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Mediating Third-Wave Feminism: Appropriation as Postmodern Media Practice

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□–*In this essay, we explore how sensibilities of third-wave feminism are appropriated by and in the context of postmodern media such that they are commodified, reinscribed, and sold to audiences in an hegemonic fashion. To this end, we analyze gendered representations of women located at various mediated sites of popular culture in whom gender is conspicuous and primary: Alanis Morissette, Kate Moss, and Ally McBeal. We argue that, in each case, the appropriation of third-wave feminist tenets is accomplished via a postmodern aesthetic code of juxtaposition that serves to recontextualize and reinscribe those sensibilities in a way that ultimately functions to reify dominant patriarchal codes and discourses.*

THEY are evident everywhere in the mass media today: Scores of outspoken, vibrant, defiant young women, vocal about sexism and endowed with an exhilarating sense of entitlement based precisely on their gender, are demanding our attention. Popular culture touts this phenomenon as a "brand-new feminism" that appears to take gender equity for granted, is more self-obsessed, wed to the culture of celebrity, primarily concerned with sexual self-revelation, and focused on the body rather than social change. A recent *Time* article, for instance, laments a change in feminism apparent in its latest mainstreamed, media-blitzed incarnation, asking: "Fashion spectacle, paparazzi-jammed galas, mindless sex talk–is this what the road map to greater female empowerment has become?" (Bellafante, 1998, p. 56, p. 60).

These images bear more than a passing resemblance to so-called third-wave feminism, a contemporary feminist movement that is strikingly different from the second-wave feminism of Gloria Steinem. Indeed, third-wave feminists define themselves first in terms of what they are not; namely, they reject the feminism of the second wave, claiming that it reflects almost exclusively the perspectives and values of white, middle-class, heterosexual

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women who define themselves primarily as oppressed victims of patriarchy. Although third-wave feminism resists easy definition beyond its reaction to the second wave, two recent, edited texts attend specifically to its core sensibilities: Rebecca Walker's *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (1995) and Barbara Findlen's *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Generation of Feminists* (1995). Here, young feminists claim that third-wave feminism features a celebration of difference in terms of identity construction, in which signifiers such as race and binary gender are rejected in favor of ambiguity and multiple positionalities; Walker notes that third wavers, women of a generation raised with a consciousness of multiculturalism, have trouble

> using theories that compartmentalize and divide according to race and gender and all those other signifiers. For us, the lines between Us and Them are often blurred, and as a result we find ourselves seeking to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and our multiple positionalities . . . . (p. xxxiii)

The politics of difference that drive third-wave feminism thus are manifest in an embracing of contradiction so that apparently inconsistent political viewpoints coexist in the name of third-wave feminism. This is evident in various ways, not the least of which is with respect to sexuality. Third-wavers seek to embrace sexual desire and expression, freeing it from the limits of patriarchy and heterosexuality as well as from what they perceive to be the anti-sex sensibilities of second-wave feminism. Several of the contributors to *To Be Real* and *Listen Up* are gay and bisexual, and many of the contributors, irrespective of their sexual orientations, describe the profound sense of empowerment they experience in defining themselves sexually, first and foremost, and thus reclaiming their sexuality.

Empowerment takes on a different meaning in this new feminism in other ways, as well—not in collective terms, as with the second wave, but in very individualistic terms. Being empowered in the third-wave sense is about feeling good about oneself and having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are. Vigorous assertion of one's individuality, then, is highly prized by third wavers, such that an "in-your-face," confrontational attitude also can be described as a hallmark of the third wave. Lamm (1995) illustrates the nuances of this attitude:

> If there's one thing that feminism has taught me, it's that the revolution is gonna be on my terms. The revolution will be incited through my voice, my words, not the voice of the universe of male intellect that already exists. And I know a hell of a lot of what I say is totally contradictory. My contradictions can co-exist, cuz they exist inside of me, and I'm not gonna simplify them so that they fit into the linear analytical pattern that I know they're supposed to. (p. 85)

Finally, a salient characteristic of third-wave feminism is its embeddedness in popular culture; several of the contributors to both *To Be Real* and *Listen Up* cite MTV, the fashion industry, and television shows as major influences in their lives, both past and present.

As noted, popular culture seems to have returned the favor; an energetic, exhilarating, fresh feminism appears to infuse every corner of the contemporary mass media, usually in the form of vibrant, assertive, and powerful young women. The political and social implications of these mass-mediated representations raise important questions for cultural critics however. Do these me-

dia depictions truly represent the long-awaited and hard-won mainstreaming of feminism? Or is this media phenomenon dangerous for feminism, largely due to the slick media conventions used to convey those representations? In this essay, we explore how third-wave feminism is appropriated via certain postmodern media practices. Our interest in this project is twofold: As cultural critics, we are concerned with understanding the nuances of postmodern media techniques with their political and social implications; and as feminists, we are interested in assessing this mass-mediated incarnation of feminism. Our analysis, then, assumes the form of a case study of how third-wave feminism is presented in the mainstream media. In particular, we analyze gendered representations of women located at various mediated sites of popular culture–namely, music, advertising (as it occurs in print media), and television–in whom gender is highly conspicuous and primary, in such a way that sets them apart from their peers in the respective media: Alanis Morissette, Kate Moss, and Ally McBeal.[1] Specifically, we argue that certain tenets of third-wave feminism are appropriated, commodified, reinscribed, and "sold back" to audiences via a postmodern aesthetic of strategic juxtaposition in such a way that those feminist sensibilities are not only defused but ultimately rendered consonant with the dominant paradigm that they appear to resist–thus, the ultimate function of these mass-mediated representations of third-wave feminism is hegemonic.

Postmodern Media Practices

Understanding how the particular postmodern media technique of juxtaposition functions requires an awareness of the broader context of postmodern media practices. As Harms and Dickens (1996) point out, "postmodern culture is characterized first and foremost by mass-mediated experiences and new cultural forms of representation" (p. 211). Postmodernism, positioned in contrast to modernist assumptions of absolute, knowable truths, is premised instead on the understanding that all knowledge is relative and multiple; it is thus characterized by paradox and inconsistency. This gives inevitable rise to what Foucault (1972) termed the "decentering" of the subject and the consequent decentering and fragmentation of society, wherein multiple discourses coexist.

The fit of media into the frame of postmodernism is an easy, natural one. Baudrillard (1981), in particular, has noted extensively the role of the mediated image in postmodern society, such that the distinction between image and substance–or fantasy and reality, the latter of which is all but meaningless in a postmodern frame of reference–is erased, and the simulations appear more real than that which they represent. This state of "hyperreality," a phenomenon attributable expressly to the mass media, thus becomes the contextual mode for a postmodern society.

Not only are the media conducive to postmodernism, but, as many have noted, they cultivate it. The tendency to collapse news and entertainment to create "infotainment" has been chronicled by a number of theorists (see, e.g., Altheide & Snow, 1991; Miller, 1986), as has the similar dismantling of distinctions between program content and advertising messages (see, e.g., Aufderheide, 1986; Kaplan, 1987). Gitlin (1986) and Grossberg (1989) have argued that media technologies are utilized strategically to the end of

cultivating this blurring of distinctions, such that mediated images ultimately are rendered "nonrepresentational, nonreferential, and depend[ent] on formats and codes for their substance" (Harms & Dickens, 1996). In addition, postmodern media often are characterized by self-referentialism; that is, they reference preexisting media images in a code that thus becomes increasingly exclusive and serves to further decontextualize meaning or substance.

Highly characteristic of postmodern media and contributing significantly to this decontextualization of meaning is the technique of pastiche, wherein random images are communicated in the media wholly absent of narrative logic. Gitlin (1989), who describes pastiche as "cultural recombination," notes that it allows "anything [to be] juxtaposed to anything else" (p. 350)–for instance, images of terrorism immediately followed by a toothpaste commercial. The effect of pastiche, according to Harms and Dickens (1996), is that it ultimately "overwhelms that individual's ability to interpret [the images'] meaning rationally . . ." (p. 216) in the absence of cohering narrative logic.

Lyotard (1984) has argued that the rejection of a grand master narrative that defines and controls society and its members in favor of various, coexisting, and amorphous micronarratives is fundamentally, inevitably liberating, and several media theorists similarly have noted the emancipatory potential for audiences implied by the postmodern media in a postmodern age (see, esp., Fiske, 1991; Gergen, 1991; Kaplan, 1987). In this view, audiences are active subjects, crafting their own meanings from the postmodern media pastiche of images and texts, and the polysemic–even contradictory–nature of those artifacts serve to ensure a limitless range of information in which audiences may steep themselves. They may pick and choose their identities and attitudes at will and discard them just as readily.

Other theorists, however, are warier. Harms and Dickens (1996), in particular, have advanced a critique of this very position, cautioning that "[t]he new information technologies that are at the heart of the postmodern condition cost money, have developed within the logic of capital, and are produced by corporations interested primarily in accumulating capital" (p. 220). Too many postmodernists, they posit, have turned a blind eye to the social, historical, and political economic context of media production and thus the "powerful material forces" that guide it (p. 219). The decentering of the subject in which postmodern media practices result, argue Harms and Dickens, serves to erode rather than cultivate subjectivity. Furthermore, this effect is strategic: "postmodern media practices . . . are more accurately seen as forces employed to 'divide and conquer' . . . communities and subcultures that might otherwise offer active resistance" (p. 223). Notably, in Harms and Dickens's discussion of strategy, specific intent on the part of an identifiable source is not at issue; rather, the authors describe particular, recognizable patterns and invited interpretations obtaining from postmodern media techniques that serve to reify and reinforce existing, dominant codes of discourse.

In this same vein, we argue that appropriation is one strategy of postmodern media employed to the end of deflecting such resistance. In this analysis, we apply and extend the work of postmodern media theorists by examining how appropriation is a function of postmodern media techniques. The

means by which this appropriation is accomplished is an aesthetic code of juxtaposition, which occurs under the guise of the established postmodern techniques of pastiche and eclecticism, characterized by random, incoherent images and/or codes of signification that serve to deconstruct meaning. In this manner, messages of resistance are coopted, commodified, and sold to audiences as a "genuine imitation"—something whose code appears strikingly similar to the resistant discourse but, by virtue of strategic repositioning, is rendered devoid of challenge. Significantly, because this juxtaposition functions politically to distort and undermine original meanings, appropriation rather than irony is at issue; although irony may certainly serve a political function, and it, too, turns on altered meaning as a result of juxtaposition, unlike appropriation, irony is not characterized by the "claiming . . . of another's meaning, ideas, or experiences to advance [one's own] beliefs, ideas, or agenda" (Shugart, 1997). In particular, we argue that in the cases of gendered media representation that we examine—Alanis Morissette, Kate Moss, and Ally McBeal—third-wave feminist sensibilities are appropriated via an aesthetic code of juxtaposition, which serves to recontextualize and reinscribe said sensibilities, thus functioning hegemonically by manufacturing the consent of audiences.

Alanis Morissette: "Covering" Third-Wave Confrontation and Contradiction

With the release of the enormously successful *Jagged Little Pill* CD in 1995, Alanis Morissette[2] launched a new genre within the larger popular musical genre of alternative/progressive rock. Described as "abrasive" (Morris, 1996, p. 1) and "that angry chick" (Sheffield, 1998, p. 119), Morissette is credited as the founder of a genre of "frankly sexual, girl-empowering songs" (Dougherty, 1998, p. 41). Gender is highly conspicuous in *Jagged Little Pill,* and, indeed, the CD drew a great deal of public attention precisely on that point; Morissette's music quickly came to be seen as emblematic of the heretofore suppressed rage of women scorned (see, e.g., Salvato, 1996; Timson, 1997), and it resonated with scores of young women.

Several third-wave feminist characteristics are apparent in *Jagged Little Pill,* most prominently the overt consciousness of sexism—women are clearly defined as exploited, in particular by their male lovers, in Morissette's music. Notably, the theme of women's exploitation is never featured absent of the attendant theme of confrontation, and this is entirely reflective of third wavers' "in-your-face" assertive attitude. Finally, the third-wave proclivity for contradictions is apparent in Morissette's music in that the women depicted in them are inconsistent—in any given song, unpredictability characterizes the women featured, and on two tracks, the women described are entirely antithetical to the female characters that populate the other tracks on the CD. In particular, the third-wave tenets of confrontation and contradiction are appropriated in Morissette's music via the postmodern media technique of juxtaposition.

"You Oughtta Know" arguably captures the gendered essence of Morissette's music; it has been described as an anthem of female rage. The song unfolds from the perspective of woman whose lover has left her for another

woman, and it chronicles her anger at having been deceived and betrayed: "it was a slap in the face how quickly I was replaced . . . Does she know how you told me you'd hold me/Until you died, 'til you died/But you're still alive." "Right Through You" also is a ringing indictment of men's patronizing attitudes and condescending behavior toward women: "You took me for a joke/ You took me for a child/You took a long hard look at my ass/And then played golf for a while . . . You pat me on the head/You took me out to wine dine 69 me/But didn't hear a damn word I said."

While exploitation is the defining feature of woman as constructed by the collection of songs on Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill,* profoundly significant is the fact that this theme never occurs in isolation of the attendant theme of aggressive confrontation, entirely reflective of third-wave feminist sensibilities. Indeed, at least as prominent a theme as exploitation in Morissette's music is the portrayal of women as aggressive and confrontational. "You Oughtta Know" epitomizes this moment: "And I'm not gonna fade/As soon as you close your eyes and you know it/And every time I scratch my nails down someone else's back/I hope you feel it . . ./And I'm here to remind you/Of the mess you left when you went away. . . ." The notion of implied violence adds weight to the confrontational element of the song; the various references to a slap in the face, scratching nails, and a cross to bear are vivid physical images that compel acknowledgment of the confrontation.

Similarly, in "Right Through You," the protagonist–a woman who had been exploited and patronized by, apparently, a wealthy older man–revels in her later confrontation of him: "You didn't think I'd show up with my army/ And this ammunition on my back." Although the references are metaphorical–her army and ammunition are her wealth and success, as the song reveals– the choice of metaphor is telling, as is the fact that she has returned to flaunt that success and, evidently, use it against the man who once exploited her. Here, too, the prior exploitation is balanced by confrontation, and not of the private, civil sort. The message that aggressive, take-no-prisoners confrontation is exhilarating and rewarding is unmistakable. Both "You Oughtta Know" and "Right Through You" unconditionally reject the role of the sorrowful, wronged woman as pathetic martyr; rather, this woman is angry and aggressive, and she revels in it.

The women described in Morissette's music also are inconsistent to some extent, reflective of third wavers' acceptance of contradictions. One of these instances is apparent in "Head Over Feet." This song describes a woman's capitulation to, gratitude toward, and infatuation with her lover. This theme alone is quite a departure from the remainder of the album, much of which describes the manipulative and sexist behaviors of male lovers. This song also suggests that the woman in this case is not being exploited but that certain traditional, sexist stereotypes are valid and even desirable: "You treat me like I'm a princess/ . . . You held your breath and the door for me." "Mary Jane" represents a second instance of internal inconsistency with respect to how gender is constructed in *Jagged Little Pill.* This song centers about a woman, as the others do, but it describes a forlorn, hopeless woman–it contests the claim in the other songs that assertiveness and challenge/confrontation are desirable traits: "Well

it's full speed baby/in the wrong direction/There's a few more bruises/If that's the way/You insist on heading/ . . . You're the last great innocent." The song appears to describe a woman beaten down and resigned, and optimism is nowhere in sight. The price of awareness is exhaustion, and confrontation is for the naive.

Women thus are overarchingly characterized in Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill* as aware of and even anticipating sexism, confrontational, and inconsistent, all traits that are highly reflective of third-wave feminism's sociopolitical sensibilities. However, *Jagged Little Pill* is problematic as a musical version of third-wave feminism. Interestingly, the very same features that characterize third-wave feminism, manifest in that context as social consciousness and political critique, are apparent in Morissette's music; however, by virtue of postmodern media techniques, they have been appropriated and consequently commodified, repackaged, and sold as anger. Further defusing the sociopolitical feminist nature of the observations included in the music, the anger featured is not just any anger but that of a vindictive, vengeful, and unstable woman.

The postmodern media technique by which this particular appropriation is accomplished is the aesthetic code of juxtaposition; in particular, the third-wave tenets that are appropriated in Morissette's music are those of confrontation–the "in-your-face," assertive attitude so characteristic of the third wave–and contradiction. Morissette is by no means the first female artist to sing about love gone awry, but she does so in a highly distinctive fashion; there is no mistaking her voice, her lyrics, and her music. What makes it particularly distinctive is the aesthetic of juxtaposition–in particular, the juxtaposition of extremes. In her music, passionate love is juxtaposed with obsessive hatred; plaintive grief with intense rage; alluring sensuality with images of violence and death. Upon listening to Morissette's music for the first time, one cannot be sure where the next lyric will go–whether it will spiral into a shriek of outrage or trail away on notes of wry amusement. For instance, the song, "Right Through You," appears to open with a touching reunion: "Hello Mr. Man/You didn't think I'd come back." That lyric, however, is followed immediately by–juxtaposed with–a threatening image: "You didn't think I'd show up with my army/And this ammunition on my back." The extreme and paradoxical nature of these juxtapositions serve to invite an interpretation of women, as constructed by Morissette's music, as unstable and disturbed.

As a result of such juxtapositions, characteristics of third-wave feminism apparently represented in Morissette's music in fact are deconstructed. The third-wave propensity for "in-your-face" confrontation, prominently featured in Morissette's music, is recontextualized and consequently reinscribed as dangerous and sinister, unpredictable and imbued with violence–the distinction between assertive challenge on political grounds and personalized, obsessive threat is collapsed. Furthermore, by virtue of the extremes represented in the juxtaposition aesthetic evident in Morissette's music, the third-wave proclivity for contradiction is recontextualized as dangerous instability, an inconsistency so extreme that it is deranged. In this light, the inconsistent constructions of women on the CD also may be interpreted as indicative of instability, particular because

the inconsistency is personal and apparently introspective, reflective of mood and emotional tenor, rather than political and directed outward.

The interpretations prompted by the aesthetic code of juxtaposition naturally have repercussions for the general feminist messages of Morissette's music. The aspersions cast on the collective character of the women portrayed in the music serve to undermine the female ethos entirely so that the observations of sexism that characterize the music also become suspect, quite possibly the delusions of disturbed women. Ultimately, Morissette's music, which is remarkably congruent with third-wave feminist characteristics on a number of levels, represents an instance of appropriation by virtue of the postmodern media technique of juxtaposition such that those very characteristics are repackaged, commodified, and sold back to consumers as a "genuine imitation."

Kate Moss: "Modeling" Third-Wave Androgyny

In the world of fashion, Kate Moss has sparked considerable public discussion on the basis of gender in terms of her function as a role model for young women and as a sociopolitical symbol regarding the status of feminism in the mainstream. Moss, the 25-year-old British supermodel whose hallmark is her extreme thinness, is described in the popular press as "fashion's most famous waif" (Various authors, "Scoop," January 25). In fact, her waif look has drawn considerable fire from critics (Leland 1996; Leo 1994); Moss is often singled out from among her peers for modeling a particularly damaging body image for young women.

Although issues relevant to gender arguably are featured in all of Moss's work, her work as the centerpiece of Calvin Klein's CK One campaign is particularly appropriate for this analysis; these ads were featured in numerous–especially print media–and several widely known photographs from the campaign also are included in Moss's recently published retrospective of her career (1997). To some extent, the CK One campaign models diversity to the extent that it features people of color; this is notable given that the world of fashion privileges whiteness, although the dynamics of exoticization in this context cannot be ignored. The campaign in general and Moss in particular also blur the boundaries between male and female. In the first place, CK One is billed as a "fragrance for a man or a woman" and is marketed to both men and women. Traditionally, fragrances have been rigidly gendered; although individual men and women may buy and wear fragrances designated for the opposite sex, no fragrance before CK One purposely blurred the boundaries between the two by marketing to both men and women. What is being marketed conceptually is androgyny–the blurring of boundaries between masculinity and femininity that occurs when men and women adopt both male and female characteristics (Wood, 1999). In fact, the specifically third-wave sensibility of androgyny, reflective of third wavers' resistance to a binary conception of gender, is appropriated in the CK One representations of Moss via the postmodern media technique of strategic juxtaposition.

The CK One ads feature androgyny primarily through the hairstyles, clothing and body type of the models. Most of the men and women have short-cropped, masculine haircuts, while Moss and one of the men have long,

"feminine" hair. The clothing of Moss and the models also signify androgyny because all of the models wear either long jeans or some other version of jeans: two women wear short jean skirts, while Moss wears cut-off jean shorts. Moreover, the men and women all wear the same basic top; many of the models, including Moss, wear muscle shirts, while those who do not are either bare-chested men or women in bra-like tops. Both the jeans and the muscle shirts are rich with gendered meanings that suggest boundary blurring; women are "putting on" the signs associated with male clothing–muscle shirts, with connotations of strength and power, and jeans, a male style of clothing that also signifies the history of women adopting jeans in the 1960s as a symbol of their equality. Thus, the message seems to be that men and women can adopt one another's styles; consistent with third-wave sensibilities, binary gender is rejected.

These androgynous signs are coupled with an androgynous body type. Although Moss is short for a model, she shares the same basic body type of all the other models, irrespective of sex: a lean, taut, slim-hipped, and angular body. Moss's waif body, then, is only a smaller version of the body type of the other, taller female and male models. The women's slender and angular bodies are highlighted when three of the women are turned sideways. Positioning some of the women sideways causes the eye to be drawn to the angular lines of the women's bodies and emphasizes how similar the women's bodies are in relation to the men's bodies: these women appear to be "breastless," like men. Moreover, the women who pose directly into the camera, including Moss, also reveal their slender, slim hips because their bodies look like straight lines; there are no curvaceous women in these ads. However, upon closer examination, the bodies of the models are not as similar as they initially appear. The men also have this angular, flat-chested body type, but they possess rather more bulk and muscularity than the women.

Moss and the CK One ads suggest that androgyny is achieved when both men and women have the same body type. Unfortunately, androgyny ultimately is appropriated in these representations in ways that function hegemonically. That is, Moss and the CK One campaign ultimately reinforce a highly traditional female sexuality that continues to privilege male characteristics and practices that keep women weak, vulnerable, and at risk. Moss's fashion work privileges male qualities and characteristics because androgyny is juxtaposed with and thus constrained by a backdrop of masculinity that serves as the benchmark for interpretation. With few exceptions, only women adopt male signs; the men featured do not reciprocate by adopting female signs. In terms of hairstyles, for example, only one man has "feminine" hair, while all of the women other than Moss adopt short-cropped or short hairstyles. With respect to the clothing worn by Moss and the other models, both the jeans and the muscle shirts privilege male qualities and characteristics. Also significant in this respect is the fact that the women adopt this male style without reciprocity in the ads; none of the men have adopted female clothing signs.

Lack of reciprocity between the men and women also occurs in the body type of Moss and the CK One campaign. The "androgynous" body type privileges male qualities and character-

istics because it is a "boyish ideal" that suggests strength and leanness and also requires obsessive dieting, exercising, and/or bulimic and anorexic practices for women to achieve. Moreover, although there is some debate regarding just how many women actually engage in anorexic or bulimic practices, femininity in current culture demands that women internalize an anorexic/bulimic mindset that keeps them rigorously and actively engaging in practices that renders them thin and, ultimately, weak and vulnerable (Bordo, 1993). This boyish ideal, then, is problematic because it symbolically and literally denies real women's bodies and the markers of female reproductive capabilities–breasts and hips.

Bordo (1995) recognizes that the slender body can be deconstructed with multiple meanings, including a newfound freedom from reproductive domesticity for women. However, when

> the same slender body is depicted in poses that set it off against the resurgent muscularity and bulk of the current male body-ideal, other meanings emerge. In these gender/oppositional poses, the degree to which slenderness carries connotations of fragility, defenselessness, and lack of power over or against a decisive male occupation of social space is dramatically represented. (p. 470)

The juxtaposition of male and female bodies in the CK One ads works to contrast male and female qualities, which highlights the fragility, weakness, and inferiority of femininity in relation to masculinity. Moreover, because femininity is consistently juxtaposed against masculinity, the women likewise always are viewed in opposition to and "other" than the men. One significant implication of this juxtaposition is that women are always reminded of their "place" with respect to masculinity–they are always inferior to men. At best, Moss and the other women in the ad campaign can always only be second best–weak little "men," who are always more fragile, vulnerable, and inferior. Thus, the ostensibly androgynous body type and styles of the CK One ad campaign ultimately reify patriarchal representations that privilege male qualities and characteristics. The CK One campaign, as modeled by Kate Moss, suggests further that androgyny does not entail reciprocity but instead requires that women adopt masculine qualities; in turn, this promotes real, material practices that keep women weak, fragile, and, sometimes, ill. In the CK One ads, in large part accomplished by the representation of Kate Moss, androgyny is appropriated by virtue of being unhinged from its third-wave feminist moorings and the real material life-practices of women. In particular, masculinity and femininity are juxtaposed in such a way as to ensure that androgyny functions hegemonically to promote and reinforce male privilege in the fashion media.

Ally McBeal: "Enacting" Third-Wave Sexuality

Like Morissette and Moss, the character of Ally McBeal, featured on the television show of the same name, has engendered significant popular interest with respect to her implications for gender and feminism. Often referred to as the "Generation X Mary Tyler Moore show," the show revolves around the lives of several attorneys in their late twenties and early thirties in a start-up Boston law firm with Ally, a 28-year-old, single, Harvard-educated litigator, as the star. Since its premier in the fall of 1997, the show has hit a cultural nerve particularly with regard

to gender issues, as Ally makes statements, such as, "I am a strong, working career girl who feels empty without a man. The National Organization for Women–they have a contract out on my head" (Heywood, 1998, B9), that draw the attention of the popular media. The June 29, 1998, issue of *Time* magazine, for example, touted Ally McBeal as a representative of the phenomenon of the professional single female, brandishing her as the cover girl for the "new face" of feminism of the 1990s.

Certainly, the show and the character for which it is named reflect some of the sensibilities of third-wave feminism. The show embraces contradictions, allowing us to witness Ally's conflicting bouts of assertiveness and tentativeness. At times, she is presented as a fragile, self-absorbed girl who longs for traditional, heterosexual marriage and, at other times, as an assertive woman, making statements such as: "Women can change the world; there's more of us. I just want to get married first." The show gives an odd nod to multiculturalism, as well, featuring Asian-American and African-American characters, often shown in interracial relationships. Admittedly, these portrayals of multiculturalism are superficial, as other traits of the characters are emphasized so that race becomes a "non-issue." The show also blurs the boundaries between males and females by having many of the central scenes take place in a unisex bathroom at the law firm, dramatizing the idea that "when nature calls, we're all equals, exposed in our natural state" (Krakowski, 1998, p. 56). Female sexuality is featured prominently in *Ally McBeal,* as well, and its depiction is superficially consistent with third wavers' embracing of female sexuality as powerful. While the show and the character for which it is named thus feature a few of the characteristics of third-wave feminism, it is this libertarian, third-wave notion of female sexuality that is appropriated and subverted via the postmodern media technique of juxtaposition.

Whereas third wavers extol unfettered and entirely self-defined sexual expression and identity, the embracing of female sexuality on *Ally McBeal* is couched within a particular understanding of power–one steeped in heterosexuality with men at the center. This is the pattern for female behavior evident in *Ally McBeal,* one marked primarily by the female characters' flagrant use of sexuality as a means of getting what they want. The women in the show understand that men can be controlled by their "dumb stick" (an "Ally term" for penis), apparently unable to control their desires for women and sex, and they (the women) relish this power. When Ally's roommate tells her, "Men at court talk about your short skirts, and that's what you want them to do, right?" Ally replies with a sly smile, "No, I want them to talk about my *legs.*"

The female characters understand this power that comes via their sexuality, and they use it not only to get what they want but also to correct "moral wrongs," usually when men have been maligned by women. For example, in an episode featuring a sexist, confrontational, Howard Stern-like talk-show host, Ally, fearful that the host had been offended by her colleague Nell's public implication that he was impotent, uses her sexuality to right a wrong when she appears on his televised talk show. For instance, when asked by the host as to why Nell started the rumor that he was impotent, Ally replies

coyly: "We were trying to turn you on in court, and you never made a move; we were hurt." Back at the law firm, Ally's colleagues watch her televised performance in horror, mystified as to her motive. In a later explanation of her performance to the host, Ally says:

> What you do [make sexist remarks on the air], while I don't like it, is presented in the form of entertainment. What we did at the press conference [imply his impotence] is below the belt. My coming on this show maybe took some of the air out of *our* show.

Defining power as the ability to attract men leads to intense competition between women—in particular, competition to be the object of men's desire inevitably pits women against each other. Douglas (1994) argues that this type of catfight, often portrayed in the media, historically has served as a backlash tactic with two functions: "it puts the lie to feminists' claims about sisterhood and reasserts in its place, competitive individualism in which women . . . duke it out with each other" (p. 223). Competition between women—usually for male attention—is rampant on *Ally McBeal,* and it features women engaging in behaviors ranging from hairpulling and fistfights to wistful conversations in which they bemoan the fact that their female colleagues are beautiful, making comments such as, "I always knew I was not the smartest, but I thought I could always be the fairest."

The embracing of female sexuality as described by third-wave feminists is thus appropriated and articulated instead as male defined and oriented in *Ally McBeal* by virtue of the postmodern media technique of juxtaposition. In the case of Ally McBeal, the juxtaposition occurs here between viewing conventions that encompass particular codes and images, reflective of Collins' (1997) discussion of the media technique of eclecticism. The style of *Ally McBeal* is extremely eclectic, oscillating rapidly between the genres of cartoon, karaoke, and soap-opera drama. The alternation between these generic conventions happens sporadically—sometimes between lines, sometimes between scenes. For example, as Ally sees her "doctor ex-boyfriend" in a hospital setting typical of soap operas, her mouth opens and tongue becomes extremely elongated, reminiscent of the Roger Rabbit cartoon, as she drools over her ex-boyfriend. Likewise, as she fantasizes about her body, her breasts grow in cartoonish fashion until they explode, bringing Ally back to reality. Just as often, characters break out in "lipsynch" to a favorite song, similar to karaoke performances, be it in groups at parties using a lightbulb for a microphone, or in solo performances, as when—in the middle of seriously pondering her fate at age 25—Ally erupts in her favorite song. Typically, such scenes end abruptly with an irritating scratching noise—as if a record needle is being removed suddenly from a spinning record, returning the character (and the viewer) back to the other genre.

These juxtapositions are not simply random, however. Rather, potentially "serious" moments strategically are countered by ridiculous scenes, usually of the cartoon variety, or, at the very least, flippant, humorous responses that portray women as unconcerned with the political and/or social significance of female sexuality. This is especially true, as noted, of scenes that explicitly feature female sexuality—the "inflating breasts" scene is one such instance, as is the scene in which Ally's sexual desire is reduced to a comic drooling tongue. In these cases, the juxtaposi-

tion aesthetic functions to parody female sexuality. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of scenes in which issues of female sexuality are addressed–most often, those that feature appearance or attire–with flippant, humorous one-liners serve to reinscribe female sexual confidence as nonchalance. Thus, confident female sexuality is parlayed as that which isn't "hung up" on social or political implications and that, furthermore, enjoys and even cultivates traditional, masculine definition. Sadly, then, the potential for a new understanding of female sexuality as expressed in third-wave feminism is not represented in *Ally McBeal*. Through the postmodern media technique of strategic juxtaposition, potentially liberatory understandings of female sexuality are recontextualized, reinscribed, and "sold back" to viewers as male defined, male oriented, and–thus qualified–the exclusive source of female power; as such, patriarchal representations of female sexuality not only remain intact but are reinforced.

Conclusion

Textual analysis of the mass-mediated, gendered representations of Alanis Morissette, Kate Moss, and Ally McBeal bears out Harms and Dickens' (1996) caution that postmodern media occur in a political-economic context that ultimately serves dominant interests. Harms and Dickens, echoing Tetzlaff's (1991) concern, note that, rather than serving as "sources of progressive liberation," postmodern media practices are more appropriately understood as means by which resistance to the dominant discourse is deflected (1996, p. 223). This study suggests that resistance is deflected via appropriation, as accomplished by the postmodern media technique of strategic juxtaposition.

The women analyzed are portrayed in the media conspicuously in terms of gender and how they represent it–especially insofar as they suggest new and alternative representations. Given the "new take" on gender that drives each of these representations, we expected to find–and did–several overlapping characteristics with third-wave feminism. On closer analysis, however, each mediated construction clearly represents an appropriation rather than a reflection of third-wave sensibilities, thus serving as cases in point wherein postmodern media practices serve to defuse resistance. In the case of Alanis Morissette, the third-wave sociopolitical sensibilities of confrontation and contradiction are reinscribed as personalized anger and instability; in Kate Moss' case, the third-wave proclivity for androgyny is repackaged as reification of patriarchal femininity; and the assertive, confident female sexuality that serves as a primary premise for third-wave feminism is coopted and resold through the character of Ally McBeal as a patriarchal representation of femininity.

Our analysis further reveals the particular technique by which the appropriation is accomplished–namely, the aesthetic code of juxtaposition, which serves to recontextualize respective messages of resistance and encourage an interpretation of them that renders them impotent. This strategy is entirely consistent with the postmodern media technique of pastiche, or the random juxtaposition of media images as the context for a given media text (Gitlin, 1986, 1989; Harms & Dickens, 1996; Jameson, 1991). However, we

found that in each of our case studies, juxtaposition was not random but occurred in specific, consistent patterns. That is, juxtaposition occurred within each text in such a way as to alter profoundly the meaning of the third-wave features in evidence. This makes it appropriation–the strategic use of juxtaposition serves to recontextualize images and messages of resistance in a context in which those messages are reinscribed and consequently rendered insignificant or ineffective. As such, this finding represents an extension of the postmodern media techniques identified by postmodern theorists to date (see, e.g., Altheide & Snow, 1991; Fiske, 1991; Gitlin, 1986; Grossberg, 1989; Kaplan, 1987; Miller, 1986; Poster, 1990; Sorkin, 1986).

This aesthetic of juxtaposition has particular implications for gender. Because gender traditionally is construed dichotomously, the technique of juxtaposition mirrors and thus serves to reify that patriarchal system of signification. Rather than eschew dichotomous thinking, the aesthetic code of juxtaposition reifies it in ways that merely appear to challenge it. This aesthetic code, then, is not only deceptive and dangerous; it represents a "new" take of the same dichotomous, patriarchal strategies that always have been employed to the end of sexist oppression. As a result, understanding how this aesthetic code functions rhetorically is especially important in order to identify and eradicate sexist media practices that may not be immediately apparent.

The consequence of the appropriation, of course, is hegemonic; what appears to be feminist–third-wave, in particular–representations are, in fact, repackaged and commodified versions of third-wave sensibilities that ultimately serve to reinforce a dominant, patriarchal discourse. As critical theorists–including postmodern theorists–have argued at length, the nature of hegemony is insidious and ubiquitous, manifest in specific, established patterns that reflect dominant interests rather than attributable to any identifiable entity; in large part, this ensures that hegemonic effects are subtle but profound (see, e.g., Altheide & Snow, 1991; Foucault, 1972; Gitlin, 1989; Harms & Dickens, 1996; Jameson, 1991). The hegemonic consequences of the appropriations identified here are all the more profound because of their status as postmodern media artifacts–the distinction between image and substance is collapsed or imploded (Baudrillard, 1983) such that it is impossible to distinguish between "real" third-wave feminism and representations thereof; Ally McBeal, for instance, has been widely touted in the popular media as the "new face of feminism" (Bellafante, 1998). As to the question of whether feminism has arrived and made its mark in the mainstream, the answer is, to some extent, yes–the term "feminism" is frequently and casually bandied about, especially in connection with women featured in the media. However, as we have argued here, this is an appropriation–a misrepresentation–of feminism that functions hegemonically and thus serves to reify and reinforce established patriarchal codes and discourses.

Ono and Sloop (1995) have cautioned against critical scholarship that attends to dominant as opposed to vernacular discourses in order to avoid reifying and fueling the former. However, that distinction is increasingly hard to make, particularly in terms of how those discourses are popularly per-

ceived. The very nature of postmodern media is that they look like and sometimes even are the vernacular. Alanis Morissette, for instance, was and still is considered to represent a fresh, "empowering" (Sheffield, 1998) female voice. From the perspective of critical scholarship, we could and probably should retain a perpetually cynical view of the media as the vehicles of dominant interests; however, in the postmodern mediascape that increasingly defines our environment, the vernacular is all but subsumed. The phrase "alternative chic," an apparent oxymoron, captures this phenomenon–that which is alternative is coopted, commodified, and marketed as the latest trend. The line of demarcation between the "genuine" artifact and its "genuine imitation" is virtually seamless.

Condit (1994) has argued that hegemony might be understood as "concordance," or a workable compromise, an indication of the fact that resistance is gaining a foothold. She notes that it may be "the best that can be negotiated under the given conditions" (p. 210). But related to the aforementioned collapse of the distinction between dominant and vernacular discourses, the problem of hegemony with respect to postmodern media is that recognizing the subversive critique is difficult. This is especially true when postmodern media are understood in the general postmodern condition; social movements arguably are far harder to identify in the postmodern era because modernist principles of rigid coherence about and adherence to definite, absolute ideals are less likely to characterize resistance today than are diffusion, multiplicity, and complexity. Third-wave feminism, in fact, is case in point; one of its core sensibilities is an allegiance to diversity and a multiplicity of perspectives–a postmodern movement, to be sure. As a result, it is itself ill defined, which may well make it that much more susceptible to appropriation by postmodern media. Given the amorphousness of resistance in a postmodern era, hegemony is particularly dangerous because it, too, is rendered amorphous, even to the critical eye. How does one define, let alone recognize, subversion when it is mass mediated and mass marketed? Arguably, scores of young women and girls are inspired and empowered by the ostensibly woman-identified Spice Girls, but many of us are uneasy citing them as examples of feminism.

Notably, the appropriations we have identified each promote and actually retain sensibilities entirely consistent with third-wave feminism–it is simply a matter of *how* they are contextualized and conveyed, via postmodern media techniques, that constitutes the appropriation. The postmodern media practice of juxtaposition as identified in the gendered representations that we analyzed reveals that messages of resistance are simultaneously publicized and reinscribed. As such, in the context of postmodern media, it appears that hegemony cannot function as concordance; rather, it can only function in the original, Gramscian sense–as cooptation. Thus, while the proliferation of third-wave sensibilities in different popular culture formats is new–for example, in the texts that Morissette, Moss, and McBeal respectively constitute–how these third-wave sensibilities are being mediated suggests that hegemony functions in ways that ultimately coopt the radical potential of this new brand of feminism. □

Notes

[1]As noted, the women whose representations we chose to analyze for this essay were selected because (1) they each represent a different medium, thus allowing us to assess whether postmodern media function in a coherent fashion in the deflection of resistance; (2) they are "mainstream"–culturally popular and readily available to and accessible by media consumers; and (3) they are identified universally in their respective media fora primarily if not exclusively on the basis of gender and in such a way that attention to their gender is spotlighted–more so than other women in those forums. Alanis Morissette consistently is described as an angry, scorned woman, as evidenced by her music (see, e.g., Dougherty, 1998; Sheffield, 1998; Timson, 1997); "waif" supermodel Kate Moss frequently is singled out from among her peers as a particularly damaging role model for young women (see, e.g., Leland, 1996; Leo, 1994); and the character of Ally McBeal has received considerable media attention in terms of how (or whether) she represents women and/or feminism (see, e.g., Bellafante, 1998; Heywood, 1998). It is significant that all of these women are white; this is a major departure from the third-wave feminist tenet of multiculturalism and is no doubt reflective of the racism that continues to pervade the mass media, promoting whiteness as the standard.

[2]Although Morissette is arguably distinctive from Moss and McBeal in that she has control over her representation, and McBeal is a character rather than a real person, the focus of our analysis, as noted, is on the *representations* of each of these women in the postmodern media, irrespective of issues of intent and control (see, e.g., Gitlin, 1989; Grossberg, 1989; Harms & Dickens, 1996).

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