010: 372). Tan observes that the equation of death with the space of the meadow, which has in fact 'become Rue's grave' in the first novel, 'prefiguring the actual graveyard which Katniss' children will play in later in the trilogy's epilogue' (2014: 33). The safety of Katniss' children, then, is always shadowed by Rue's death, the spectre of which recurs frequently throughout the trilogy.

In the penultimate paragraph, life is once again invoked: 'Peeta says it will be okay' (2010: 373). However, Katniss' recurring nightmares suggest otherwise. The concluding paragraph begins with Katniss narrating that 'I'll tell them how I survive it,' something she can do for her children to 'make them braver' (373), suggesting that Katniss' resilience might benefit her children, if not herself. The present tense here is significant: Katniss is surviving 'it,' the games, and the war, every day. Collins

could have chosen to write 'I'll tell them how I survived it' (373) in the historical present tense, rendering those events firmly in the past. Using historical present tense here would indicate the events of the trilogy as something Katniss has endured and overcome. Instead, the language use makes it clear that Katniss' survival is ongoing, that it, like her nightmares, 'won't ever really go away' (373). This is further emphasised by the 'game' played for over twenty years, in which listing the acts of goodness she has witnessed helps to cope with the 'bad mornings' in which she cannot enjoy the present without fear 'it could be taken away' (373). The trilogy concludes by reminding the reader in its final line that 'there are much worse games to play' (373). The quotation recalls the past horror of games, while suggesting that the present is only a marginal improvement. The management of trauma may not be as harmful as the trauma itself, and Katniss' present may be preferable to her past, yet that does not make her present 'good' either. In this way, 'life' and 'death' settle uneasily together in the epilogue and nowhere more so than its final line. Ultimately, the line 'there are much worse games to play' (373) signifies a double referent, the co-existence of life and death, recalling a past without invoking the possibility of a future.

To conclude, I return to the discussion of the epilogue's gender politics and consider how it reflects on my earlier analyses of *Gone Girl* and *Girls*. Like Broad, I remain frustrated with the trilogy's conclusion, which presents traditional markers of narrative closure for femininity through marriage and motherhood. Although characterising Katniss as ambivalent toward her fate significantly complicates the notion of closure in this instance, it nevertheless appears to be presented as the 'best deal on offer' (Cecire 2015: n.p). It is important to note that *The Hunger Games* is one of three texts analysed in this thesis that concludes with motherhood (*Girls*) and marriage (*Gone Girl*). Although working across vastly different genres, this synchronicity indicates the enduring power of traditionally feminine ways of living. Even when produced as profoundly frustrating (*Gone Girl*) or quietly unsettling (*The Hunger Games*), marriage remains the primary device through which their narrative arcs are finalised. Similarly, *Girls* uses motherhood as the ultimate signifier of Hannah's coming-of-age accomplishment, suggesting that

regardless of how satisfying (or not) the traditionally feminine edition of the good life is, our cultural imagination remains limited when it comes to a sense of what constitutes closure for women's stories.<sup>68</sup>

The epilogue is notable in its refusal to overwrite the damage inflicted over the course of the trilogy. The implication appears to be that, yes, a future generation will be afforded more opportunities to thrive. However, this sets a very low bar in which a 'better' future means any world in which children are not forced to murder one another for entertainment. This is scarcely a conclusion that suggests an upbeat erasure of trauma that one might have initially inferred from such a domestic ending, usually interpreted as the forfeiture of female agency. My analysis of the epilogue indicates that, in terms of resilience, Collins has indeed structured the series by inflicting ever-increasing trauma on her protagonist; however, rather than promote superficial healing attained through uncomplicated narrative closure, the epilogue instead explores the persistence of trauma that cannot be simply overcome. *The Hunger Games* trilogy, then, exacts trauma, although not in the service of presenting a unified self whose goal it is to overcome trauma in socially profitable ways. However, while the narrative does not correspond precisely to James' pattern of damage-resilience-healing, it nevertheless creates a narrative space in which feminine subjectivity is produced through a cycle of suffering and resilience, regardless of whether its protagonist's personal suffering is overcome or, as the epilogue suggests, endures in her everyday life. Girlhood in this series is imagined as an ongoing struggle to stay alive, and its coming-of-age narrative produces a female subject whose heroism is derived from profound trauma. This discussion paves the way for the following chapter, which continues to examine the resonances between resilience, young women's subjectivity, and the coming-of-age narrative.

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<sup>68</sup> In *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (1985), Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that once women collectively confront gendered social norms, quest narratives might cease to imagine all women's narratives ending in marriage or death (1985: 4).

## Chapter Five: Relationality and Transformation in *Girlhood* (2014)

Contemporary French coming-of-age film *Bande de Filles/Girlhood* operates according to a distinct set of generic conventions as compared to *The Hunger Games*' sensational futuristic narrative, yet the two share a heightened focus on the identity formation of young female subjects as characterised by modes of resilience. Chapter Four established the resilience paradigm as a newly conventionalised femininity, using *The Hunger Games* to illustrate how resilience works at the level of world-building, plot and narrative structure. Key to my reading of *The Hunger Games* is the understanding that Katniss' character must first endure trauma and suffering in order for her to defiantly overcome it by strategically risking her social viability. By contrast, although *Girlhood*'s protagonist, Marieme, overcomes obstacles and adversity, her character primarily does so through what I will define as transformative and relational modes of resilience. Chapter Five therefore provides an alternative perspective on the established framework by investigating contextually-specific modes of resilience. Through analysis of key scenes and the film's transitional structure, I differentiate between a transformative mode of resilience generated in service of dominant hierarchies of power, and an intersubjective or relational resilience produced in the service of affirming girlhood itself.

Before I briefly compare *The Hunger Games* and *Girlhood*, it should be noted that I have thus far focused primarily on girls and women in American culture, although Chapter Six will also concentrate on an example drawn from British cinema. In this way, the thesis aligns with what Handyside and Taylor-Jones term a 'tendency to look only at Anglo-American cultural production in its assessment of contemporary girlhood on screen' (2016: 9). They also point out that in a globalised cultural economy, it is essential to look beyond this dominant British and North American context in order to give 'a more complex account of girl film culture' (9). This chapter is therefore significant, as it departs from the Anglo-American perspective and makes a French film the primary object of analysis. This not only widens the scope of the discussion on girlhood in contemporary cinema, as Handyside and

Taylor-Jones suggest, but also demonstrates the expansive globalising reach of resilience discourse across national contexts.

Notably, while *Girlhood* is firmly rooted in a French context in terms of both cinematic tradition and the spatial-geographic focus of the film, its audio-visual construction of girlhood also works in a distinctly transnational register. One example is Sciamma's use of Rihanna's song 'Diamonds' to score the pivotal dancing scene. As Lisa Jansen and Michael Westphal observe, Rihanna's cultural production has a global appeal and is circulated worldwide in a way that transcends 'national and social boundaries' (2017: 46). Along similar lines, Higbee notes that this kind of music 'is avidly consumed by a global youth audience' that is 'as much white and middle-class as it is black and *banlieusard*' (2018: 170). What I find especially interesting here is the way that transnational global youth culture becomes the primary mechanism of the girls' (temporary) escape from their everyday lives. The film therefore exploits the aspirational appeal of a pop star like Rihanna, which lies, at least partially, in the universalising fantasy of freedom from national boundaries.

Although both *The Hunger Games* and *Girlhood* work within models of resilience to varying degrees, a brief comparison of their modes of address and approach to the production of meaning will clarify their differing approaches to constructing girlhood. The role transformation plays in each text is especially important. As discussed in Chapter Two, transformation is central to the postfeminist paradigm and the coming-of-age narrative which often constructs change or epiphany as the key to emancipation or completion of identity. For example, Rue's death scene in *The Hunger Games* is the fundamental transformative moment, changing Katniss' perception of the world and inciting her to take action within her harshly limited circumstances. The events of this scene prove vital to Katniss' coming-of-age arc, marking the activation of a political consciousness that enables her to defy and play a pivotal role in abolishing her tyrannical social order. This scene is further illuminated by Huehls' interest in and differentiation between:

those authors who replace representational forms of meaning-making, which use referential language to depict, reflect, or say something about the world, with more ontological forms of meaning-making, which derive value from the configuration and interrelation of beings, human or otherwise (2016: xii).

Within this framework, Collins' first-person style of narration and Rue's death scene demonstrate two primary ways the trilogy prioritises the representational form of meaning-making that Huehls identifies here. First, the transformative moment that marks Katniss' ideological shift transpires through representational forms of meaning-making, as Katniss proves able to seize some semblance of control over the referential interpretation of Rue's death, using symbolism to make it signify differently, despite (and because of) the tightly controlled system she must operate within. Second, the novels' mode of address is vital here, as the first-person narration provides us with insight into Katniss' interiority; the reader is offered direct access to her transition from calculating cost/benefit analyst to the figurehead of a revolution. In this sense, the series' production of meaning, subjectivity and coming-of-age all rely on a representational politics. What this demonstrates is that *The Hunger Games* operates on the assumption that Katniss' beliefs must change so that she can change her world, suggesting that social reformation is predicated on the transformation of individual subjectivity.

Structured around its protagonist's central moments of self-reinvention, *Girlhood* at first appears to adhere to a similar trajectory. However, where *The Hunger Games* uses first-person narration to provide insight to the interiority of girlhood and to chart the politicisation and subsequent identity formation of its protagonist, *Girlhood's* transformations are motivated by survival and access to different ways of living and forms of social inclusion, rather than the traditional identity-formation typical in coming-of-age genres. *Girlhood* is far less interested in providing audioviewers<sup>69</sup> with access to Marieme's inner world. In fact, as I will go on to

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<sup>69</sup> In this chapter I use the term 'audioviewer' (Chion 1994: 56) in place of spectator, following Colling who stresses the importance of finding frameworks and vocabulary that 'equalize the sensorial aspects of the film experience' (2017: 15). I find, as Colling does, that 'the term spectator seems inadequate' (15) when addressing the relationship between sound and image, as this chapter

explain, rather than constructing a sense of unmediated access to girls' subjectivity, the film often distances us from Marieme's character during significant moments when we might typically expect to be afforded insight in her emotions or interiority. Hence Huehls' definition of an ontological form of meaning-production appears to make a more useful reference point in this context. Huehls suggests that 'ontology is meaningful because of the way beings exist in relation to each other and to larger assemblages of beings' (xii). In this way, *Girlhood's* imaginary of the girl coming-of-age manifests as a process characterised by connections and interactions, primarily among girls, as well as their spatial relations to sociality.

As I will clarify in further detail, *Girlhood* is very much concerned with the conditions of possibility that arise from interactions, change, encounters with and occupations of space. At the same time, the primary ways the film produces meaning are through its vibrant colour palette and effervescent music sequences, as well as through narrative and structural moments of transformation. *Girlhood's* narrative charts 16-year-old Marieme's transformation into the self-assured Vic ('for Victory')<sup>70</sup> over three significant periods of her life. Through its four transitional sequences, which signal epiphanies, turning points or opportunities for reinvention, the film produces Marieme's coming of age visually through striking use of costuming, and aurally through French composer Para One's evocative electronic score. As Marieme chooses different paths, she assumes and performs different identities. In this way, the film structurally links transition (movement from one position to another) and transformation (a change in form or appearance). Max Thornton observes that *Girlhood* 'lack[s] full structural coherence' because 'growing up, after all is not a tightly-plotted three-act hero's journey with clear turning points, tidy linear progression through the successive stages of personal development, and a satisfying ending' (*Bitch Flicks* 2012). What

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in particular does. See also Vivian Sobchak's article 'Fleshing Out the Image: Phenomenology, Pedagogy, and Derek Jarman's "Blue"' (2012) which discusses the tendency within film analysis to prioritise visual aspects of cinema over sound design or music (2012: 25).

<sup>70</sup> Ginette Vincendeau suggests Vic's name is 'a reference to the Sophie Marceau character in the 1980 classic French teen film *The Party (La Boum, Claude Pinoteau)*' and quotes Sciamma as saying that since the original Vic 'was the French little fiancée of the 1980s,' the objective was to find her contemporary counterpart (*Sight and Sound* 2015: 27).

this suggests is that director Céline Sciamma's filmmaking is attuned to the intensities and indeterminacies that are fundamental to coming-of-age.

Handyside explores the connections between emotion, girlhood coming-of-age and music in Sciamma's first feature film *Naissance des pieuvres/Water Lilies* (2007) and Mia Hansen-Løve's *Un amour de jeunesse/Goodbye First Love* (2011). Featuring teenaged girl protagonists, both films use music as a 'vector of meaning and affect' to 'give form and expression to girls' emotions' (2016: 121) during their first experiences of love and heartbreak. Handyside explains that in both films:

the music is outside of the girls' worlds, usually non-diegetic, and is not the literal expression of their voice. Rather, it is a disembodied, non-identical expression of their feelings, and thus a paradox can be maintained, whereby the films simultaneously offer us insight into the heightened, disoriented sensations of the girls' encounters with intimacy, but allow the girls to retain their opacity and privacy (2016: 121).

Here, Handyside suggests that non-diegetic music is the primary method of providing insight into the characters. It is important to note that Handyside does not propose that music offers access to the interiority or subjective worlds of the protagonists; rather, it is their 'encounters with intimacy' that are of central concern. This phrasing prioritises the encounter, or the associations, relations and forms of contact girls create and experience in the world. At the same time, the music provides freedom from scrutiny, and relief from the tendency toward attributing and fixing meaning. Music therefore affords insight while also concealing information, suggesting that perhaps we do not require intimate knowledge of a character's interior world in order for our attention to hold. In her analysis of *Girlhood*, Isabelle McNeill draws on Handyside to argue that, along similar lines, 'Para One's score thus harnesses the potential of extra- diegetic music to be both narratively significant [...] and yet indeterminate [...], allowing the girls and their lives to affect us while retaining the "opacity" that Handyside identifies in *Naissance des pieuvres*' (2017: 5). Similarly, *Girlhood's* project is not in deciphering or revealing the meaning of girlhood or attempting to define and represent descriptive categories such as 'black girlhood' or 'French girlhood.' This is not to suggest that its fiction bears little or no relation to our own world, but rather that

the film's aesthetic qualities signal that its interest does not lie in an attempt to represent or communicate the 'reality' of French black youth culture and, more specifically, the world of black girls growing up in the Parisian banlieue.<sup>71</sup> Instead, the film charts Marieme's transformations, and maps out the types of spaces and forms of sociality that she gains access to as a result. In doing so, *Girlhood* therefore constructs (one) way of being a girl.

### **Relational Resilience**

This section focuses on how the film constructs relational resilience through two key scenes, both of which operate in what Julia Dobson describes as an 'avowedly non-realist, performative mode' (2017: 40). In Chapter Four, I discussed and delineated between suffering and defiant resilience, both of which are predicated on a subject's social viability. For example, both involve overcoming socially inflicted (or as Ruti might say, circumstantial) trauma; where the purpose of the former is to gain social capital, the latter risks that capital. By contrast, relational resilience is characterised by our social bonds and connections with others. In other words, it manifests in moments or circumstances in which we derive the capacity to overcome (or at the very least withstand) trauma through our relational ties. To clarify this concept in more depth, I will first briefly analyse the film's anthemic opening scene of a brightly lit and tightly shot American football game before examining in further detail the scene in which Marieme and her friends dance to Rihanna's 'Diamonds.' As Dobson suggests, the banlieue is the film's primary setting, yet 'these two stylised scenes remain at the very centre of the affective and sensual mappings of the film, creating an overwhelming impact on the spectator

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<sup>71</sup> *Girlhood* is also contextualised within the banlieue film genre (Vincendeau 2015). Will Higbee explains that although 'technically the French word *banlieue* signifies "suburbs," it is an extremely loaded term in its contemporary socio-cultural context' as it typically refers to working-class housing projects 'dominated by violence, unemployment, criminality, social exclusion and populated by alienated male youth' (2007: 38). As Vincendeau notes, the Parisian banlieue, home to communities of first and second-generation immigrants, are 'central to narratives of multicultural France' (*Sight and Sound* 2015). Although a number of banlieue films were released in 1995, such as *État des lieux* (*Inner City*, Richet 1995) and *Douce France* (Chibane 1995), *La Haine* (Kassovitz 1995) remains the chief point of reference, achieving a markedly high critical and commercial profile, praised for its examination of social stratification and its distinctive visual style. For an in-depth examination of *La Haine* see Vincendeau, *La Haine: French Film Guide* (2005). For wider discussion of the 'banlieue film' genre, see Higbee (2007).

that overwrites other spatial exclusions' (2017: 40). It is no coincidence that the two scenes with the greatest affective impact are also those affirming the collective power of girlhood relationality. In each scene, the film works formally to reproduce the affective impact of girls' collective potency. Thus, in *Girlhood's* opening scene, vivid colour, slow motion and the powerful rhythm of Light Asylum's fiercely cathartic track 'Dark Allies' unite to create an intensely heightened and kinetic sequence invoking the physicality and collective team spirit of girlhood.

It is worth noting that prior to introducing its protagonist, the film emphasises the complex dynamics and connections between the girls on the field. The football game can be understood as a form of organised social opposition, rehearsing conflict designed to be resolved within set boundaries and structures. However, the relative security of the training ground does not endure for long. Immediately following the football game, Sciamma makes effective use of space and sound to articulate a sense of the structural hierarchies that encapsulate the film. As the stadium lights are extinguished, the bold image of the two teams celebrating as they chant and cheer is cut to darkness. The camera follows the girls through their neighbourhood, the excited post-game conversation collectively dominating the soundscape, until they abruptly fall silent. Although the girls continue to dominate the screen visually, gradually two or three male figures come into view in the background of the frame. Despite their relatively insignificant presence onscreen, Sciamma makes it clear that all it takes to silence a large group of physically strong, athletic girls is the presence of a much smaller number of the neighbourhood boys. Visually foreshadowing the trajectory of the film, the groups break apart until Marieme finds herself walking alone. This opening sequence provides an effective summary of the postfeminist dilemma in which feminine/feminist energies are dispersed by the persistence of patriarchy. The freely assertive fantasy occupied by the girls in the football training ground, a traditionally masculine space, is quickly eclipsed by an oppressive reality dominated by masculinity, allowing no room for female self-expression.

While the opening scene emphasises the anonymous collectivity of the football team, the Diamonds sequence<sup>72</sup> focuses on the relationship between Marieme and her newfound friends (Lady, Adiatou and Fily). Their friendship is central to the film as a whole, but particularly the second act, which concentrates on the interplay between Marieme's individual subjectivity and the intersubjectivity she experiences through becoming a member of the group. It is during this second act that Marieme's transformation into Vic is set in motion. The girls plan a party in a Paris hotel room, where they try on their glamorous shoplifted dresses (security tags intact), smoke, drink and dance to Rihanna's electro-pop ballad 'Diamonds.' Much of the film's action takes place in the public spaces of the banlieue or central Paris shopping district, but as the film's opening sequence conveys, these communal spaces do not belong to the girls. Instead, the intimacies of their friendship are played out in a hotel room; the only privacy they can hope to attain is in a space they have rented for the night. When renting a hotel room, there is a reliability to the prescribed rules for interacting with a space (for example, in the expectation of specific times for checking in and out) which contrasts with the inherent instability of gaining access to a space for a restricted period of time. As a stage for intimacy and friendship, the hotel room invokes the sense that their freedom is on loan, creating a visceral awareness that there is an expiration date attached to their shared strength and happiness. This sense of uncertainty is part of how Sciamma generates tension in the film, creating apprehension about the direction taken by Marieme's story, as her world is in constant flux, and nothing seems to offer any security or permanence.

As well, Marc Augé's coining of the term 'non-place' to describe transient spaces like hotels, airports or supermarkets is significant to how girlhood is constructed in this instance as a liminal space, one that is slipping from Marieme's grasp. Such spaces, Augé explains, 'cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity' (1995: 77–8). A non-place, then, is primarily characterised by its anonymity; it is decontextualized from the specificities of any particular social

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<sup>72</sup> For clarification, I use single quotation marks to refer to Rihanna's song 'Diamonds' and omit them when referring to the Diamonds sequence in *Girlhood*.

conditions. As such, according to Augé, social connection or identity formation is unlikely to thrive in a non-place. Nonetheless, in *Girlhood*, the hotel room proves crucial to both Marieme's intensifying connection to her friends, and their formation of both group and individual identities. Perhaps the ahistorical nature of the non-space is even what helps to cultivate the girls' growing connection with one another. Moreover, what Augé describes as 'places for living' [...] where individual itineraries can intersect and mingle' (66–7), are, if not entirely off-limits to the girls, most certainly hostile to their presence. By setting the Diamonds sequence in a hotel room, Sciamma illustrates how the girls must resort to finding their freedom in a nondescript non-place. On the one hand, this may seem an essentially desolate situation, in which the four girls are so constricted by their social environment that they must rent an anonymous space in which to dance, drink and flourish, and only for one night. On the other hand, Sciamma's chosen setting can be read as an appropriation of space, celebrating how the girls' occupation of the hotel room transforms non-place into place, where organic feminine sociality can thrive. As Augé notes, 'a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants' (103). This relief from their everyday may in fact be exactly what Marieme and her friends are in need of: freedom from the weight of their social histories and daily environment.

After all, as Dobson points out, 'the domestic, familial space is seen, not as a space of retreat, but as [a] problematic site of an oppressive policing of girls' appearance and behaviour' (2017: 39). The sequence therefore speaks to the urgency of their need for a space in which they can truly relax, express their affection for one another and the pleasure they take in one another's company. Indeed, the time spent in the hotel room is the only part of the film in which all four are able to take reprieve from the restraints placed on them by their masculine-oriented social environment. As highlighted by the opening scene, finding her voice is crucial to Marieme's trajectory. Sciamma includes a quiet shot of the hotel hallway, as the girls walk towards their room. The four are positioned centrally in the frame; however, the use of a long shot renders them small in the screen. Although we can see that they are laughing and chatting, their voices can barely be heard, diluted by

the generic hotel soundtrack (thus rendering this scene a clear parallel to the opening scene in the banlieue). Yet, as soon as the door is opened, their voices ring out loudly, in excitement and anticipation of the night ahead. A quick cut follows, showing the four of them, immediately playful and relaxed, as Marieme dives onto the bed to join her friends. Their raucous delight is in direct opposition to their much quieter demeanour in the hallway. This transition from quiet to loud not only recalls but reverses the opening sequence's transition as the large group of girls are silenced by the presence of the boys. It also emphasises their need for a room of their own, in which they can partake in the everyday pleasures to be found in eating, drinking and dancing together, as well as the ability to laugh and talk without censure.

### **The Audiovisual Soar**

Much like the opening sequence, the editing and composition of the Diamonds sequence is typical of the group-individual dynamic seen throughout the film. For instance, when characters are alone in the frame, they command the centre screen, taking up space and demanding our attention. The sequence begins with a radiant close-up of Lady as she lip-syncs the opening lyrics of the song. Yet equally, the dynamic fast-paced camera movement and editing remind us that the girls are never far from one another. As the first verse begins, the camera pans back to a medium close-up that accommodates Adiatou's presence. The film's editing here, transitioning to a spare, balanced two-shot, as the two join hands, fluidly dancing and twirling, shows that when two characters occupy a frame, they truly share the space. The sequence continues in tight close-ups, as their bodies shift in and out of the frame. Aligning and realigning with one another, they become almost indistinguishable from one another. However, Sciamma does not allow their bodies or their identities to merge, using close-ups of their faces to convey that although they are interconnected, they are not interchangeable.

With this context of the sequence in mind, I will shift focus to its structure, using James' analysis of 'Diamonds' to explore how Sciamma uses visual and aural

techniques to adapt the song for her own purposes.<sup>73</sup> James uses ‘Diamonds’ as an example of what she terms a melancholic practice, capable of undermining our expectations of (suffering) resilience.<sup>74</sup> James builds her argument first by engaging with the critical reception of the song that describes it as ‘dull’ and ‘bland’ (2015: 146), explaining that ‘Diamonds’ sounds this way to a listener because Rihanna is not practising the resilience we have come to expect. In ‘Diamonds,’ James argues, Rihanna capitalises on her ‘damage’ (154) —in this case, her personal and professional relationship with American R&B artist, Chris Brown.<sup>75</sup> However, although Rihanna capitalises on her experience of domestic abuse, she does not do so ‘in the “right” way, i.e., in a way that amplifies listeners’ experience of privilege’ (2013b). Where a listener might expect a narrative of resilient overcoming, James shows how Rihanna instead produces a melancholic refusal of resilience by amplifying the ‘wrong affects’ (2015: 144).<sup>76</sup> Rather than amplifying an experience of overcoming abuse, ‘Diamonds’ is an example of a melancholic practice, encapsulating an attachment to damage rather than a triumphant display of simply ‘getting over it.’

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<sup>73</sup> I am primarily drawing on James’ work from *Resilience and Melancholy*. However, my reception of James’ thinking on Rihanna’s music practice has been refined in accordance with an original post on James’ blog, *It’s Her Factory* (2013a) and an article in *The New Inquiry* (2013b). Some key details, which help explain the importance of ‘Diamonds’ to James’ argument, are found in these earlier commentaries.

<sup>74</sup> In the previous chapter, I outlined James’ use of melancholy as a method to subvert resilience norms. In short, I argued that in *The Hunger Games* melancholy did not align with the modes of resilience produced by the novel. Primarily, I reasoned that although *The Hunger Games* goes ‘into the death’ (James 2015: 50), it does not do so in a way that reads as or produces a melancholic affect. It therefore became necessary to adapt James’ concept in order to understand the model of resilience at work in Collins’ novel. For James’ analysis of Rihanna’s ‘Diamonds,’ however, melancholy makes much more sense—as literally the sounds produced are melancholic. I outline this to explain that I am not discounting melancholy altogether, but merely expanding on James’ theoretical project.

<sup>75</sup> In 2009, Chris Brown pleaded guilty and was subsequently charged with assault for his violent attack on then-girlfriend Rihanna (Duke, *CNN* 2014). Unauthorised police photographs of Rihanna’s bruised and bloodied face were widely circulated, creating a media furore and subsequent public debate on domestic violence. For analysis of the media response to Brown’s violence within a neoliberal, postfeminist and postracial context see ‘In Her Own Time: Rihanna, Post-Feminism, and Domestic Violence’ (Rodier and Meagher 2014).

<sup>76</sup> Nicole R. Fleetwood concurs. Her analysis of Rihanna’s ‘post-assault performances and personae’ (which includes ‘Diamonds’) finds that ‘instead of abiding by the protocols of the black female survivor of violence who repudiates her abuser, Rihanna sticks close to the scene of her assault and continues to rehearse and restage the interplay of love, violence, and erotic attachments in deliberately shocking ways’ (2012: 419).

By analysing the form and structure of the song, James explains that 'Diamonds' 'plays out to privileged listeners as a lack of intensity' because it primes the listener to expect musical resilience, but instead delivers melancholy (2013b). According to James, 'Diamonds' uses two techniques to build toward, and subsequently undermine, the musical climax of the song (2015). First, 'Diamonds' is working within the conventions of tonal harmony that are used in the vast majority of popular music. At its most basic, this kind of harmonic structure requires a movement between musical rest (consonance) and musical tension (dissonance) before returning to consonance. Pop songs typically use the tonal relationship between consonance and dissonance to build and release affective tension. In a sense, the return to consonance 'resolves' any conflict or tension that is intentionally created by the dissonant sounds. What James finds significant about 'Diamonds' is that it adopts this technique but fails to develop the harmonic relationship. In a similar respect, 'Diamonds' is structured around loops, continually circling around minor chords that evoke a darker, more melancholic sound than major chords, which are associated with a brighter or happier tone (2015: 147). By using the 'language and semiotics of tonality' (147), Rihanna primes her listeners to expect a more cheerful disruption that a major chord would provide, but instead continually produces melancholic sounds. The second technique is how Rihanna builds toward and then destabilises a musical climax. James observes that 'Diamonds' 'doesn't go anywhere' (146); its form is 'directionless' (146). This works in contrast to the genre conventions of a typical pop song, which dictate that both form and structure be oriented toward the goal of musical climax. Where this musical peak or soar is associated with the listeners' embodiment of resilience, James argues that it is Rihanna's deliberate refusal of the soar that aligns her with the production of a melancholic subjectivity.

'Diamonds' is composed using a verse-chorus-verse formula, which, as James explains, is followed by a 'break' in the pattern where the musical crest usually transpires (2015: 147). Similar to the pattern described above, the break is not a transgressive feature as it is in fact an integral element of the formula. In EDM-

pop,<sup>77</sup> a 'pause-drop' immediately follows the soar. This pause (in which most of instrumental and/or vocal sound is reduced) is designed at once to delay and exacerbate the rapid musical descent that creates the most effective catharsis for the listener (147). James explains how 'Diamonds' includes a pause-drop after the second verse, yet subsequently omits the soar (147–8). Without an escalation of aural intensity to precede the pause, the song simply maintains its musical threshold rather than crashing through and overcoming the intensity usually created by a soar. In both instances, 'Diamonds' capitalises on genre assumptions by using strategies that rely on musical and compositional climaxes while ultimately neglecting their delivery. James describes the outcome of undermining these musical techniques as 'a conquest narrative that doesn't conquer [...] and an intensification trajectory that never intensifies' (2013a). Therefore, in a context in which 'success, optimization, investment, and capitalization' are ethically and aesthetically idealised, 'Diamonds' is noteworthy because it adopts those compositional aesthetics, but subsequently 'fails to fully exploit and optimize' them, constituting a '*failed musical investment*' (James 2013a). Melancholic musical techniques, therefore, sound like loss and deficiency, or a failure to maximise and reap the rewards of the resources at one's disposal.

One of the reasons I have provided an in-depth illustration of the pattern of consonance-dissonance-consonance is that it works in a very similar way to the formula of the hero's quest that Collins adapts in *The Hunger Games*. As a subgenre of the coming-of-age narrative, the hero's quest is structured around the disruption of the protagonist's everyday world, creating tension to be eventually resolved in conclusion. The coherence of their world is rendered dissonant by events beyond their control until the protagonist's own agency can resolve the tension and conclude by returning to a state of central coherence. Importantly, conclusions of this nature offer a kind of resilience in which protagonists do not 'bounce back' to their original state; instead, they integrate the dissonance they experience, become

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<sup>77</sup> EDM refers to electronic dance music, with EDM-pop typically used to describe a sub-genre that emerged in the 2010s in which artists like Skrillex, David Guetta and Calvin Harris mix the conventions of pop music (song structure and melody) with those of EDM (heavy bass, soars and drops).

fundamentally altered by it, but also in the end manage to cohere again around a new state of play. This kind of consonance is distinct from the type at the beginning of the narrative, but still produces coherence for the characters and subsequently the reader. The generic expectation of a fundamental transformation that produces a coherent subject evidently works across multiple modes of cultural production. This is one of our primary collective cultural narratives, which shapes our own expectations of identity-formation to be structured around a trajectory of growth.

In this section, I build on James' analysis of 'Diamonds' to show how Sciamma's use of both visual and aural techniques generates quite a different reading of resilience within *Girlhood*. In Rihanna's performance, the break section is haunted by an absent soar, and the song gestures towards a catharsis it does not provide. Sciamma's visual language during the 'pause-drop' section of 'Diamonds' works in rhythm with the song: as the camera slows, so do Marieme and Lady as they dance. At this point, Sciamma and Rihanna are in visual-aural alignment. However, immediately after the song's break section, Sciamma intervenes aurally, providing a 'soar' of sorts as the girls' own voices break out, merging with Rihanna's in the diegetic soundtrack. This pattern, although different to the soar-pause-drop formula, provides a surge of intensity nonetheless. All four characters are framed together, as they jump and sing exuberantly to the song's final chorus and coda, Sciamma's four-shot once again emphasising their inter-group intimacy. The power of the girls' voices coming to the fore of the soundtrack works in tandem with the image of their dancing and the physicality of their movement as they jump in time to the music, thus providing the visual manifestation of a 'soar.'

Importantly, Sciamma also provides a visual 'break' in the sequence, which occurs prior to the break section James identifies in 'Diamonds.' Sciamma cuts away from Lady, Adiatou and Fily to show Marieme as she watches them dance together. The camera dollies in from medium-shot to a close-up of Marieme; this technique of drawing gradually closer to her is one of only a few in the film that invites the audience into Marieme's interior emotional world. Marieme's facial expressions as she watches her friends dance evoke a complex mix of emotions, perhaps akin to

what Laura Carstensen *et al.* refer to as ‘poignancy,’ that is, the combination of both positive and negative feelings that arise with the awareness of one’s ‘limited time in the context of meaningful experience’ (2008: 158). In other words, this moment of the film evokes Marieme’s knowledge that her joyful experience is finite. On the one hand, the colourful aesthetics and visual soar produce a girlhood that feels joyful and carefree; an animating force. Yet, on the other, girlhood sociality feels momentary, produced to some degree as an exceptional experience that cannot endure for long beyond the bounds of their hotel room.

There are moments in the film when Marieme’s horizons open up, such as the pivotal first transition when the camera draws away from her, increasing our field of vision much as Marieme’s own world is about to expand. Conversely, in the Diamonds sequence, the combination of camera movement toward Marieme and the extended focus on her facial expression work together to further the sense of restriction that pervades the film, even in moments as carefree as this one. McNeill notes that during the musical sequence ‘the girls momentarily become “stars,” like Rihanna,’ yet at the same time, ‘the traumatic melancholia of the video and Rihanna’s fragile persona contribute a sense of unsettling transience’ (2017: 12). This along with the visual break, then, suggests Marieme’s own sense of a genre with a limited shelf life. At a time in her life when Marieme would be expected to be focused on acquiring skills, gaining knowledge, growing up and outward into the world, Marieme’s horizons instead contract. Not only will the song end, but this chapter of her life is also soon to close. Breaking away from the exhilaration developed in the first part of the sequence, especially during this rare moment highlighting Marieme’s interiority and the ‘poignancy’ of her emotional landscape, works to generate an intensified affective pleasure in the final moments of the sequence, as it dawns on us that Marieme’s happiness here will likely be all too fleeting.

The sequence itself also works as a kind of pause within the narrative, with the stylistic audiovisual choices contributing to a sense of discontinuity. McNeill finds ‘the performance of “Diamonds” in the film destabilises diegetic space by

borrowing from a music video aesthetic' (2017: 7) which is characterised by the 'blue-filtered lighting, glamorous head shot' and 'apparent awareness of and interaction with the camera and lip-synched performance of a pop song' (1). The blue filter stands out in particular: although the colour echoes the visual motif used throughout, this is the only scene that diverges from the warmer and more naturalistic lighting used in the rest of the film. Equally, the decision to play out the entirety of 'Diamonds' is significant here. Allowing the viewer to experience the song as the characters do creates further immersion into their world, as it aligns audioviewer and character in the same temporal space. The song in particular creates a delay in the film's sense of narrative time, a time out of time, in which the viewer is suspended outside the ordinary world of the film, just as Marieme and her friends are suspended in an experience outside the familiar rhythms of their everyday lives.

It is important to think through the significance of Sciamma's creation of both an audiovisual soar and break in her use of 'Diamonds' in this sequence, and the kinds of resilience it produces. First, we ought to note that Sciamma's creation of a soar does not diminish Rihanna's undermining of one. Rather, the two appear to harmonise. The characters perhaps find a more traditional form of resilience in 'Diamonds,' a song that does not allow a listener to overcome and recycle their damage. This suggests that melancholic practices such as 'Diamonds' are in fact crucial to forming the kinds of resilience that work against oppressive hierarchies rather than for them. What makes the 'Diamonds' sequence so powerful is that the resilience produced is in service of girlhood itself. In terms of the hierarchical structures at play in *Girlhood*, the resilience produced by the Diamonds sequence works to affirm femininity rather than the dominant hyper-masculinity that pervades the film from the outset and is the primary power dynamic structuring Marieme's everyday world.

The moments in which we see Marieme most restricted are when the men in her world exercise their power over her; for example, her brother's abuse. Equally, for much of the film Marieme's actions work towards her gaining patriarchal

acceptance and entry into the very same hierarchies that oppress her. This scene is notable for its construction of relational resilience derived from girlhood community; however, it also hints at the complexities of how girls interact with one another. On the one hand, Marieme and her friends draw their strength from one another in this striking sequence. On the other, Marieme's inclusion within the group is cemented by her intimidation of a younger girl, whose stolen euros help pay for their night of fun. This is one of multiple instances where Marieme capitalises on the oppression of other girls, with the film's third act providing the primary example of a fight against a girl from a rival group, which works narratively to complete and consolidate Marieme's transformation into Vic. More importantly, winning the fight gains Marieme brief acceptance from her brother, whose dispassionate offer to play video games with him is in stark contrast to his physical and verbal abuse of Marieme in the rest of the film. Unlike the structured opposition of the football game, here the conflict is resolved through violence and the humiliation of Marieme's opponent. We begin to see the ways that relational resilience as the capacity to overcome the strictures of the everyday—even although it does provide the support structure Marieme needs—comes at the expense of the hostile exclusion of other girls. Relationality, then, is not so clear-cut. While constructing social bonds between girls as central to their subject formation, *Girlhood* also acknowledges that, as Ruti puts it, 'relationality is not necessarily any more pure, any more devoid of power struggles, than any other component of human life' (2017: 81).<sup>78</sup> Initially appearing to affirm girlhood and feminine sociality as they resist or undermine the status quo in which girls are undervalued, relational resilience becomes somewhat compromised by these scenes in which Marieme's narrative agency is driven by her role in other girls' suffering.

### **Transformative Resilience**

This section focuses on how the film's structure creates transformative resilience, or the capacity for change that enables one to overcome adversity in 'socially

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<sup>78</sup> For further discussion on the complexities of the relationship between relationality and individual autonomy, see Ruti (2017: 81–83).

profitable ways' (James 2015: 15). Transformation is central to the film's structure, which unfolds over five segments, stylistically demarcated by four extended cuts to black. Four key moments of transition are scored by an urgent minimalist electronic composition that develops intensively throughout the film. The affective energy of the score advances Marieme's transformations, as each segment concludes with a transitional sequence that signals turning points or opportunities for reinvention. The soundtrack is therefore vital to charting Marieme's trajectory as she joins a girl gang ('Néon'), forcefully declines the opportunity to follow in her mother's footsteps as a low-paid hotel cleaner ('Néon reprise'), initiates a sexual relationship with her brother's friend Ismaël ('Girlhood'), then leaves her neighbourhood to work for a local drug dealer ('Le Départ'). In addition to the atmospheric soundtrack, the film produces Marieme's coming-of-age process visually through striking use of costuming, foregrounding the concept of identity formation as a performative construction.

In Chapter One, I discussed how *Gone Girl* constructs the process of transforming oneself to align with postfeminist social norms as damaging to the formation of feminine subjectivity. Chapter Two analyses *Girls'* use of formal and narrative strategies to establish and disavow expectations that growth and coming-of-age will be achieved through self-transformation. *Girlhood's* approach to transformation diverges significantly in two key ways. First, the film demonstrates how social value and access to social spaces is obtained through processes of transformation, and second, it interrogates the notion that external transformation is intrinsically linked to the formation of subjectivity or identity in the way we might expect of coming-of-age genres. Instead, the transitions work to construct Marieme as a resilient subject able to overcome adversity. Therefore, I situate the transitions within a framework of continual adversity and overcoming through analysis of the first and final sequences.

For instance, the film's first act establishes Marieme's home life as abusive and her educational opportunities as limited. Her brother's abuse makes the domestic space an unwelcoming one, whereas Marieme's poor grades prevent her entry into

the instructive space of the lycée, foreclosing an academic path that might lead her beyond the banlieue. Where the narrative in the first act establishes the conditions Marieme must surmount in order to come of age, the score and camerawork are the primary methods by which an affective sense of resilience is constructed, suggesting that through transformation, Marieme is capable of overcoming the withdrawal of her opportunity for further education. In the first transition, Marieme is washing dishes; a close-up of the kitchen sink shows her hesitate before slipping an ornate knife into her pocket. The camera tracks up from her hands placed firmly on the edge of the sink to a close-up of her face in profile (Figure 14). Marieme remains the primary subject of the shot, yet her features are obscured. As I have discussed, this is one of several important moments in the film that shields Marieme's character from the camera's scrutiny. Where a typical close-up of a character's face might offer insight into their emotions or at the very least access to a facial expression, *Girlhood* invites us to accompany its protagonist on her journey but does not offer her interiority for our inspection. The camera draws slowly back from Marieme, who faces away from the camera, allowing her some breathing room, as the 'Néon' theme intensifies, informing us that something new, something exciting is on the horizon. Marieme's potential emerges in these moments as the soundtrack soars, allowing us to imagine futures of possibility for Marieme's character, irrespective of external constraint.



Figure 14 Profile close-up of Marieme (Karidja Touré) during *Girlhood*'s initial transition sequence (Sciama 2014).

Similarly, the scenes in which Marieme initially spends time with the girl gang highlight their potential to open up new spaces and ways of being in the world. At the same time, they construct a sense of quiet foreboding, drawing on the popular trope of the impressionable young girl led astray by the bad influence of a rebellious new friendship group.<sup>79</sup> This tension between risk and potential is reminiscent of the two contrasting girlhood discourses labelled by Harris as ‘can-do’ and ‘at-risk’ (2004: 13–36). Harris argues that the relationship between young women and late modernity works to produce girls within these two frameworks so that girls either emerge as ‘can-do’ capable achievers, or alternatively as ‘at-risk’ and vulnerable (2004: 9). For example, Marieme’s initial trip to Paris with the girls (which immediately precedes the transition) constructs a complex dynamic of risk and potential, both of which arise from a series of confrontations that demonstrate their ‘taking pleasure in a noisy display of protest and dominance’ (McNeill 2017: 8). In the first instance, after Marieme declines the invitation to visit Paris and subsequently changes her mind, Lady confronts her, hard-faced, asking if Marieme is afraid of her. For an anxious moment, the camera holds on Marieme’s face before Lady bursts into laughter, defusing the tension. Similarly, the girls’ intimidation of a white shop assistant who suspects Marieme of shoplifting, and their confrontation with a rival group of antagonistic girls on the opposite side of the Métro platform, are both followed by comparable moments where laughter breaks out, which McNeill reads as the girls ‘acknowledging the event as performance’ (2017: 8). In other words, the girls’ posturing grants little sense of actual violence or aggression. However, when reading these scenes in relation to the knife Marieme pockets, or the setting of the banlieue as an indelible cultural image of crime and deprivation, there is certainly room to interpret them as portents of imminent risk or violence. At the same time, the film’s emotive transitions and colourful aesthetics read as indicative of the expansive potential the figure of the girl so often yields (Harris 2004; McRobbie 2008). The girl, then,

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<sup>79</sup> This trope spans many genres, usually with a naïve or strait-laced protagonist becoming infatuated with a more popular girl or group of girls who lead her astray, sometimes for comic effect as in *Mean Girls* or with the devastating consequences seen in *Thirteen* (2003 Hardwicke) as thirteen-year-old protagonist Tracy’s friendship with rebellious Evie leads to petty crime, drug abuse and self-harm.

generates feelings of buoyant optimism, at the same time as carrying a heavy sense of trepidation. Therein lies the central conflict in *Girlhood* between the girls constructed as irrepressibly luminous, capable and imbued with potential, and at the same time as severely limited by their social environment.

In addition to music and narrative, costuming plays a significant role in the transitions, particularly the first and final, which are the most distinctive. If clothing is typically read as marker of identity providing insight into the construction of selfhood, the costuming in *Girlhood* diverges somewhat from this understanding. While clothing does still read in terms of identity in some respects (connoting Marieme's youth, for instance, in the first act), Marieme/Vic's clothing cannot be read solely or even primarily as 'signs' of her internal world or identity. Instead, the costume changes provide Marieme access to ways of being, rather than working as methods of transforming her identity. For instance, the first costume we see are the American football players' uniforms. Bulky shoulder pads and a cage-like helmet enable the girls to take up more space and to participate in the rough and tumble of the game without coming to harm. The training ground provides a space in which the girls can revel in their physical abilities. Once they've shed their protective armour, however, they transform from whooping, cheering athletes to cautious young girls who must be vigilant at all times in their own neighbourhoods.



Figure 15 Marieme's fashionable new clothing and hairstyle in *Girlhood*'s initial transition sequence (Sciamma 2014).

In the first transition, Marieme departs from her non-descript long-sleeved tops and long braids, and emerges with straightened hair, fashionable clothing and a newfound confidence (Figure 15). When the domestic and educational spaces are restricted or excised altogether, Marieme's initial costume change provides her with access to a space in which feminine sociality can thrive. In this way, dressing and acting like 'one of the girls' is what indeed makes Marieme one of the girls. By the final transition, Vic makes her way up a flight of stairs, pausing to adjust her short, tight red dress, hinting at her discomfort in this new costume. Far from the exciting sartorial transformation of the first transition, here Vic's attire is a uniform of sorts, providing entry to a high-class party to sell drugs to white guests. However, this particular transformation is momentary, as once the transaction is complete Vic immediately exchanges the hyper-feminine dress for a loose-fitting sweatshirt and trousers, removing a platinum-blond wig to reveal short braided hair (Figure 16). Here, the film engages with complex gender politics as Vic eschews her feminine clothing and instead binds her chest, wearing loose clothing and close-cropped braids that allow her to blend in and move freely within the masculine spaces of her new neighbourhood, effectively becoming, in this segment of the film, 'one of the guys.' If Marieme's home life and schooling leave her with 'nothing' (James 2015: 1) to work with, *Girlhood* suggests, it is only through transformation that she is able to grasp at 'something' (1). Traditional spaces of identity formation are hostile or foreclosed; therefore, to gain access to new spaces, Vic must look the part.

Furthermore, the score significantly influences any reading of the costume transformations. Unlike the elevating Néon theme of the initial transition, which imbues Marieme's exterior transformation with a sense of triumph, in the final transition the music takes a minatory turn, creating an urgent sense of threat through discordant tones and rhythmic sounds reminiscent of a heartbeat. This ominous affect created through the soundtrack is further compounded by the camera, which follows Vic's feet, tracking her steps in a slight slow motion that produces a sense of threat. Here, the music generates fear for Vic, associating her transformation with a sense of foreboding rather than the joyful sense of potential in prior transitions. The perception of risk returns here, suggesting that

transformative resilience might be necessary for Vic's survival, but not necessarily something to be celebrated in itself. The central role of transformation suggests that girlhood genres are perhaps uniquely influenced by postfeminist empowerment rhetoric avowing its emancipatory potential. However, it is also important to recognise that *Girlhood* aesthetically connects transformation to both uplifting and fearful affective registers in its transition sequences, thereby affectively conveying that transformation after postfeminism does not necessarily always feel liberating. Although, as I've suggested, *Girlhood* does not discount Marieme's internal world, the transition sequences indicate that the film is simply more interested in the kinds of spaces and socialities her costumes provide access to, making where Marieme goes and who she connects with more important than our sense of 'who' she is.



Figure 16 Vic's masculine attire in the final act of *Girlhood* (Sciamma 2014).

### **Aesthetics of Sociality**

While I have argued that the transitions construct transformation as a mode of resilience, and the Diamonds scene constructs relationality as a mode of resilience, the film's fourth transition complicates this analysis somewhat. Its very status as a transition connects it to the notion of change the film establishes through its structure. The music creates a sense of forward momentum in line with Marieme's narrative position at this point in the film, having triumphed in her fight with a rival girl and asserted her sexuality with Ismaël. This transition sequence takes place at La Défense, the Paris business district, and emphasises the relationality of girlhood

in a similar way to the Diamonds scene. Comparatively, as the La Défense transition sequence situates Marieme within a wider social sphere, it therefore works to extend the scope beyond her primary friendship group. The distinction I have established between transformative and relational resilience is blurred as the two become formally and narratively imbricated. The La Défense sequence comprises five shots of a large group of girls that include Marieme and her friends. The first begins with Vic in close-up. She is briefly the sole occupant of the frame, establishing her as our central reference point, before the camera slowly tracks left along a line of girls, including Marieme's friends. The girls chat excitedly and express their affection for one another through casual physical contact.

McNeill analyses the use of the 'Girlhood' theme to mark this transition, which 'structurally resembles the "Néon" theme' of the first two transitions. She identifies similar formal elements in each, including 'pulsing, repeated semi-quavers and drawn-out, minimalist chord progressions,' but she also notes that, unlike the 'ambivalence of "Néon,"' 'Girlhood' expresses a more positive sense of rising momentum that echoes Vic's growing sense of agency within the narrative' (2017: 5). McNeill's analysis supports the notion of opacity and privacy identified by Handyside as integral to the role of music in expressing girls' emotions (2016: 121) as she notes that the shot 'asks us to admire the girls' youthful vibrancy, beauty and connectedness whilst defying our desire to know them or guess their trajectory' (5). In other words, while we are invited to witness their relational intimacy, the film does not extend our insight to the girls' individual subjectivities or the paths their lives may take. This relational construction of girlhood emphasises the joy that emerges from and within the girls' relationships to one another. The music, in combination with the tracking shot, creates and articulates the relations between Marieme as an individual subject and her wider social group. This, along with their structural positioning as part of the transition sequence, indicates that connection and sociality are integral to Marieme's subject formation and her capacity for transformation and transformative resilience especially.

Immediately, the film cuts to a long-shot of the group, the camera's wide angle emphasising the expansive space of the commercial district dominated by the huge square structure of La Défense's central icon, the Grande Arche that towers above the girls. In this way, the film situates Marieme within an anonymous social body before emphasising the girls' diminutive status relative to the wider structures surrounding them. Girlhood, therefore, is forged by relationality, as much as it is determined and shaped by wider, often unknowable social forces. As well, it is important to note that the static shot interrupts the fluid movement of the camera tracking the girls, suggestive perhaps of the way that social institutions interrupt or block the potential of girlhood. Whereas the first shot opened with Marieme, therefore beginning with the individual before broadening the scope to map out her social relations, a group of girls fill the frame of the third shot, which slowly pans forward over the crowd. In this shot, Marieme and her friends are included, but not privileged by the camera. Instead, they are simply part of the multitude of girls occupying the entirety of the frame, thus cementing the film's construction of Marieme as a relational subject whose coming-of-age is produced by and through the connections she makes with others. The final two shots are almost static, tightly focused on the movement of the girls through the shopping centre, and work similarly, in terms of how they situate Marieme as one girl among many. The girls walk away from the camera, which follows at a slow pace that allows them to slip beyond the camera's scope so that others may enter the frame. This framing enables the audioviewer to follow and observe from a distance, while once again hinting at their unknowability. The 'Girlhood' theme continues to dominate the soundtrack throughout, though we also begin to hear the girls' indistinct chatter, which then comes to the fore in the final shot, in which the girls now walk toward the camera, their collective voices slowly superseding the non-diegetic soundtrack.

In a reversal of the opening scene, this moment further emphasises that girlhood sociality finds its most vivid expression in the anonymity of the non-place. Against the grain of Augé's assertion that social connection is unlikely to flourish in a non-place, *Girlhood* suggests that these spaces are in fact crucial to feminine relationality, as the domestic sphere which ought to yield 'places for living' (1995:

66–67) instead inhibits the girls' self-expression. At once demonstrating the characters' resourcefulness in seeking out spaces in which they might thrive, if only momentarily, this scene also indicates that social identity is a key determining factor in one's experience of a non-place. Augé's assertion that airports, hotels and shopping centres are decontextualized from social conditions is essentially accurate. However, his proposal that they conclusively therefore 'cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity' (1995: 77–8) perhaps overlooks the importance of paying attention to the specificities of the identity and associated historical weight each individual subject brings to a non-place, and furthermore, the relationality that can transpire between the individuals inhabiting them. Dobson too identifies the non-place as important to *Girlhood's* spatial topography, interpreting such spaces as lacking in their 'capacity to function as social places as they encourage self-designation as individuals defined by transitory function for example, consumer, commuter' (2017: 41). Perhaps, then, if one holds strong social ties to familial, educational or other social institutions, the atomising force of the non-place feels especially anti-relational as it encourages such individualised identities. If, however, one's social history or identity are in fact 'roadblocks [...] to their flourishing,' (Ruti 2017: 137), the non-place might function, as *Girlhood* suggests, as one of the only settings in which relational bonds can be initiated and sustained.

Importantly, the La Défense transition focuses on collective relationality (both aurally and visually), as opposed to the particular speech or interiority of an individual. *Girlhood* therefore places value in taking up the space of the frame and the soundscape, similar to the 'break' in the Diamonds sequence that creates an affective relational resilience. However, it also indicates that who these girls might be and what they are saying to one another is afforded privacy. Thereby, the film suggests we do not require access to the inside of girls' heads to value them. This has important implications for resilience discourse, which typically encourages female subjects to reveal and overcome their suffering so that they might gain social capital.

A minor point of convergence arises here between *Girlhood* and *The Hunger Games*, as Katniss begins to preserve her privacy and the integrity of her selfhood by withholding her affective responses from the cameras in the arena. However, where *The Hunger Games* highlights the importance of privacy in terms of its protagonist's characterisation, readers are in fact granted continuous insight to Katniss' inner world by virtue of the simultaneous present-tense narration. In contrast, there is little clue as to whether Marieme's character values privacy precisely because the film's aesthetics are designed to shield her interiority from the scrutiny of our gaze. *Girlhood* is far less interested in the 'content' of the girls' identity and in figuring out or pinning down who they are, or what this might mean (the 'truth' of their subjectivity and or/girlhood), than it is preoccupied with constructing girls as simply being. The film values their collective (and individual) voice but suggests that the content of their speech is far less important than the very fact that girls ought to be afforded opportunities to speak. Accordingly, whether at an aesthetic level or a concern of the narrative, it is clear that retaining 'opacity and privacy' (Handyside 2016: 121) and the enhanced scrutiny girls face from social others is a key concern of girlhood genres.

In conclusion, while transformative resilience remains complicit in the postfeminist paradigm of continual self-improvement and flexibility, I want to argue that the way *Girlhood* places transformation within the context of relationality thoroughly entangles the two, making it much more difficult to read this mode of resilience as an absolute capitulation to a restrictive status quo. The film is clear that transformational resilience comes at a price, but it is also how Vic gets where she is going, offering her far more opportunities and experiences than the normative paths she rejects (or that reject her). We can therefore begin to see that each model of resilience can be alternately caught in a liberatory/complicit paradigm with plenty of convincing evidence for either. In other words, transformative resilience *is* complicit with postfeminist norms, yet at the same time, it liberates Vic from an unwanted marriage and a life of low-paid work. In essence, the film suggests that within the confines of Marieme's world, transformation may not be as wholly emancipatory as postfeminist rhetoric often suggests, yet there are

evidently ways in which postfeminist conventions offer more potential for freedom than the alternatives available to her. Therefore, instead of arguing for/against each model, I have focused on ways in which each mode is useful to Marieme's character in the film. Relationality of both kinds (with other girls, and against them) provides Marieme access to a different way of living.

In this respect, there is an odd angle of intersection between *Gone Girl* and *Girlhood*. In a very similar way to *Gone Girl*, self-transformation is constructed as the socially desirable route to rewrite one's story and change generic outcomes. Both protagonists try on the identities their respective societies have fashioned for them, and both texts speak to the unsustainability of the norms and subjectivities available to them, as well as the impossibility of constructing a wholly new identity, or forging a new path out of nowhere and with nothing. *Gone Girl's* narrative suggests that postfeminist modes of identity formation are more likely to exhaust potential than fulfil it. Meanwhile, the ambiguity of *Girlhood's* approach to costuming, music and narrative suggests that the film is less interested in the impact of transformation on individual subjectivity and more in what the various identities allow Vic to do and where they allow her to go. This chapter has provided crucial insight into two cultural manifestations of resilience discourse that appear at first glance to be in opposition. Yet, as *Girlhood* suggests, transformative and relational modes of resilience—predicated upon flexible self-reinvention and social ties respectively—are in fact thoroughly entwined, necessitating methods of analysis that eschew symptomatic reading practices. While *Girlhood* ultimately delivers on its promise of a resilient coming-of-age narrative, Chapter Six explores the bad feelings generated by films that break with this contract of spectatorial expectation.

## Chapter Six: Feel-Bad Femininity in *Catch Me Daddy* (2014)

Where the previous two chapters explored how modes of resilience manifest in girlhood coming-of-age narratives, Chapter Five shifts focus to a film which creates and obstructs a desire for a cathartic performance of resilience. Using and adapting Nikolaj Lübecker's concept of the 'feel-bad film' (2015: 3), this chapter analyses Daniel Wolfe's debut feature, *Catch Me Daddy*, a British thriller following sixteen-year-old protagonist Laila's quest to evade capture by the two groups of men hired by her father, Tariq, to retrieve Laila and bring her home.<sup>80</sup> The film's closing stages a horrific confrontation between Laila and her father, culminating in his attempts to coerce her to commit suicide. Following a protracted sequence in which Tariq fluctuates between rage toward his daughter and regret for his actions, Tariq instructs Laila to stand on a chair and place a noose around her neck. Here, the film ends abruptly, offering no narrative or emotional catharsis and literally leaving us hanging over the question of Laila's capacity to determine her own fate. In doing so, it finds resonance with Lübecker's genre of feel-bad films, which work in an 'unpleasant register' (2015: 2), using narrative and cinematographic devices to produce a desire for particular types of catharsis or satisfaction in the viewer, and then continually preventing closure. Several scenes early in the film communicate and affectively construct a sense of resilient femininity, thus establishing expectations that Laila's self-determination will prevail in the face of adversity. The subsequent failure in the film's closing sequence to perform resilience is what denies narrative closure and instigates an affective feel-bad experience.

Although Lübecker identifies several feel-bad modes, including abjection and cringe comedy, the book concentrates on four in particular: "assaultive films",

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<sup>80</sup> Significantly, the men in pursuit of Laila operate in two groups, divided along racial lines: in the first, Laila's brother Zaheer is working with three other British Pakistani men, Shoby and Bilal, led by Junaid. The second comprises two white British men, Tony and Barry. In an interview, Wolfe speaks candidly about his inspiration for the film, drawn from a news article which describes 'two white guys—the press call them bounty hunters—two white thugs working with two British Pakistani guys, colluding in this pre-meditated crime' (*Film 4* 2014). Wolfe goes on to express his interest in how so-called 'honour crimes,' traditionally concerned primarily with female sexual impurity and family shame (Meetoo and Mirza 2007) become commercial transactions. Although the film does not refer to honour crimes explicitly or use sensationalist terminology like 'bounty hunters,' these discourses tacitly underpin the majority of the film's narrative.

“desperation films”, “suspension films” and the “feel-bad farce” (2015: 4). What each of these categories share is the creation and ultimate frustration of a desire for catharsis, although their modes of address and affective registers vary considerably. Accordingly, Lübecker’s study is not a comprehensive map of the feel-bad genre; rather his interest lies in its ‘political and ethical potential’ (4). Lübecker notes that the feel-bad films he engages with are not the mark of an entirely new phenomenon. As he explains, in recent years the concept has reached ‘unprecedented heights’ (3). Across each of the four modes, Lübecker identifies films in which:

the intensification of the feel-bad climate is so radical that the spectators begin to worry where things are going. They begin to wonder about the “intentions” of the film, about the nature of the spectatorial contract (3).

In this way, the ‘destabilisation of the spectatorial contract’ (3), as Lübecker puts it, is central to the production of bad feelings. To explore this in more detail, Lübecker outlines the assaultive and suspension modes in order to explain how such films deliberately antagonise and confront spectators with unpleasant sensorial affects. Within the assaultive mode, Lars von Trier’s *Dogville* (2003) is his primary example of films that ‘go through the body of the spectator to her intellect’ (16). In other words, assaultive feel-bad films aim to deliberately provoke discomfort or unpleasant sensation in the body of the spectator (16), while at the same time inviting an intellectual engagement with the political and ethical questions they raise. A typical example of a suspension film is Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant* (2003), which engages a desire to explain and understand a difficult or traumatic social conflict or problem, and then endlessly defers any clarity of closure. In contrast to the assaultive film, the suspension mode is characterised by indirectly conveying unpleasant feelings, causing a sense of unease through an evocation of uncertainty or indeterminacy (5).

While the assaultive and suspension modes demonstrate *how* such films produce a feel-bad experience, the desperation film and the feel-bad farce are both articulated through consideration of the distance between transgression and emancipation, and in particular, the assumption that the former will (and should)

invariably lead to the latter.<sup>81</sup> Lübecker's desperation films all operate through 'an attempt to force a way from transgression to emancipation,' followed by a tacit acknowledgement of 'their failure to achieve this,' which is communicated 'by making the spectator experience the frustrations generated' by that failure (2015: 130). For example, Urszula Antoniak's *Code Blue* (2011) constructs a 'transgressive spectatorship' (127) through its narrative of extreme and ambiguous sexual violence which suggests a route to closure through trauma but ultimately 'offers no grounds for thinking the transgressive viewing experiences as a way to redemption, community or any other such positive notions' (129–130). Lübecker's primary example of a feel-bad farce is Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers* (2009), a film which provocatively suggests that the 'childishness, sexual perversions and violence' (159) of 'idiotic murderers who spend much of their time humping inanimate objects' (156) is an emancipatory challenge to social norms, before severely undermining its 'confusing' rhetoric of freedom (159). Films within this category (which also includes Von Trier's *The Idiots* (1999) and Werner Herzog's *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1971), Lübecker suggests, play on our desire to laugh away uncomfortable subject matter, while ultimately depriving us of the release laughter might provide (156).

Generic expectation, one of the central concerns of this thesis, proves essential to the identification of the feel-bad film. If, as Lübecker points out in his discussion of the art film, disturbing subject matter and an 'open ending' (Bordwell 1999 in Lübecker 2015: 3) are in fact defining features of the genre, then expectation dictates that catharsis or closure may not necessarily be forthcoming. At the same time, what truly defines all feel-bad modes is when 'the film produces a spectatorial desire, but then blocks its satisfaction; *it creates, and then deadlocks, our desire for catharsis*' (2015: 2 original italics). Accordingly, this chapter aims to illustrate that

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<sup>81</sup> Such expectations of emancipation arising from transgression recall Berlant's observation in *The Female Complaint* that transgression inevitably becomes part of our cultural fantasies and generic formulae, and that genres always hold the capacity to absorb and transform transgressions into new conventions. This is of course part of a continuous cultural cycle, as James (2015) also points out in her analysis of punk music. What is transgressive for one generation is subsequently folded into the mainstream, requiring new techniques for destabilisation, which are in turn also absorbed.

*Catch Me Daddy* produces a desire for feminine resilience yet subsequently withholds catharsis.

In this chapter, I will use Teresa de Lauretis' theorising about the relationship between narrative, desire and femininity to understand how *Catch Me Daddy* constructs expectations of feminine resilience and agency through the generic expectations of the quest narrative. For de Lauretis, the Oedipal story is paradigmatic, not only of how desire in the conventional quest narrative operates, but of all narrative structures (1984: 112). De Lauretis uses Jurij Lotman's definition of how the Oedipal narrative divides characters into 'those who are mobile, who enjoy freedom with regard to plot-space, who can change their place [...] and cross the frontier' and 'those who are immobile, who represent, in fact, a function of this space' (Lotman 1979: 167 in 1984: 112). The first type includes the hero or 'mythical subject,' traditionally male and positioned as active within the narrative (112). Consequently, the male character's desire is what drives the narrative momentum. Within this framework, male subjects have to 'pass through' or cross the boundary in order to be produced as a member of society, or to come of age. By contrast, according to de Lauretis, all quest narratives tend to construct female characters as objects, whether as helpers, rewards, or obstacles for the male character to defeat. In essence, male characters must overcome female obstacles in order to achieve their identity as masculine subjects. This coming of age, in which the female is the matrix for male identity, is constructed as the point at which narrative closure is achieved.

De Lauretis' argument resonates with my understanding of resilience discourse, in which the way to become an acceptable female subject is to overcome one's femininity, and even better, to capitalise on this overcoming (James 2015). This suggests that even within female-focused resilience narratives, the 'object' to defeat remains feminine, regardless of the characters' genders. *Catch Me Daddy* stages a quest narrative in which a female protagonist occupies the active role of the hero, and the obstacles standing in the way of her coming of age are the desires and decrees of male characters (particularly her father). Using this structure reifies,

as de Lauretis argues, a traditional gender binary, even with a female character in the subject position. Yet Laila is not produced as an integrated member of her society and does not in the end achieve any self-completion or successful coming of age. Where *The Hunger Games* and *Girlhood* produce harsh but hopeful coming-of-age narratives—for better or worse, their protagonists have potential to find a place in their worlds—there is nowhere for Laila to go within her quest narrative. Thus, the obstacle from the traditional quest narrative—her father—remains undefeated, and so does the obstacle one finds within resilience discourse—Laila’s perceived fragility and passivity. In essence, this chapter argues that the film works through the quest narrative, yet arrives at a conclusion in which the genre turns out to be incapable of producing a feminine subject.

To explore this in more detail, I first look more closely at the relationship between agency and resilience. Broadly speaking, I use the term agency to refer to the ways we exercise our capacity to act, not necessarily in order to have a concrete effect on the world or transform our material realities, but encompassing any endeavours toward doing so. Resilience, in this context, refers to overcoming traditional conceptions of femininity. As James explains, ‘post-feminist society assumes women are always-already damaged by patriarchy’ and that while all women bear the burden of their femininity, “‘good” women visibly overcome the negative effects of feminization’ (82). Feminine fragility continues to be the presumed baseline; however, now women are held responsible for embarking on trajectories of resilience to become healthy subjects that overcome their perceived gender deficits. In this vein, according to James, there are two requirements female subjects must fulfil in order to attain social viability: ‘femininity is first performed as damage, second as resilience’ (82). Therefore, when I refer to resilience, what I mean is an aspirational or hegemonic imperative for women and girls to overcome the deficits associated with their traditional femininity in order to become socially viable subjects. As the following discussion will demonstrate and explain in further detail, resilience in *Catch Me Daddy* manifests primarily through aesthetics of agency, constructed in three key ways: a capacity for motion, for speech, and for making choices under restricted conditions.

### Agency in Motion

First, I will analyse a key scene that creates an expectation of agentic femininity by characterising Laila not only in relation to the family she is hiding from, but also in accordance with a form of sound and motion that signifies freedom. I also briefly compare the dancing scene in *Catch Me Daddy* to the Diamonds sequence discussed in the previous chapter, as I find it especially significant that both *Catch Me Daddy* and *Girlhood*, two films concerned with girlhood and resilience, zoom in on their central thematic by inserting emblematic dancing sequences. In this way, conceptions of agency and resilience become uniquely entwined with girls' bodies in motion, and with the music they dance to.

In *Catch Me Daddy*, Laila dances with abandon to Patti Smith's song 'Land: Horses / Land of a Thousand Dances / La Mer (De)' from Smith's 1975 album *Horses*. Smith's influence on punk genres, her experimental music and stream-of-consciousness lyrics earned her a reputation as a transgressive artist, known for pushing boundaries and creating an unconventional sound. 'Land' in particular constitutes a significant departure from the mournful folk music comprising the majority of the film's musical universe. Moreover, with the exception of Nicki Minaj's song 'Roman's Revenge' (2010), of which the film only uses a brief excerpt, Smith is the primary source of female-created music. It therefore works to solidify the relationship between Laila's character development, on the one hand, and the importance of sound and motion, on the other, by aligning the girl protagonist with the sense of uninhibited freedom from constraint that Smith's music evokes.

The music choice in this scene is one of the key elements constructing Laila's character as fundamentally free and uninhibited, implying a form of girlhood grounded in making the best of one's circumstances and creating enjoyment despite the restrictions of life on the run. In particular, this scene constructs Laila within resilience discourse, as despite the cluttered and claustrophobic close-ups Wolfe uses to constrict Laila's immediate environment, in which there hardly appears to be space for her to move at all, Laila is clearly someone who knows how to make the most of what little space she has at her disposal. In this way, Laila

aligns with James' definition of the resilient girl who manages to 'turn nothing into something' (2015: 1) by transforming the interior of a cramped, ramshackle caravan into a playful space for creative self-abandon and pure joy.

One of the highlights in *Girlhood* is the way the Diamonds sequence works to illustrate how the girls draw their capacity to overcome adversity from their relationships with one another, as well as affectively working to instil this same sense of resilience in the spectator. Whereas Sciamma uses a blue filter and the extended duration of the song to create a sense of time out of time, a break or narrative refuge, *Catch Me Daddy's* dancing sequence is structured to entirely different ends. The Diamonds sequence reserved a space for Marieme and her friends alone, affording us a privileged view of their private space as they enjoy their freedom. It also addressed the spectator from firmly within Marieme's perspective, rooting the sequence in Marieme's interior world, enhanced by Sciamma's use of colour and duration. *Catch Me Daddy*, on the other hand, makes use of trans-diegetic music, which does not allow us to inhabit any one perspective as we are constantly shifting between two soundspaces. We first hear 'Land' non-diegetically during a shot of the two groups of men in their 4x4 cars as they continue their pursuit of Laila, winding through the vast Yorkshire landscape. The music then becomes diegetic as we join Laila and Aaron in the caravan. With each cut between the pursuers and the pursued, the music transitions between non-diegetic and diegetic sound.

Aaron Hunter (2012) points out that the term trans-diegetic is both 'under-defined' yet 'useful' when it comes to 'addressing [the] practice of allowing music to cross the diegetic/extra-diegetic border' (4). Hunter draws on Robynn Stilwell's article 'The Fantastical Gap Between Diegetic and Nondiegetic,' in which Stilwell examines such transitions as 'a gap in our understanding, a place of destabilisation and ambiguity' (2007: 186). Stilwell notes that, despite ambiguity and uncertainty of meaning, any transition between diegetic and non-diegetic soundscapes 'does always *mean*' (186 original italics). Hunter's observation that 'the trans-diegetic contributes to narrative meaning but not always in ways that are particularly clear'

(2012: 4) has particular resonance for this scene with its shift between non-diegetic and diegetic music, as well as objective and subjective spaces. The dancing scene's performative aesthetic mode lends it a privileged position in terms of narrative significance, and it is therefore worth thinking through how the use of trans-diegetic sound might contribute to meaning-making. As Hunter suggests, there is no clear-cut or obvious formula when it comes to reading trans-diegetic sound, and so further comparisons to *Girlhood* may help to illuminate the narrative meaning constructed by the scene's shifting between sounds and spaces.

As discussed in Chapter Five, using sound, colour and extended duration, Sciamma creates a cinematic space that belongs to the four girls alone, with Rihanna's soundtrack working to create a sense of collective girlhood relationality. By contrast, even though Laila occupies the majority of the audiovisual space, the sequence is not structured solely to stage her agency and freedom. Instead, the film cuts between Laila's dancing, Aaron watching until he eventually joins her, and the men as they drive through the moors. By opening, closing and interrupting Laila's dancing with shots of the men pursuing her, the film communicates that the song does not belong to Laila alone, and that the freedom her dancing signifies is acutely under threat. Laila is able to inhabit the agentic space the song embodies, but the transition between non-diegetic and diegetic sound must also ascribe agency to the men: they also have the power to act, and their agency has the capacity to disrupt, subdue and potentially eliminate Laila's. Unlike *Girlhood*, therefore, the sound design does not anchor us within Laila's interiority; rather, the movement between non-diegetic and diegetic sound serves to highlight and blur four separate perspectives: Laila's as she dances, Aaron's as he watches her, the men's as they search for them, and the spectator's, who is unable to draw these disparate perspectives together cohesively.

Furthermore, opening and closing the sequence with our view of the two groups of men effectively situates Laila as trapped between them, exacerbating the constraints of her environment, both within the film's narrative and its cinematic space. Wolfe's visuals work in tandem with Smith's lyrics here to great effect, for as

much as Smith is undoubtedly a figure of female strength, 'Land' is well known for its ominous lyrics, shifting from overt imagery of male violence to poetic nonsense as the song's rhythm and tempo increase their intensity. A pair of reverse shots featuring Aaron, then Laila, are accompanied by Smith's stuttered vocals ('suddenly, Johnny, gets the feeling he's being surrounded by horses, horses, horses, horses'), thus creating a simple yet effective way of communicating the imminent danger closing in on Laila and Aaron. This is further compounded by the cutaway to the two cars driving through the Yorkshire hills, harmonising with the lyrics 'coming in / in all directions / white, shining, silver studs with their nose in flames.' The image of the cars driving towards the spectator, in combination with the unsettling vocals, produces a sense that not only is the sanctuary of Laila's hideout about to be violated, but also creates a wider impression of the overwhelming patriarchal constellations of power encroaching upon Laila's narrative space.

Unlike *Girlhood's* preservation of the hotel room as a sacred space, Laila is not afforded a room of her own; she instead shares a cramped caravan in the middle of nowhere with her boyfriend Aaron. In addition, where Sciamma makes use of sharp focus, clean lines and balanced compositions during the Diamonds sequence, Wolfe instead constructs Laila kinetically, obscuring her features in rapidly cut, hazy, blurred-out frames. Similarly, Laila's dancing is structured as a part of her everyday world rather than the escape from the ordinary that Sciamma stages when Marieme and her friends retreat to the anonymous hotel room in order to create their own freedom and find their own voices for the night. Laila, by contrast, is confined to the caravan, having been instructed by Aaron not to accept an invitation to go out dancing with her friend to a club. Neither Laila nor Marieme are pictured dancing in a nightclub environment, which would more firmly align their characterisation with the social and with public space. It is crucial to both *Girlhood* and *Catch Me Daddy* that their dancing scenes take place in spaces transgressing the boundary between public and private: the hotel room being both one and the other, while the claustrophobic privacy of the caravan appears too fragile to sustain the border. In different ways, these scenes suggest a hostility of the external world

toward both characters, acknowledging that the private worlds they create for themselves are marked by their wholly improvised momentariness and transience.

While Marieme's capacity to overcome is founded upon finding her own voice, space and movement in relation to those of other girls. Laila's agency is first and foremost constructed by her capacity for initiating movement despite (and because of) external limitations. *Catch Me Daddy's* dancing sequence is emblematic of Laila's momentary escape from patriarchal confinement, extricating herself from her 'real' world by running away and living in hiding with her boyfriend. Yet the real world never quite recedes from view. As this chapter will discuss later, Laila's agency becomes curtailed by the end of the film, and *Catch Me Daddy* significantly complicates the notion of speech being invariably linked to agency. In further contrast to *Girlhood*, *Catch Me Daddy* constructs Laila primarily in relation to her boyfriend Aaron. In fact, the only time we see Laila alone is early in the film as she walks to work (Figure 17). In these scenes, Laila is swallowed up entirely by the vast landscape, barely perceptible within the wide-angle frame. Laila's interiority is not the focus; rather, intercutting her spatial imperceptibility with intimate shots of Aaron's morning routine in the caravan informs us that even when Laila is on her own within narrative time, visually and spatially she remains constructed in relation to Aaron and their relationship.



Figure 17 Wide-angle shot in which Laila's (Sabeena Jabeen Ahmed) form is barely perceptible within the landscape (Wolfe 2014).

Despite so many interruptions, one segment of the dancing sequence remains reserved solely for Laila, in which she appears at her most free and uninhibited as she twirls, twists and drops, the camera in close, following her movement. Through shallow depth of field, extreme close-ups and rapid cutting, motion (and therefore, it is intimated to us, agency) becomes linked to distortion and dissolution. Once again, Wolfe synchronises his hazy visuals of Laila's dancing with Smith's vocals. As Smith sings, 'got to lose control, got to lose control, got to lose control / and then you take control,' the vocal repetition and distorted imagery remind us of the popular view that there is a kind of freedom in losing oneself in affective sensation, as Laila does when she dances. In terms of agency, this works to construct Laila as both capable of losing herself in sound and motion, as well as taking control when she needs to. This is one of the primary ways Wolfe renders Laila as a character constrained by circumstance, yet—at least potentially—in command of her own bodily autonomy and narrative agency. Although the narrative tension and sense of foreboding created by the cutaways to the bounty hunters is effective, the overall sense is that despite the shadowy figures of patriarchy closing in on Laila, she has the capacity to resiliently overcome.<sup>82</sup> In the following section, I will outline how the film's initial construction of Laila's agency through dance is both compounded and complicated by two scenes that effectively rehearse the link between damage and resilience in James' model.

### **'Femininity is first performed as damage, second as resilience'**

If we assume that 'damaged' femininity refers to instances in which qualities of passivity or fragility are emphasised, this is encapsulated by the film in a scene in which Laila's brother Zaheer finds her alone in the caravan and tries to persuade her to come home with him. This scene is important because of how it once again invokes agency in relation to motion; however, in this instance the power initially rests with Zaheer rather than Laila. After lecturing her about family responsibility, Zaheer's attempt to physically overpower Laila backfires fatally, as their struggle

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<sup>82</sup> Following James, it becomes clear that it is precisely *because* of the men pursuing Laila that she is provided with the opportunity to overcome. In other words, the creation of a resilient heroine necessarily depends upon an object or obstacle for her to defeat.

culminates in his fall and accidental death, which triggers Laila's first escape (the first of four, as I will discuss). Because of the scene's position in the narrative, the difference is striking between the Laila who dances and twirls freely, the camera mesmerised by her movement, and the Laila immediately afterwards, framed statically as she sits motionless, staring impassively as her brother reprimands her. The framing and editing choices all indicate that Zaheer's capacity to act is greater than Laila's, his agency being linked to his capacity to move while Laila must remain still, and to speak as she must remain silent.

In the first instance, I want to draw attention to the framing of this scene. Laila is framed in an eye-level close-up, which would typically promote spectatorial intimacy with her character. However, Laila's downcast eyes do not meet the spectator's, showing that the close-up is not intended to showcase emotional interiority, and is to be read instead as passivity. This is exacerbated by the static framing of Laila in comparison with the kinetic medium shot of Zaheer, who paces frantically back and forth, the camera following his movement to keep him in centre screen. The editing of the reverse shots used in this short scene further compounds this relationship between male kinetic agency and female static passivity. Reverse shots are typically designed to show smooth spatial continuity between characters in conversation, usually with eyeline matching which makes transitions appear seamless as well as constructing a kind of emotional continuity. For example, prior to the dancing sequence, Wolfe uses traditional eyeline matching in his cuts between two extreme close-up shots of Aaron and Laila, who are positioned on opposite sides of the frame (Figure 18 and Figure 19). In this instance, using the same extreme close-up to frame each character creates visual harmony, as well as emphasising the intimacy and equilibrium of their relationship by encouraging the spectator to forge emotional connections between Laila and Aaron.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Near the beginning of the dancing sequence, Wolfe also uses intercutting between Aaron and Laila to encourage spectatorial identification with Aaron's character, in addition to Laila's. Although Laila remains our protagonist, creating identification with Aaron, and a sense that Laila cares about him



*Figure 18* Aaron (Connor McCarron) looks at Laila in a close-up designed to promote intimacy through traditional eyeline matching (Wolfe 2014).



*Figure 19* Reverse shot of Laila looking at Aaron in a close-up designed to promote intimacy through traditional eyeline matching (Wolfe 2014).

In contrast, the film's reverses between Laila in close-up and Zaheer in medium framing show the acute imbalance in their relationship, further compounded by the contrast between Laila's immobility and Zaheer's continual movement. Similarly, eyeline matching is forgone in this scene, as Zaheer turns away from the camera immediately before the film reverses to Laila, furthering the disconnect between brother and sister, and between Zaheer and spectator (Figure 20 and Figure 21). Additionally, the close-up indicates that although we are prevented from connecting emotionally with Laila, we are encouraged to empathise with her passivity instead of Zaheer's activity, whose medium framing holds him at a distance, discouraging any identification with his interior motivations. Moreover, in framing Zaheer from a slightly low-angle he appears to dominate the screen, thereby immediately setting him up as a threat to Laila's freedom rather than a character we might want to look to for support. The blocking of the scene further reinforces this sense of Zaheer's curtailing impact on Laila's agency, as rather than reverse back to Zaheer as he is speaking to Laila, the film shows him pacing directly in front of the camera, impeding our view of Laila. The camera remains focused on Laila as its subject, yet Zaheer's movement denies us access to her interiority. More importantly, the entire scene indicates that Laila's narrative space is beginning to contract. Evidently, the space allotted to the film's protagonist is already significantly reduced when her character is envisaged within the confines of a traditionally feminine paradigm. Overall, the static framing, the increasing reduction of Laila's narrative space, and her silence all work to portray her as

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(and therefore we should too), is important for his brutal murder later in the film to have maximum emotional impact.

passive and inhibited from taking action, thus articulating the ‘feminine damage’ (2015: 82) specified by James’ model.



*Figure 20* Medium shot of Laila’s brother, Zaheer (Ali Ahmad), lecturing her about family responsibility (Wolfe 2014).



*Figure 21* Close-up of Laila, eyes downcast in response to her brother (Wolfe 2014).

I will now explain how the passivity constructed through the framing, editing and blocking of the scene between Laila and Zaheer does not ultimately diminish our perception of Laila as a potentially resilient subject; rather, the scene that follows enhances the notion of her as a socially viable subject worthy of our affective investment. As James suggests, traditionally feminine qualities must first be performed to be subsequently overcome. In this instance, the film breaks the stillness as Laila lunges to grab her phone. Zaheer is accidentally killed as he tries to restrain her, and Laila flees out of the window onto the moors. This marks the first of four times Laila narrowly escapes from the men pursuing her. Immediately following, Laila escapes the grasp of Shoby as she runs into the darkness of the moors, and then she unwittingly evades Barry as he searches for Laila in a packed nightclub. Finally, when a suspicious taxi driver seems to know too much about their situation, Laila and Aaron rush out of the car and into the dark hills. All four of these scenes work within the thriller genre to increase the tension of the chase. However, more importantly, they also work to intensify our sense of Laila’s determination and agency, characterising her as someone capable of taking flight and persevering in the face of adversity. In particular, when read together with the kinetic agency of the dancing scene, these escapes create an expectation that against all odds, Laila’s determination and perseverance in the face of adversity will prevail later in the film when Laila does return home to her father.

The escape scenes are also significant in the way they construct Laila as capable of reclaiming her narrative space. In this way, the film creates a link between traditional feminine fragility and contemporary feminine resilience. The dancing scene, appearing early in the narrative, reinforces our initial expectations of the kind of subject Laila is, namely—free and uninhibited by restraint. The film then shifts to articulate traditionally feminine attributes of immobility and passivity that directly challenge and contrast the film’s initial construction of agency in motion. Within the resilience paradigm, femininity remains a burden, albeit no longer one that prevents women from taking action; instead, as James argues, it ‘provides you the very materials with which you *can* do something’ (2015: 84). In other words, attributes like passivity, which have traditionally been ascribed to women and prevented them from owning and mobilising agency, are now the very basis from which women can act—and—through their actions—‘prove’ their resilience and hence viability as social subjects. In this way, Laila’s ongoing movement from one scenario of escape to another becomes the way in which she can prove her resilient viability as a social subject. The norms of traditional femininity remain powerfully intact; however, their parameters and manifestations shift so that traditional femininity no longer *feels* good—unless accompanied by an act of overcoming.

I have explained how the film is designed to invoke an expectation that Laila’s character will overcome her traditionally feminine damage through her capacity for kinetic agency, thus fulfilling the second requirement of James’ model. In this section, I analyse the film’s closing sequence, which constructs a similar dynamic between Laila and her father, where kinetic agency belongs to Tariq and Laila’s passivity is reiterated through static framing, silence, and the gradual reduction of her narrative space. The sequence takes place primarily in Tariq’s restaurant and culminates in his attempt to coerce Laila to commit suicide. In this protracted closing sequence, we are waiting for Laila to *do* something. We expect her to *act* in order to prove herself socially viable, both within her fictional world—and as a protagonist worthy of our affective investment. First, I will briefly discuss framing and narrative space before taking a more extended look at how silence works in

this sequence (which comprises four restaurant scenes in total, each interrupted by cutaways to the two groups of men).<sup>84</sup>

The initial scene is characterised by monotony: the film plays on our desire for something to happen as the scene cuts between Laila hunched over a table and Tariq standing at the restaurant counter. The unconventional rhythm and shot types used in the reverses indicate that the two characters are not in conversation with one another. Rather, where Laila once again remains static and silent, Tariq (like his son Zaheer previously) appears unable to settle. The handheld camera works to reinforce this dynamic, remaining still when Laila is in the frame whilst moving with Tariq as he restlessly shifts back and forth. Overall, the scene focuses much more heavily on Tariq than Laila, with Tariq's 'turns' amounting to more than 80% of the duration. Moreover, in the series of shot-reverses, Tariq is afforded an extra 'turn' in their exchange, meaning the scene concludes by focusing on him, rather than Laila, thus contributing to a sense that Laila's narrative space is being steadily encroached upon and threatened by erasure. This is further reinforced by how the little narrative space Laila is allocated becomes gradually invaded by the camera's increasing too-closeness (Figure 22). While the stillness of the frame and reduction of narrative space generate frustration, these techniques also recall the earlier scene with Zaheer, thus creating an expectation that, once again, an opportunity will eventually arise for Laila to take back her space and reclaim her agency through motion.

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<sup>84</sup> The first scene cuts to Tony, driving away after returning Laila. The second is a phone conversation with Junaid, in which Tariq is informed that Zaheer is dead. The third is the brutal murder of Barry by Junaid, Shoby and Bilal. Each cutaway works to gradually increase the tension. Tariq's anger in response to his son's death and the extreme violence of Barry's murder considerably aggravate Tariq's intensified abuse of Laila in the scenes that follow.



Figure 22 The camera draws increasingly closer to Laila in the film's final sequence (Wolfe 2014).

Because agency is typically measured by one's ability to make choices and take action (Elliott 2013), women's speech emerges as a particularly contested area within feminist scholarship (Parpart 2010). As Jane L. Parpart observes, 'voice, or the act of speaking out' is often characterised as 'one of the key conditions demonstrating women's empowerment' (2010: 13), while silence tends to be perceived as 'passivity and powerlessness' (Gal 1991: 175 in Parpart 2010: 13). With these debates in mind, I discuss *Catch Me Daddy's* use of silence in the first restaurant scene, both with regards to the conspicuous lack of an ambient soundtrack and the absence of Laila's speech. Pertinently, in the concluding chapter of *The Ethics of Opting Out*, Ruti and Jordan Mulder explore the potential of silence as a mode of resistance.<sup>85</sup> Working from a Lacanian perspective, they outline the various forms silence can take, and the different interpretations of silence that are on offer. Mulder asks:

does silence involve an automatic acquiesce to the misrecognitions of the Other? Or can it perhaps be read as a form of resistance, as a refusal to open one's interiority to the interpretive, probing attitude of the Other (or other)? (2017: 215).

<sup>85</sup> Despite the entrenched associations between agency and voice, the power of silence has long been part of feminist traditions. For example, 'Choosing Silence: Defiance and Resistance without Voice in Jane Campion's *The Piano*' (Dalton and Fatzinger 2003) interrogates 'the prevailing metaphor linking voice to power' (n.p) through analysis of the film in which the protagonist Ada chooses 'not to speak, rather than to speak and not be heard' (n.p). Intersecting with Ruti and Mulder's discussion, Dalton and Fatzinger find silence, in particular circumstances, to be 'a tool of defiance' (n.p), a strategic opting out of social systems that restrict one's ability to participate on equal terms.

In response, Ruti asserts that silence always has the capacity to damage or even destroy our social viability (216). Yet Ruti is also interested in whether the refusal to expose one's interiority can possibly also be read as a 'sign that the subject has learned not to heed the desire of the Other, which in most social situations, especially ones involving authority of any kind, elicits the subject's speech (active participation)' (216). In other words, silence can signify a refusal to actively participate in, let alone respond to, normative social enactments of authority.

Cinematically, silence has even greater ambiguous potential. In *Catch Me Daddy*, solicitation of speech plays out across two scenes in the film: one with Laila and Tony as he drives to her father's restaurant, and the other between Laila and Tariq upon her return. Cinematic language, in both cases, aids a reading of female silence as the refusal to actively participate in the terms of dialogue set by the male characters. In each case, it is not only (male) speech and (female) silence we ought to read, but also the cinematic language that frames and enables both. In the first scene, Tony solicits Laila's reassurance that taking her home to her father is an acceptable course of action: 'you'll be ok, back at your Dad's, eh?' When Laila does not respond, Tony repeats his address, insisting: 'Laila. You'll be ok.' Once again, although there is a cut to Laila's face, the dark, grainy close-up combined with her silence reveals little expressive information. In this moment, while we can imagine Laila refuting Tony's claim, her decision to remain silent suggests primarily that she is not heeding Tony's desire (either for speech or reassurance). In this instance, silence does not alter Laila's material reality, but it does suggest that there is some power to be won from refusing to actively participate in her return home.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> It is worth considering Audre Lorde's unequivocal scepticism of the power of silence: 'I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you' (1984: 41). Although she acknowledges that speech has a unique capacity to make subjects vulnerable (particularly racialised subjects, within the context of Lorde's writing on systemic racism), for Lorde it is always worth speaking up, simply 'because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid' (Lorde 1984: 42).

On the one hand, the film offers an example of how silence can operate as a refutation of authoritative power. Equally, however, there is scope to suggest that no act of silence can be either wholly acquiescent or entirely resistant to an authoritative other. As Ruti understands it, 'silence can be appropriated by the Other [...] when the subject does not speak, it offers itself as a massive canvas for the misrecognition of the Other' (2017: 216). This indicates that although it is possible to read Laila's silence as I have above—that is, as a refusal to participate in the fiction that Tony's actions are acceptable, her silence nonetheless remains open to misrecognition. It is hence possible to read Laila's silence as acquiescence rather than an 'active' opting out of the terms of social engagement. However, it seems significant that the male characters who seek to control Laila often respond to her silence by repeating their address, as we see in the above example. This would suggest to me that, although a reading of Laila's silence as acquiescence is not eliminated entirely, there would be no need for the male speaker to repeat his question at the risk of resoliciting the same response if Laila's silence was an unequivocal sign of her submission or complicity. In other words, Tony's character does not find Laila's silence entirely satisfactory, let alone reassuring, and so he must repeat himself in an effort to make Laila speak and agree with his version of events. Tony asks for, but does not receive, her absolution. The significance of speech or its deliberate absence, therefore, do not always only lie in the words themselves, or in what they might impart about aspects of a speaker's interiority, but also in their capacity to signify and communicate an affective component.

Laila's silence in relation to her father works slightly differently. Tariq's question ('are these the keys to the house?') solicits a response through direct address, yet does not demand Laila's active participation in the same way as Tony's bid for reassurance. In this instance, the film reverses to Laila, yet there is no reaction shot of her facial expression and she remains silent. However, there is far less at stake in Laila's silence here, and so it cannot necessarily be read in the same way. This is in keeping with Ruti's suggestion that silence 'can cut both ways' (2017: 216) depending on what is socially expected of different subjects in context-specific situations. Silence, then, must occur at particular moments, in specific contexts, in

order to function as and/or be perceived as a form of resistance. This is where shifting norms of femininity complicate matters. If traditional femininity demands passivity (manifested as silence), then a refusal to speak is more likely to signal acquiescence to convention. By contrast, the demands of the contemporary resilience model are twofold: first, silence is required, which must then be broken, but only with the 'right' kind of sound/speech. *Catch Me Daddy* performs the first step, yet in the second restaurant scene, Laila's silence is broken by prolonged crying, another signifier of feminine excess, rather than a noisy articulation of resilience that would realise the girl's potential for overcoming. Instead of a display of resilience and overcoming the film unleashes an intensification of feminine damage. It is not the performance of damage *per se* that feels bad. In fact, as I discuss in Chapter Four, the intensification of female damage is very often presented as a feel-good experience, always provided it is accompanied by overcoming. However, as my analysis of *Catch Me Daddy* will demonstrate, when female damage is performed without the requisite overcoming it can only generate feel-bad femininity.

### **Resilient Affect**

In the following I will first compare the way Laila's femininity becomes feel-bad due to her excessive emotion with how *Girlhood* and *The Hunger Games* (primarily the film adaptation, though I will also draw on the novel) each feature instances in which their protagonists are shown in control of their affect. The latter two films construct their protagonists' crying in terms of what I call 'resilient affect' or strong emotion eventually overcome in such a way that communicates an individual's self-control. To explain what I mean by resilient affect, I want to draw connections between what Stephanie Shields terms 'manly emotion' (2002: 85), Shonni Enelow's definition of a 'restrained but resilient' (*Film Comment* 2016) acting style, and Berlant's (2015) concept of flat affect. Each explores the legibility of emotional registers. However, while Shields and Enelow identify a cultural ideal demanding a strong affective response expressed through containment or restraint, Berlant's flat affect operates to withhold emotions solicited by dominant affective structures.

Shields describes manly emotion as the dominant ideal within contemporary US society and the standard by which both men's and women's expressions of affect are measured (Shields 2002: 85; Shields and Warner 2007: 98). For Shields, manly emotion is not synonymous with male emotion, and neither is it 'an expression of normative or natural emotion' (2002: 85). Instead, it is 'the expression of deeply felt emotion under such control that it can be telegraphed by the minimal gesture, tone of voice, language, or facial movement' (85). Manly emotion, then, is a cultural imperative dictating that affect be strong and authentically felt, but minimally expressed. Along similar lines, Enelow's analysis of the contemporary American acting style she labels 'restrained but resilient' is expressed through an intensely contained performance style demonstrating a 'resistance to and evasion of spectacular emotionality' (*Film Comment* 2016), recalling Berlant's definition of flat affect as an 'underperformed emotional style' (2015: 199). Enelow finds that contrary to a prior generation of American teenagers on film who fought to 'express their true selves,' the contemporary performances she examines offer no such 'emotional release or revelation,' (2016) fighting instead to control rather than reveal affect.<sup>87</sup> Both Shields and Enelow emphasise control of affect, thereby associating this ability with one's agency and capacity for self-determination.

To differentiate between the feel-bad femininity constructed by *Catch Me Daddy* and the resilient affect in *Girlhood* and *The Hunger Games* I use Julian Hanich's distinction between weeping and crying. Hanich's investigation into 'cinematic crying' (2008: 27) focuses on the lived bodily experiences of audience members within the collective space of the cinema (28). Drawing on Arthur Koestler, Hanich distinguishes between weeping and crying as follows:

*Weeping* has two basic reflex-characteristics which are found in all its varieties: the overflow of the tear-glands and a specific form of breathing. [...] *Crying*, on the other hand, is the emitting of sounds signalling distress, protest, or some other emotions. It may be combined with, or alternate with, weeping (Koestler [1964] 1989: 271–272 original italics).

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<sup>87</sup> Enelow's analysis includes Jennifer Lawrence in *Winter's Bone* (Granik 2010) and *The Hunger Games* (Ross 2012), as well as Rooney Mara in *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* (Fincher 2011) and *Carol* (Haynes 2015), Oscar Isaac in *Inside Llewyn Davis* (Coen and Coen 2013) and Michael B. Jordan in *Fruitvale Station* (Coogler 2013).

Accordingly, although Hanich notes that to draw any distinction between weeping and crying is merely heuristic, he does so to argue that weeping is a primarily silent activity that allows the cinemagoer to avoid the 'isolating effect of shame' (2008: 29) which overt crying would likely provoke.<sup>88</sup> In other words, visual manifestations of distress are more socially acceptable than aural signs, as the shame of crying aloud makes us vulnerable to the 'potentially embarrassing gaze of others' (29). Importantly, Hanich differentiates between 'real' and 'fictional' tears, arguing that while we tend to 'avoid, by and large, the tear display *of others*' (32 original italics) in our everyday lives, 'tears on the screen can have a highly pleasurable effect on us by making us weep in empathic mimicry' (32). In other words, we gain enjoyment from fictional weeping, but draw the line at overt crying, which we no longer experience as pleasurable.

The protagonists of *Girlhood* and *The Hunger Games* weep and their performances therefore remain within the realm of the socially acceptable, as opposed to the socially undesirable overt crying in *Catch Me Daddy*. For instance, in *The Hunger Games*, Rue's death motivates Katniss' tears in a scene primarily comprised of several close-ups of Katniss' face, as she tries to comfort Rue in her last moments. The film ameliorates the emotional effect of any visual signs of distress through framing and posture, and similarly offsets the effects of auditory distress (which is more likely to incur a shame response) either through visual cuts, or by omitting the audio altogether.

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<sup>88</sup> While Hanich's interpretation that 'weeping does not, by definition, involve sounds; it is inaudible' (2008: 30), would suggest that sound is the crucial marker of difference between weeping and crying, Koestler does also describe the breathing patterns of weeping as 'a series of short, deep, gasping inspirations, i.e. sobs' ([1964] 1989: 272) which seems unlikely to be entirely silent. It is a minor distinction to draw, but it would probably be more accurate to say that what Hanich is interested in is the silent weeping of cinemagoers rather than any suggestion that weeping is silent by definition.



Figure 23 Katniss (Jennifer Lawrence) mourns Rue's death, turning inward and away from the spectator (Ross 2012).

During close-ups of Katniss' face, any sounds produced falling within the range of what Koestler identifies as weeping (shallow breathing, sniffing and sharp gasps for air) are kept to a minimum. Similarly, in shots where Katniss' tears are (just about) visible, her face is angled downward, turned away from our gaze (Figure 23). Framing Katniss in close-up encourages emotional connection with her character, while her '*inward-directed*' (Hanich 2008: 33 original italics) posture works to shield us from any outpouring of grief that might overwhelm or inhibit that connection. Portraying Katniss as drawing inward and isolating herself from the audience at this moment ensures that an equilibrium between emotional connection and distance is maintained. Katniss' grief is made legible within a socially acceptable emotional register. In other words, it is not too difficult for us to keep watching the film. Anything threatening to cross the aural boundary from weeping into crying is mitigated by cutting away to Rue. A similar instance of mitigation occurs immediately after Rue's death, as the scene cuts from the close-ups of Katniss' grief to a medium shot of Katniss hurling away the spear that killed her friend. In this moment, we have the visual image of Katniss screaming, yet her scream is silent, scored instead by understated diegetic music. Thus omitting the sound of Katniss' grief means that the scene never truly risks stepping over the line into the shameful territory of crying. Katniss' distress communicates her grief without affectively expressing the shame, social isolation and self-dissolution linked to overt crying that a spectator might find too difficult to handle. While Katniss' character does not necessarily display resilient affect in this scene, in the moments where she does

lose control, the film itself tightly maintains it, allowing Katniss' (and our own) capacity for resilience to remain intact.

The editing techniques used in *The Hunger Games* ameliorate the impact of distress at the same time as rendering Katniss' character legible within an emotional register of resilient overcoming that corresponds to dominant norms surrounding the display of affect. By contrast, *Catch Me Daddy* combines the audio-visual components of crying with visceral effect. In particular, images such as Figure 24 are especially unusual in that Laila's crying is not aestheticized; instead, she is framed in a close-up that emphasises her tear display rather than attempting to conceal or otherwise mitigate the impact of her distress. Laila's tears are not discreet, not quiet, and neither the actor nor the camera make any effort to turn inward or direct us away from her crying. Moreover, the combination of visual and auditory manifestations of distress equates to an almost intolerable sensation of intimacy.



Figure 24 Close-up of Laila crying in *Catch Me Daddy's* closing sequence (Wolfe 2014).

*Girlhood's* construction of resilient affect is comparable to that of *The Hunger Games* where blocking and framing are used to create a sense of Marieme's affective response at the same time as producing a distanced spectator position. For instance, Marieme at first stands with her back to the camera and is framed in a

medium-long shot, both designed to keep us at a distance from the visual signs of her distress, as well as reducing the impact of her audible sobs. When Marieme turns to face screen left, we can both see and hear her crying, though the medium shot and profile of her face work to somewhat mitigate her distress (Figure 25). However, as the camera draws in closer to Marieme, it also pans away from her, slowly edging her out of shot (Figure 26). There is potential to read this as leaving Marieme behind. The camera no longer has an interest in her story, as if Marieme had exhausted her options and is no longer capable of the transformation required.

However, as I suggested in the previous chapter, there is room for a reading in which the camera's shifting gaze in fact offers Marieme privacy, as well as shielding us from her affective overflow.

It is also important that when Marieme reappears within view by stepping forward into a close-up, she is no longer crying. Although the question of what lies ahead for Marieme is left open, there is an assurance of perseverance in her look of stoic determination (Figure 27). Moreover, Marieme is shown capable of regulating her affect, which reads as her being in control of her fate, much like Katniss' carefully calculated withholding of emotion in the first *Hunger Games* book discussed in Chapter Four. In their study on the 'social value of tears,' Leah Warner and Stephanie Shields suggest that a:



Figure 25 Profile medium-long shot of Marieme crying in the final scene of *Girlhood* (Sciamma 2014).



Figure 26 The camera rests on an image of a blurry landscape, having panned away from Marieme (Sciamma 2014).



Figure 27 Marieme looks determined, after stepping back into the frame (Sciamma 2014).

moist eye in a sad context [...] signals that a strong emotion is being expressed in response to an uncontrollable loss but also that the emotion is sufficiently under control so as not to produce an overflow of emotion and full-blown crying (2007: 95).

While their study suggests that a 'moist eye' is most effective at conveying emotion that we perceive as authentic and justifiable, the ability to control one's affect is equally important. Marieme's crying is more intense than mere weeping, but her eventual ability to control her emotion constructs her as competent and in control, positioning her safely within norms of crying deemed socially acceptable. In contrast to Katniss and Marieme who produce little to no tears at all and whose crying is ameliorated by editing and composition, *Catch Me Daddy* does not shy away from or attempt to mitigate Laila's distress. On the contrary, Laila sobs (rather than resorting to stoic weeping), and her crying is both messy and prolonged.<sup>89</sup> In spite of the given norms of resilient femininity which demand that girls overcome or control their affect, here it is Laila who is overcome by her emotions. Within resilience discourse, Laila's unmitigated overflow of tears signifies that she possesses an excess of what James labels 'feminine fragility' (2015: 82). A performance of resilient affect remains absent by the narrative's close and, consequently, is unavailable to the spectator.

*Girlhood* and *The Hunger Games* construct weeping as a private, dignified act prioritising one's internal world, communicating that their protagonists can take care of their own emotions, therefore signalling autonomy over the self. They offer up the pleasures of emotional empathy and embodiment of resilient affect, all the

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<sup>89</sup> The crying scenes in *Catch Me Daddy* find an intertextual reference point in *Vive L'Amour* (Ming-liang 1994) whose closing sequence includes a six-minute medium close-up of the female protagonist Lin Mei-mei crying. Song Hwee Lim's analysis notes that in the critical reception of the film, 'many said the crying went on for too long' (2014: 125). Although Lim describes the scene as 'an unrelenting soundtrack of female sobbing that borders on the unbearable' (125), it is interesting to note that it uses similar techniques I have detected in *The Hunger Games* and *Girlhood*, both of which ameliorate the impact of distress by separating the visual and aural manifestation of crying. In *Vive L'Amour*, the prolonged sobs are indeed devastating. However, the effect is somewhat mitigated by the way Lin Mei-mei's hair partially obscures her face. It is only once she stops crying that Lin Mei-mei pushes her hair back from her face. In other words, we hear her crying but are protected from having to fully witness her distress. This correspondence in the aesthetics of crying across genres further supports Hanich's argument regarding its social undesirability and capacity for (perceived) self-dissolution.

while keeping intact the fantasy of a coherent and controlled subjectivity. In *Catch Me Daddy*, the scenario of Laila's uncontrollable crying threatens to disrupt any such illusion. Crying in this instance is an undignified, relational 'cry for help' in which one solicits external assistance; it signifies a reliance on and interdependence with others, as well as communicating a devastating lack of control over one's self. The self-dissolution associated with crying recalls the earlier dancing scene in which, through Smith's lyrics ('got to lose control / and then you take control'), Laila is shown as embarked on the liberatory process of losing and taking control at will. Of course, any loss of control in this instance would be temporary, taking place within the limits and boundaries of the song's duration and transpiring through the socially acceptable mode of dance. Hence, there is no true risk of self-dissolution in this scene.

### **Feminine Damage**

An idealised contemporary femininity is supposed to be fragile but not *too* fragile. This explains why Laila's femininity feels bad: she does not overcome her fragility in the way we expect of a female heroine. Moreover, as I have shown, the film creates an expectation that any fragility or passivity will be either narratively overcome or formally mitigated (or both). However, while the protracted scenes featuring Laila's crying are indeed incredibly uncomfortable, it is the abrupt ending that truly makes this film a feel-bad experience as it denies us the opportunity to watch Laila overcome her excessively feminine damage. Laila's crying not only violates an unwritten social contract, it violates the spectatorial contract established by the film's endlessly deferred promise of resilience. In other words, the social damage generated by the crying scenes could likely be tolerated were it in the end ameliorated or transformed into the affective resilience the film leads us to anticipate, yet which it, as we shall discover, ultimately withholds.

I would like to compare the film's conclusion, which cuts to black in medias res before we see Laila make a choice or determine her fate, to the turning point of the film, in which Laila chooses to return home to her father (in exchange for the release of Aaron's kidnapped mother). This decision aligns with Elliott's concept of

suffering agency, described as ‘the way in which choices made for oneself and according to one’s own interests can still feel both imposed and appalling’ (2013: 84). As discussed previously, Elliott identifies a growing genre of popular novels that update and reconstruct genres of self-preservation and survival in a way that highlights how our agency can be experienced as a trap rather than bringing us closer to freedom or empowerment (84). Moreover, Elliott’s coinage of the term serves as a tool to critique the neoliberal fetishization of individual choice. For example, suffering agency is a recurrent motif in the post-apocalyptic television series *The 100* (Rothenberg 2014–) in which we are constantly reminded that ‘there are no good choices’ (5.6 ‘Exit Wounds’). The series is almost pathologically preoccupied by the problematic of agency, choice and personal interest under imposed restraint, as it continually introduces situations in which female characters in particular must prove themselves capable of making decisions with appalling consequences. As Clarke, one of the teenage protagonists remarks, ‘whatever choice I make, somebody always dies’ (4.12 ‘The Chosen’), indicating the kind of futility identified by Elliott in which systemic domination is uniquely connected to our individual capacity for choice, action and agency. Further analysis of this series might interrogate the degree to which staging scenes of suffering agency in fiction gradually comes to naturalise our grasp and our experience of circumstances in which there are no good choices, resulting in suffering beginning to seem inevitable.

Much like Ruti and Mulder’s problematisation of speech as a marker of active participation, Elliott’s concept is an indicator of our complicity in our own suffering. As discussed in Chapter Four, Elliott identifies a type of personhood that is constituted through common sense neoliberal logic positing ‘interiority as the possession of interests; interests as the motivation for choice; choice as the engine of action; chosen action as measure of agency; and agency as a sign of personhood’ (2013: 88). I interpret this as a linear, additive set of propositions which establish a self-reinforcing (‘common sense’) rationality wherein agency becomes the sole defining factor of personhood. To become socially intelligible within this framework, one must demonstrate personhood through actions that function as a

measure of agency. Action is instigated by choices, which we make according to our personal interests or stake in our own welfare. In other words, to keep one's social viability intact (within the neoliberal paradigm), one must make choices and take action that is within one's own interests. Within this framework, *which* choice is not significant; what *is* important is that Laila *must* choose.

If suffering agency refers to circumstances in which we must decide between two unbearable choices, this is precisely the kind of no-win situation the film stages at its point of no return. Hiding with Aaron in the darkness of the moors, Laila is presented with a choice in which she can either keep running and risk Aaron's mother being killed by the men that hunt her, or she can return home and face her father. In this way, Elliott's concept illustrates how power works upon subjects, not through denying the opportunity to act as such, but rather through turning our choice-making capacity into a no-win catch-22 nadir. While this particular scene in Wolfe's film operates as an example of suffering agency, it is not designed to make us feel bad in Lübecker's sense of the term. Although we might experience negative or unpleasant emotions at the thought of Laila returning home to her domineering father, this scene delivers rather than denies our expectations of resilient agency. In this way, scenes of suffering agency begin to feel, if not *good* exactly, then perhaps satisfying, simply because they deliver on our expectations of a resilient heroine who overcomes adversity by making choices and taking action under duress and within reduced circumstances. As I will illustrate in the conclusion, it is any interruption of this form of presumed agency that feels bad precisely because it denies us the manifestation of resilience that the film has led us to anticipate.

### **Agency, Interrupted**

In its final scene, the film orchestrates another situation in which the 'choice' of action is left up to Laila. Tariq instructs Laila to climb up onto a chair, physically manoeuvring her when she refuses. This is in line with previous examples of Tariq's dominance over Laila, for instance a scene in which he repeatedly assaults Laila by violently kicking her, or another scene in which he forces her to drink alcohol. However, in this instance, rather than continuing to exert his will physically, Tariq

shouts at Laila to place a wire noose around her neck. This informs us that the film is not simply about a father's control over his daughter; if that were the case, it could present Tariq looping the wire around Laila's neck himself. Rather, in its final moments, the film is interested in Laila's complicit agency. When Laila complies and slips her head through the wire, we are aware that she does so under duress, yet it is also understood that she is making a choice. Unlike the earlier staging of suffering agency, Laila makes a choice that is decidedly not in line with her own interests. The film orchestrates a scenario in which Tariq could kill Laila as he has threatened to, but instead he wants her to actively embrace or enact her own complicity in his violence against her. Tariq wants Laila to make the *right* choice, which is of course a choice of *his* making. The quandary of Laila's agency is further emphasised as, after setting the situation in motion, Tariq walks away from Laila, the camera following him as he sits on the floor and cries. In contrast to his previously dominant position in the frame, Tariq is now small, slumped over in the background of the shot (Figure 28). Tariq's power within the frame (and therefore over Laila) is considerably diminished, especially when compared with earlier shots in which Tariq dominates Laila's physical space, obscuring her from view (Figure 29) or appearing almost demonic in his rage (Figure 30).



Figure 28 Tariq (Wasim Zakir) ceases active coercion of Laila and cries (Wolfe 2014).



Figure 29 Tariq forces Laila to drink gin, his body obscuring hers within the frame to communicate his power over her (Wolfe 2014).

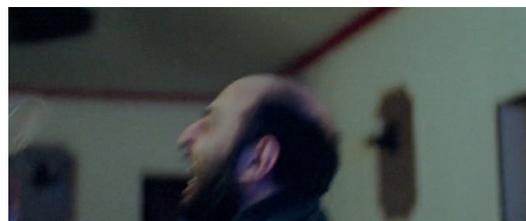


Figure 30 Tariq, shouting at Laila (Wolfe 2014).

Much like the prior restaurant scenes, Wolfe stretches out the closing sequence with a series of reverses between Laila and Tariq. The use of suspension and duration in these final moments opens up potential to imagine alternative courses of action: Laila could remove the wire, make further appeals to her father, run—or

even step forward from the chair. While an act of coerced suicide would make a horrific conclusion to an already bleak film, it would not be a feel-bad film, as it would provide a form of satisfaction arising from subjective self-determination. Similar to the scene on the moors, if Laila were to jump, her choice would be imposed and appalling (as Elliott might be likely to claim), yet it would still read as a determination of her own fate within limited circumstances. Instead, the film offers a close-up of Laila's feet, motionless in the frame (Figure 31), before cutting to a long shot of her standing, arms by her sides (Figure 32). These shots indicate clearly that although Tariq is no longer actively coercing her, Laila remains passively in place, sobbing and calling out for her father. The diminishing focus on Tariq recalls Sumi Madhok *et al.*'s Foucauldian observation that 'agency and coercion cannot be understood in a binary relationship of presence/absence, where the one is present only by virtue of the other's absence' (2013: 2–3). In other words, just because Tariq is no longer actively coercing Laila's compliance does not mean that consequently her capacity to act freely and of her own accord necessarily increases. The contradictory ways in which Laila is constructed as both passively complying with and actively resisting her father's will point to this complication of the relationship between agency and coercion, yet they also create frustration as the film's feel-bad qualities partially arise from the ways it creates a perception that Laila is capable of overcoming, yet in the end 'chooses' not to do so.



Figure 31 Close-up of Laila's feet as she stands on a chair with a noose around her neck (Wolfe 2014).



Figure 32 Laila standing, motionless, calling out to her father (Wolfe 2014).

It is often much easier to find value in narratives that portray protagonists (successfully) navigating worlds that are not designed for their flourishing (as Berlant might put it), as we see it at work in *The Hunger Games* and *Girlhood*. It becomes much more difficult to parse the value in a film like *Catch Me Daddy*, in

which the odds seem far less insurmountable than those faced by Katniss or Marieme, and yet Laila is constructed as a character who appears to regress to an almost pre-feminist sensibility, one that the film's structure will not allow her to overcome. In spite of this, I would like to argue that it is an idealised version of resilient agency that the film's closing illuminates. If traditional forms of resilience and agency have been co-opted, and the suicidal act is not a truly viable alternative, then there is clearly an impasse of some kind at play. My intention in reading the film through the framework of resilience and scrutinising the different forms of agency it works with is not to assign moral value to resilience and declare that performing resilience makes us 'bad' (neoliberal) subjects. For, as James points out, *'because resilience discourse is hegemonic, your "choices" will be judged against an ideal of resilience whether you like it or not'* (2015: 20). In an everyday context, most female subjects cannot afford to opt out of performing resilience. However, while we may not be able to bear the loss of our social viability, a fictional character certainly can. My analysis of Wolfe's film raises the question of whether watching a character perform an excess of feminine damage, without being eventually rewarded with the requisite overcoming, creates a spectatorial fear of losing our own social viability. More importantly, how might such an impact on the spectator be productive within the film's generic framework? If resilience and agency are the newly conventionalised feminine normativities, as the two previous chapters have shown, I want to consider the potential value in this film's construction of feel-bad femininity, as it opens up an opportunity to take into account the forms that a refusal to participate in societal expectation might take.

To this end, I want to draw a loose parallel between Lübecker's understanding of negativity in cinema, James' notion of resilience, and Edelman's celebratory reclamation of the alignment between queerness and the Freudian-Lacanian death drive in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). Edelman advocates an embodiment of that which impedes our social viability, calling for a queer politics that embraces rather than attempts to refute negative associations with death and social disruption. His central argument in *No Future* is that death-driven queerness poses a threat to the heteronormative reproductive sexuality symbolized by the

figure of the child, for whom we must secure a brighter future. Edelman proposes that the promise of a better future operates as a fantasy of stability, wholeness and self-coherence, where death drive is figured as that which disrupts our efforts towards maintaining such a fantasy (2004: 10). It is this endlessly deferred fantasy of a seamlessly intact future that distracts from improving the conditions of our eternally fragmented, imperfect present. To counter the logic of reproductive futurism, Edelman situates it in direct opposition to queerness, which, he argues, 'names the side of those not fighting for the children' (2004: 3) and hence the side of those against the future. Turning towards negativity, Edelman proposes, is a method of refusing the false optimism of reproductive futurism and 'the insistence of hope itself as affirmation' (2004: 4). In other words, Edelman advocates refusing futurity and the hope it represents in popular and political culture.<sup>90</sup> In *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2013), Edelman and Berlant define negativity as 'the psychic and social incoherences and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike, that trouble any totality or fixity of identity' (2013: vii-viii). In other words, they conceive of negativity as that which has the capacity to undermine our sense of self-continuity or coherence as social subjects. Moreover, negativity is 'the relentless force that unsettles the fantasy of sovereignty' (vii-viii). In this formulation not only are we severed from any complete understanding of ourselves, but any fantasy of ourselves as autonomous agents is also shattered.

Within this paradigm, it would be possible to conceive of *Catch Me Daddy's* scenes of immobility, silence and self-dissolving crying as productive of precisely this kind of negativity, which troubles the fixity of Laila's identity as a resilient subject and reminds us that the sovereignty resilience discourse purports to offer is a fantasy. When read in relation to resilience discourse, Edelman's theory of death-driven

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<sup>90</sup> It is worth noting that this school of anti-relational negativity is contentious within the field of queer theory. For instance, in the 2006 *PMLA* summary of the Modern Language Association conference forum, Tim Dean, Halberstam and José Muñoz strongly disputed Edelman's antisocial thesis. In particular, Muñoz's (2009) work on queer utopianism provides an important alternative perspective, asserting that queerness is in fact 'an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world' (2009: 1).

negativity might advocate that rather than attempt to overcome the trauma associated with femininity, we ought instead to embrace its negative associations.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, the concept of the feel-bad film engages directly with our relationship to negativity. Just as James observes that we can cope with the negativity of traditional femininity as long as it is surmounted, Lübecker too suggests that we can bear negativity momentarily, as long as it is eventually narratively and/or formally contained. The feel-bad film refuses this containment of negativity, instead exacerbating and intensifying unpleasant affect, disavowing closure and satisfaction in a way that corresponds to Edelman's refusal of social viability. Likewise, the film increases the negativity of femininity, refusing us the release of overcoming.

Significantly, in this framework, queerness (which for Edelman is virtually synonymous with negativity) ostensibly becomes 'ethical' through 'its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social' (Edelman 2004: 3).<sup>92</sup> Resisting the viability of the social is the chief aim here—seemingly at any cost. This would also appear to dovetail with much of the work of this thesis, which has engaged with the problematic of postfeminist social viability across various narratives and genres. I find Ruti's interpretation particularly helpful here, as she explains that Edelman's theories are considered ethical (rather than simply nihilistic) because within discourses of queer theory, the 'antinormative almost automatically carries an ethical force' (2017: 28). In other words, to oppose the social order in any way,

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<sup>91</sup> There is a prolonged and persistent historical association between femininity and negativity. For example, Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (1985) explains how by the end of the nineteenth century hysteria was widely recognised as a uniquely feminine condition in psychiatry and literature (129), and that in the Victorian era women were perceived as innately 'childlike, irrational, and sexually unstable' (73). Sara Mills complains that 'many [feminists] have paradoxically gone on to celebrate the traits or behaviour that we have been assigned, as if these traits were in some sense inherent, rather than socially constructed, as if we might as well make the most of what we have got' (1987: 189). In this respect, a theoretical imperative to embrace negativity is hardly innovative. Frustratingly, the connection between femininity and negativity proves remarkably durable, as thirty years after Mills' critique Ruti designates 'queer theory's depictions of "feminine" masochism, passivity, submission' as 'a flimsy excuse for misogyny' (2017: 188). In particular, Ruti strongly denounces Halberstam's alignment of feminism with 'masochistic passivity' (2011: 131), particularly his assertion that female self-cutting 'is a feminist aesthetic proper to the project of female unbecoming' (135).

<sup>92</sup> This speaks to a concern with the viability and sustainability of social and cultural scripts, practices, ways of living, ideologies and affective structures, as opposed to the alignment of any given individual with those socially dominant norms.

opting out of its terms of discourse and debate, is always presumed to be an ethical act. However, Ruti also critiques Edelman's theoretical position as 'a mechanical celebration of incoherence—nonsovereignty, dissolution, fragmentation, instability, and so on—that forecloses all other registers of being, that valorizes life's most exhausting frequencies' (142). She is also concerned that:

the kind of radical self-dissolution that Edelman celebrates can only be undertaken from a position of relative security, that deprived subjects—many women, racialized subjects, and those who lead economically precarious lives (that is, subjects whose claim to symbolic identity is shaky to begin with)—simply cannot afford to abandon themselves to the jouissance of death drive in the way that more secure subjects might be tempted (or even compelled to do) (2017: 125).

What Ruti alludes to here is that each subject's claim to symbolic identity—that is, her ability to align fully with social norms—is inevitably a determining factor in her capacity to oppose or violate those social norms. This resonates with James' (2015) acknowledgement that deprived subjects are precisely the ones who have the most damage to recycle, and who need to hold on to what little social capital they manage to acquire.

The difference between resilience (as a hegemonic marker of social viability) and agency (as the way in which resilience manifests) is important. If *Catch Me Daddy* had opted for a closing scene in which Laila removes the wire, it would have created a potential for conventional forms of agency and resilience to emerge. Whereas were Laila to jump, even though a suicidal act has the potential to read as a form of agency, it is difficult to imagine interpreting it as a straightforward act of resilience. On the one hand, the potential for overcoming in this scenario remains wholly unclear. On the other, if—as I have argued—contemporary feminine resilience manifests in making choices and acting upon them, then even the suicidal act could be read as a form of overcoming.

As I have argued in Chapter One, the figure of the dead girl articulates the paradox in which self-annihilation becomes the most effective method for securing a subject's social viability. I discussed how the dead girl manifests often as an escape from conventional femininity; in this instance, however, the possibility of Laila

choosing death would only further affiliate her with contemporary feminine norms. An affinity emerges here between *Catch Me Daddy* and *Gone Girl*, in which both position suicide as an act that might secure their protagonists a measure of social viability, albeit under different postfeminist paradigms and with different narrative functions. *Catch Me Daddy* constructs the suicidal act as entangled within a discourse of self-determination and agency, where self-striking is a requirement of social acceptance in the narrative world of the film and legible as a resilient choice within a contemporary postfeminist framework. Here, then, are two narratives in which suicide is constructed as a potentially socially viable act—preserving rather than shattering our alignment with the social order.

However, more importantly, as my analysis in this section has suggested, for Laila to be read as a viable feminine subject it does not actually matter which choice she makes—only that she does make one. Social expectation ceases to be about making the ‘right’ choice, and instead simply demands that we make any choice at all. The way to become an acceptable female subject is to overcome perceived gender deficits, illustrating that for female subjects to successfully come of age in a postfeminist setting, the narrative obstacle they must defeat is femininity itself. By contrast, Laila’s opportunity to complete the coming-of-age process is suspended by the film’s abrupt cut to black, following its final image of an extreme shallow focus close-up from behind Laila’s head (Figure 33). The closeness of the camera exceeds the intimacy of a typical close-up: not only are we provided with very little information regarding Laila’s interiority or motivation, but the distorted image does not even invite our consideration. Rather than a close-up of Laila’s face which might typically encourage identification, the film shifts to a form of depersonalised intimacy which, along with the cut to black, suggests that the closing scene is no longer interested in Laila’s character here and what she might or might not do. Instead, the film structurally opts out of the choice-making resilience paradigm, disengaging from the problematic of female characters and their agency or lack thereof. In doing so, the film removes the predicament of Laila’s choice from the aesthetic field of interpretation. We can interpret and find meaning in this formal

decision, but not in the choice itself, which is excised from the film's narrative, denying her character and the spectator access to the very terms of the debate.

Whereas the resilience model encourages us to *use* our negative feelings, our excessively affective femininity, and create surplus value, Laila's feel-bad femininity generates negativity but denies us a positive or cathartic experience of overcoming. In this way, the film's very structure suggests that there is nowhere for Laila to go within the narrative—as there are simply no choices left to make. If, as I have argued, the genre itself shows itself incapable of producing socially viable feminine subjects, then classic narrative structures like the hero's quest are in fact fundamentally hostile to the production of female subjects, who are encouraged to overcome not just traditional forms of adversity, but also conventionalised femininity. My reading of *Catch Me Daddy* illuminates this idealised version of resilient agency. It has enabled me to interrogate the complexity of our fantasies surrounding the attainment and implementation of agency and resilience, to investigate what makes feminine subjects socially viable within their culturally and historically specific contexts and, most crucially, to question the price we are willing to pay for social inclusion.



Figure 33 *Catch Me Daddy's* final image, an extreme close-up of the back of Laila's head (2014).

## Conclusion

This thesis has sought to develop vital new lines of enquiry in feminist media studies, with the particular aim of understanding the relationship between postfeminist empowerment discourse and contemporary genres aimed at women and girls. By examining how postfeminist empowerment discourse has shaped contemporary genres and emergent female subjectivities, this thesis draws from and contributes to the fields of girlhood studies, gender studies, and feminist media studies. As Handyside notes, scholarship on postfeminism has typically concentrated on the important work of analysing the phenomenon in very detailed thematic terms, with a focus on plot and characters (2016: 123), or else as Colling suggests, investigated the ideological implications of media texts (2017: 11). Building on this work, I have explored the period after postfeminism, eschewing reading practices designed to assert the ways in which cultural works either align with the postfeminist sensibility, or else subvert its norms. Instead, I have focused my readings on how postfeminism is constructed narratively, aesthetically and generically. The scope of the chosen texts has demanded an examination of affect, agency, impasse, and the complexities of both maintaining and rejecting social viability within a postfeminist framework.

I began the thesis with three primary research questions, the first of which considered the particular formations of contemporary female subjectivity produced by postfeminist discourses. Accordingly, the first two chapters focused on how these narratives are structured by the fantasies of postfeminist empowerment discourse; it is here that their affective impact is felt most acutely. Chapter One found that efforts to maintain social viability within a postfeminist framework have grown increasingly strained, compounded and aggravated further by a postrecession culture of precarity and insecurity that poses a significant threat to the postfeminist promise of personal autonomy and liberation. Chapter Two explores this precarious cultural landscape in which *Girls* emerges, animated by a good life fantasy (Berlant 2011) that harbours a pervasive sense of loss and disappointment.

Chapter Three then provides an important difference in perspective by temporarily abandoning the postfeminist dilemma altogether. Despite affective continuities across *Girls* and *Appropriate Behaviour* and their respective visions of extended girlhoods in New York, postfeminism manifests only along the peripheries of *Appropriate Behaviour* and has minimal bearing on the narrative. Having established the argument that traditional postfeminist ideas have begun to decay in the cultural imagination, Chapters Four and Five then explore the emergence of resilience as a defining characteristic of contemporary girlhood genres. While what I have called resilient femininity is far from the only subject position available to women and girls, I have argued that its growing ubiquity spanning multiple genres and expressed through numerous affective registers necessitated a heightened focus in the thesis.

My second research question concerned how contemporary fictional genres navigate the paradoxes of postfeminism. My project has found that affect is central to the way fictional genres make sense of the numerous postfeminist contradictions women and girls are subject to. The key tension of empowerment discourses is the imperative for female subjects to present themselves as wholly autonomous, while at the same time concealing a performance of traditional femininity. As Gill (2007) explains, self-discipline and surveillance are among the tactics women undertake to ensure compliance with cultural feminine norms, while simultaneously perceiving and presenting these tactics as a freely made choice. In my analysis of *Gone Girl*, I emphasise that the novel's significance lies in its structural and generic articulation of the paradoxes of trying to maintain social viability within a postfeminist cultural landscape. Building on this, my reading of *Catch Me Daddy* concentrates on the tension generated by resilience genres which demand that traditional femininity must be performed and visibly overcome for female subjects to achieve social viability. In relation to different postfeminist paradigms, both *Gone Girl* and *Catch Me Daddy* go to extreme lengths (narratively and aesthetically speaking) to articulate and expose the 'bad feelings' postfeminist discourses cultivate and suppress.

My final question considers the kinds of affective registers produced by postfeminist culture. Overall, this thesis demonstrates that exploration of the affective dimensions of girls' and women's culture can offer new insights into how coming-of-age, girlhood and femininity are culturally produced in the aftermath of postfeminism. In the process, I have argued that it remains vitally important to continue analysis of postfeminist culture, at the same time as interrogating its discursive mobility. As the myriad impacts of its cultural dominance continue to crystallise, new methodologies are needed to make sense of the postfeminist legacy. By testing the elasticity and applicability of existing theoretical positions and pioneering new methods of reading, the thesis contributes to disciplinary debate and practice within postfeminist media studies and girl studies through its introduction of a number of critical approaches to understanding affect in relation to media cultures aimed at women and girls. In particular, I have disclosed a productive synergy between Lauren Berlant's concept of impasse and *Girls'* recursive aesthetics, which is expressive of a continual desire to reject and subsequently return to normative postfeminist convention. I have drawn from and adapted Nikolaj Lübecker's work on negativity in cinema: first, to better understand how postfeminism is now being culturally produced as a feel-bad genre incapable of producing fulfilled subjects, and second, to identify the bad feelings produced by films that break their contractual promise of delivering a resilient overcoming of feminine suffering. Finally, by integrating Jane Elliott's work on suffering agency and Mari Ruti's concept of defiant agency with Robin James' model of resilience, I have been able to delineate an account of how both popular literature and art house cinema aestheticize resilience as a newly conventionalised feminine norm.

In Chapter Six, I primarily read *Catch Me Daddy's* final image of Laila, standing paralysed on a chair with a noose around her neck, in relation to the hard cut to black which leaves the audience hanging on the verge of the choice-making paradigm. Here I want to revisit this final image, in particular to further consider the suggestion that it may offer potential resistance to the 'viability of the social' (Edelman 2004: 3), a key concern of the thesis. As indicated by Ruti, any resistance of this kind tends to be championed as automatically having ethical value. Yet it

feels disingenuous to wrest something ostensibly positive from a scene of such utter despondency. As I have argued, the image of paralysis constructed by *Catch Me Daddy's* final scene destroys any fantasy of resilient girlhood we may have held. The feel-bad femininity constructed by the film certainly unsettles fixity of identity, and its narrative structure undermines any sense of subjective sovereignty. Yet when read in terms of resisting social viability, the film orchestrates a scenario in which it becomes impossible for its protagonist to do so. Irrespective of which choice she makes, in making any choice at all Laila retains her claim to symbolic identity as a resilient subject.

Moreover, we must consider the feel-bad aesthetics that precede Laila's standing on the chair. Crying, silence and paralysis in the face of patriarchal violence do not simply feel bad because they deny us an aesthetic experience of resilience. Or, to put it another way, resilience does not simply feel good because it facilitates our alignment with social expectation (though this is certainly part of the equation). Rather, it feels good because resilience is bound up in our ability to survive and at least attempt to thrive within social environments that are often not designed for us to do so. Ruti writes that:

the strand of queer theory that advocates various versions of the ethics of opting out often promotes the ideal of antinormativity so indiscriminately that one act of defiance seems just as good as any other, irrespective of the "content," let alone the outcome, of the act in question (2017: 37–38).

This suggests that perhaps the value of negativity, antinormativity, incoherent subjectivities and threats to fantasies of sovereignty is not in fact as self-evident as queer theory so often suggests (Bersani 1995; Edelman 2004; Halberstam 2011).<sup>93</sup> Therefore, while *Catch Me Daddy* can serve as a productive theoretical exercise in exploring the limits of agency and the devastation of stripping its protagonist of her

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<sup>93</sup> The anti-relational school of thought within queer theory originates with Leo Bersani's *Homos* (1995), in which he argues that 'the most politically disruptive aspect of [...] gay desire is a redefinition of sociality so radical that it may appear to require a provisional withdrawal from relationality itself' (1995: 7), positioning queerness as intrinsically anti-relational. Extending Bersani's formulation, Edelman (2004) links queerness to the Lacanian concept of death-driven jouissance and self-undoing. See Chapter Six of this thesis for further detail on Edelman's arguments in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. For further insight into the anti-relational strand of queer theory, see Lorenzo Bernini's *Queer Apocalypses: Elements of Antisocial Theory* (2017).

viability, it would be controversial to suggest that the negativity generated by Laila's fictional pose constitutes an ethical ideal. As I have shown in Chapter Four, resilience discourse cannot be reduced as simply being tantamount to the neoliberal/postfeminist status quo. Furthermore, as Huehls (2016) suggests, it is possible to accept the ongoing hegemony of dominant hierarchical structures without surrendering entirely to them. Therefore, even as I might find Edelman's valorisation of negativity conceptually intriguing, its critical sustainability must remain in question.

A reading focused on the value of negativity captures the girl's coming-of-age genre within a paradigm that appears to allow for a construction of girlhood in which female suffering is intensified, not to be overcome, but to be celebrated as an antinormative act of self-dissolution. Moreover, such a reading valorises this fragmentation of girls' subjectivity when, as Ruti suggests, it is so often 'women, racialized subjects, and those who lead economically precarious lives (that is, subjects whose claim to symbolic identity is shaky to begin with)' (2017: 125) from whom such dissolution is most often demanded. Instead, I consider the image of Laila as constructing the ultimate impasse, highlighting the impossibility of free choice and demonstrating that in situations where 'webs of power [...] surround us' (45), sometimes the costs of resisting the viability of the social are simply too much to bear. Furthermore, perhaps it is not always strictly necessary. As I have demonstrated in my analysis of postfeminist culture, it is instead worthwhile making the effort to 'inhabit the world the way these texts and their characters do' (Huehls 2016: xi). Rather than resisting and critiquing our social circumstances, we are likely better off trying to adapt to and explore any impasse we find ourselves in (Huehls 2016; Schoene 2017).

With this in mind, future research might consider the question of what it means to be a feminine subject following the gradual collapse of the fantasy of the happily empowered, freely choosing, self-scrutinising subject of postfeminism. If, as I suggested in the introduction to this thesis, postfeminism has already irrevocably altered the conditions in which feminine subjectivity is formed, then it is imperative

to give further consideration to what relationality, agency and resilience look and feel like in our contemporary context. As the readings in this thesis have demonstrated, the aftermath of postfeminism produces a diverse range of contradictory subject positions. It is especially important to consider the implications of these complicated and sometimes ambiguous positions and relations for the field of postfeminist media studies.

My primary contributions to the field lie, first, in my argument that there are two distinct but overlapping strands of postfeminist culture, namely, the empowerment genres prevalent in the 1990s to mid-2000s, and their continuing legacies in post-2008 resilience genres. As with any kind of periodisation, determining a precise beginning and ending to any particular era must inevitably be fraught. Nonetheless, a conceptual periodisation of postfeminism has enabled me to create a descriptive abstraction of the postfeminist era typified by choice, autonomy and individualised empowerment, and provide a framework for understanding its primary subject positions, generic elements and ideals. Furthermore, it offers a conceptual framework for understanding resilience discourse as being intimately entwined with, yet distinct from empowerment genres. It is worth clarifying here that my intent has not been to use the term 'postfeminist resilience' for the purposes of rigidly classifying yet more cultural works as postfeminist. Rather, in line with Berlant's (2008) conception of genre as a set of mutating conventions that evolve in response and relation to shifting social and historical conditions, my delineation between empowerment and resilience genres is made with a view to understanding the intersections and divergences between them. For example, the readings I produce in Chapters Two and Five demonstrate the centrality of transformation to both paradigms. However, my analysis shows that in *Girls* this process leads to circular repetitions that hold little sense of fulfilment or completion of subjectivity, whereas *Girlhood* retains some (cautious) optimism for transformation as a survival tactic that facilitates connection and mobility. This illustrates the affective ties between the different genres aimed at women and girls, at the same time as demonstrating the ways in which their priorities diverge significantly.

The second contribution is made in the first two chapters, which provide insight into the shape of a new discursive field in which fictional millennial women are beginning to work through their experiences of growing up with the fantasies of postfeminist empowerment discourse as the primary mode of address structuring their lives. In particular, the thesis illuminates a major cultural turn in which the construction of postfeminist empowerment in popular genres begins to drastically shift from an affective register of enjoyment, carefree pleasure and fun, to one in which postfeminism is articulated as a site of rage, horror and resentment. This significant finding suggests that although postfeminist ideals remain culturally prevalent, there is also a profound shift in constructions and perceptions of the capacity for postfeminist empowerment discourse to deliver a path to fulfilment. At the very least this opens up additional affective registers through which to understand postfeminist empowerment discourse. Furthermore, it constitutes an important step in rendering postfeminist empowerment ideals not only as unattainable, but more importantly as undesirable.

The final three chapters of the thesis contribute an in-depth understanding of how young femininity is increasingly constructed through the language of resilience. Where James provides an examination of how contemporary pop music formally constructs resilience, I have expanded the scope of her project to analyse audio, visual, narrative and structural aesthetics of resilience across film and popular literature. The thesis develops an affective lexicon to better understand contemporary modes of defiant, transformative and relational resilience, as well as a framework through which to expand on further modes that are specific to the genres they emerge within. For example, my reading of *The Hunger Games* introduces the concept of defiant resilience, exploring ways in which subjects might risk their social viability in opposition to the expectations of their social order. This model acknowledges the complexities of existing histories of trauma and oppression, while at the same time proposing that survival often necessitates resilience against these forms of suffering.

Taken together, the conclusions I reach across six chapters demonstrate a variety of ways in which postfeminist empowerment discourse has profoundly shaped contemporary fictional genres aimed at women and girls and their constructions of feminine agency and subjectivity. The genres I consider in this thesis vary considerably—including a crime thriller, a single-camera American comedy, an independent film, a series of young adult novels, and two art house films—and each text brings a unique generic history to bear on its narrative. In addition to illustrating the extensive scope of the thesis project, what my chosen texts and analysis show is that postfeminist empowerment discourse has continuing significance across popular and independent genres alike, as well as across a range of media and modes of address.

Moreover, although this thesis has gone some way to intervene in work on postfeminist media analysis, it has also presented potential areas for further investigation. For instance, whereas Chapter Two concentrates primarily on *Girls*, a series that has been critically and generically influential (Bernstein, *Guardian* 2017), further research might address the degree to which postfeminist concerns extend to comparable works exploring girlhood in New York, such as *Broad City* (Glazer and Jacobson 2014–) and *Search Party* (Bliss *et al.* 2016–) or female-led series like *Insecure* (Rae and Wilmore 2016–) and *Fleabag* (Waller-Bridge 2016–), as well as examining their specific affective tonalities. For example, while comedy series *Broad City* is indebted to *Girls* and shares many of its narrative characteristics and concerns, its exuberantly surreal affective register is worlds apart from the quiet devastation in *Girls*. This poses the question of why exactly postfeminist empowerment discourse is so troubling for some female subjects, while others in equivalent circumstances appear relatively unscathed.

The thesis offers a contextually specific and flexible set of theoretical concepts and frameworks through which to explore such questions. The approaches I have developed through engagement with affect, aesthetics and genre will offer other feminist scholars a newly expanded vocabulary to make sense of the continuing impact and legacies of postfeminist culture, as well as produce an ever more

nuanced account of contemporary feminine subjectivities. In undertaking this research, I have demonstrated that postfeminist discourse continues to have significant currency within contemporary culture, in both its empowerment and resilient formations, and that each of these paradigms deserve further consideration within current discussions and debates in the field of feminist media studies.

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