

Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research

Volume 18

Article 7

2019

Kellyanne Conway and Postfeminism: 'The Desert of the Real'

L. Shelley Rawlins

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, rawlins@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/kaleidoscope>

Recommended Citation

Rawlins, L. Shelley (2019) "Kellyanne Conway and Postfeminism: 'The Desert of the Real'," *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research*: Vol. 18 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/kaleidoscope/vol18/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Kellyanne Conway and Postfeminism: 'The Desert of the Real'

Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgements: I thank my advisor and friend Dr. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook for his invaluable input on this work. I thank my mother Sandy Rawlins for sharing inspiring conversations with me and for her keen editing eye. I appreciate the reviewers' helpful feedback and thank Kaleidoscope's editorial staff, especially Shelby Swafford and Alex Davenport, for facilitating this publication process. L. Shelley Rawlins is a Doctoral Candidate at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale

Kellyanne Conway and Postfeminism: ‘The Desert of the Real’

L. Shelley Rawlins

Postfeminism is a slippery, contested, ambivalent, and inherently contradictory term – deployed alternately as an “empowering” identity label and critical theoretical lens. Troubling notions about the past, present, and future of feminism, postfeminism challenges feminist theory. This essay scrutinizes cultural and theoretical themes informing postfeminist discourses. I identify four prevailing themes in extant literature: postfeminist oblivion, self-empowerment, criticality, and feminine pride. I then examine the public discourse and self-asserted postfeminist stance of Kellyanne Conway, former campaign manager and current counselor to President Trump. Conway advocates for an individualistic, depoliticized femininity. I argue that her complacent misogyny bolsters the bizarre imaginary view that feminism has been and remains harmful to women. To demonstrate this postfeminist harm, I employ Baudrillard’s theoretical apparatus of simulacra. Baudrillard’s notion highlights the strategies of abstraction, simulation, and accompanying models of control that circumnavigate and ignore “the real” (feminism) in favor of “the hyperreal” (postfeminism) (1-2).

Keywords: postfeminism, feminist theory, Kellyanne Conway, Jean Baudrillard

Postfeminism is a slippery, contested, ambivalent, and inherently contradictory term. It is alternately deployed as an “empowering” identity label and critical theoretical lens (Genz, “Third Way/ve” and *Postfemininities*; Adriaens; McRobbie, *Aftermath* and “Post-Feminism”; Lazar; Gill, “Postfeminist,” “New Cultural Life,” and “Post-Postfeminism”). Following Susan Faludi, some theorists consider postfeminism to be a variety of antifeminist backlash – a concerted ideological effort of retaliation against advances made toward gender equality (*Backlash*). Postfeminism presents many challenges to feminist theory because it troubles notions about feminism’s past, present, and future. For example, can it help feminism reconcile “progress” made by the Second Wave with an increasingly urgent need for feminism to continue evolving and become more intersectional,

Acknowledgements: I thank my advisor and friend Dr. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook for his invaluable input on this work. I thank my mother Sandy Rawlins for sharing inspiring conversations with me and for her keen editing eye. I appreciate the reviewers’ helpful feedback and thank *Kaleidoscope*’s editorial staff, especially Shelby Swafford and Alex Davenport, for facilitating this publication process.

L. Shelley Rawlins is a Doctoral Candidate at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale

invitational, and inclusive (Faludi, *Backlash*; Genz, “Third Way/ve”; Butler)? Women’s agency is a central thematic concern in postfeminism, and is often posed as being realized within neoliberal contexts where the “freedom” and “choice” of consumerism materializes the postmodern arena in which young women exert their “agency” (Genz, “Third Way/ve”; Gill, “Postfeminist”). I follow Rosalind Gill in her claim that postfeminism traces “a patterned yet contradictory sensibility” (“New Cultural Life” 1) as a critical tool. Consequently, postfeminism straddles two ambiguous, complexly nuanced, contextually-dependent sets of discourses taking place across time in both academic and broader popular cultural discussions. The abundant variance in postfeminism’s “supposed” meanings and to whom these meanings apply, shows that the term is up for debate.

This work locates some of the cultural and theoretical themes shaping postfeminist discourses. I begin with a literature review organized around four prevailing definitional planes of postfeminism: oblivion, self-empowerment, criticality, and feminine pride. Next, I examine the public discourse of former campaign manager and current counselor to President Trump, Kellyanne Conway, concerning her self-asserted postfeminist stance. In doing so, I consider Conway’s statements as postfeminist texts. This analysis draws from three interviews Conway held with media outlets *The Washington Post*, *Politico*, and *Business Insider* between December 2016 and May 2017. I explore the ways Conway’s deployment and dramatization of postfeminist themes operate *against* feminism. Across her self-contradicting and ambivalent stances on gender, feminism, and her comments concerning balancing motherhood and career life, Conway reveals features of the pseudo-ideological framework upholding postfeminism. Conway emerges as an advocating figure for an individualistic, depoliticized femininity – a *post-feminist* quagmire. I contend that such misinformation and complacent misogyny bolsters the peculiar and imaginary view that feminism has been and remains harmful to women.

In opposition to Conway’s illusory postfeminist propagandizing, I contend that enthusiasts like herself serve to distract people from comprehending the rampant ongoing gender inequality and violence faced by women worldwide. To demonstrate the harm I see postfeminism ravaging on feminism in the minds of all members of humanity regardless of their gender identification or non/conformity, I draw on Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern theoretical apparatus of the simulacrum. Baudrillard’s notion highlights the strategies of abstraction, simulation, and accompanying models of control that succeed in circumnavigating and ignoring “the real” (feminism) in favor of “the hyperreal” (postfeminism) (1-2). Conway lives in infamy for innovating the phrase “alternative facts”¹ in response to numerous crowd experts’ tabulations and visibly vacant aerial pictures from President Trump’s

1 *Meet the Press* (with Chuck Todd), 22 Jan. 2017, www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/video/conway-press-secretary-gave-alternative-facts-860142147643.

inauguration, each of which disputed the White House's incorrect claim that the inauguration had been the largest in history. Postfeminism similarly seeks to obliterate the authentic ideological territory of feminism, and in doing so, threatens to actualize "*The desert of the real itself*" (Baudrillard 1). While I value much of the conceptual work theorists have performed in locating the frictions between feminism and postfeminism, it is my sense that postfeminism should be more rigorously challenged, discounted, and debunked by feminist theorists. I begin my share of that work with a literature review and definitional typology of postfeminism.

Postfeminism

Postfeminism is widely theorized across much critical feminist work. Feminist theorist Susan Faludi locates the emergence of postfeminism in the 1970s conservative press (and particularly in the work of anti-ERA activist Phyllis Schlafly) (*Backlash* 91). Faludi explains how a cultural paradox arose around the existentially abstract idea that "women have achieved so much yet feel so dissatisfied; it must be feminism's achievements, not society's resistance to these partial achievements, that is causing women all this pain" (*Backlash* 91). This messaging succeeds in stirring-up the skeptical *sense* that women are dissatisfied and feminists are to blame, thus escalating antifeminist sentiments – Faludi calls this phenomenon "backlash." Backlash is a preemptive strike on the feminist agenda to counteract any progress being made toward feminist ideals of gender equality (Faludi, *Backlash* 11). Considered another way, urban myths such as past hysteria surrounding the Halloween hoax that candy "might" contain razor blades made plenty of 1980s parents fearful about protecting their children from their neighbors' candy.² In both cases, fear is empowered when the source of anxiety is shrouded in mystery, misguidance, mistrust, and mystification. Similarly, postfeminism emerges as an alternative "political scrambler" of sorts that battles feminists' efforts.

Angela McRobbie extends the postfeminist project to include an analysis of the degree to which feminism has become integrated within political and institutional life, yet its remarkable influences on daily life are taken for granted as past collective action fades from memory ("Post-Feminism" 60). Womanhood returns home, capitalism thrives, and neoliberal ideals frame feminine "agency" as performed through decorative tastes and consumeristic "choice" (McRobbie, *Aftermath* 1). Feminist media critic Rosalind Gill considers postfeminism to be a useful critical lens of its own saturation within media scopes ("New Cultural Life" 1-2). In other words, as "an analytical concept," Gill utilizes postfeminism to identify its own unchecked prevalence in media studies ("Post-Postfeminism" 612). Gill says postfeminism must be

2 German Lopez, "The Myth of Poisoned Halloween Candy," *Vox*, 31 Oct. 2018, www.vox.com/science-and-health/2018/10/31/18047794/halloween-candy-poisoned-needles-pins-razors, (accessed 13 July 2019).

probed for its contribution to the production of normalizing values that inspire the perception of healthy capitalistic competition, which in turn stimulates consumers' buying power and attainment of more things (participating in a "strong" economy). Gill suggests this media-capitalist aspect of postfeminism could be used to analyze the intimate connections between people's "affective politics" and the subsequent emergence of new practices of self and other "surveillance" ("New Cultural Life" 3-4). For Gill, the postfeminist schema cultivates effects beyond mediated portrayals of women "having it all" by operationally restricting feminists' expressive responses, like anger, through the stigmatizing deployment of tropes, such as the "angry feminist" ("New Cultural Life" 3). Consequently, postfeminism defensively insulates itself against feminist critiques with preemptive attacks as it actively manifests a version of Faludi's backlash.

Stéphanie Genz extends the analysis of postfeminism by focusing on a politically conservative ideological spin on feminism's Third Wave.³ "Third Way," Genz explains, is when "communitarian commitment finds its expression, not in the rallying of disadvantaged groups as suggested by the old left, but in the neo-conservative endorsement of traditional family values, which of course are aligned with the economic interests of the market" ("Third Way/ve" 335). Genz makes clear that the postfeminist project is sustained by the capitalist patriarchal interests informing its very foundation. Accordingly, postfeminism frequently invokes portrayals of nostalgic bliss from past "simpler times" and juxtaposes this fabled domesticity with the messy stresses of modern living. Contemporary existence be damned – wracked with financial complexities, ungratifying work, incommensurate pay, and the related trials of affording insurance and healthcare for oneself and/or family. As Faludi, McRobbie, Gill, and Genz reveal, postfeminism is tied to various presuppositions concerning history and the feminist movement, capitalist enterprise and consumerism, cultural portrayals of women in film and media, and political ideologies largely split across progressive and conservative expectations of the extent to which the gender binary ought to dictate women's and men's social roles. Drawing on these important understandings, I next present a thematic typology of four approaches to defining postfeminism.

A Postfeminist Typology

The following four definitional frames of postfeminism are not mutually exclusive – as postfeminism is broadly and loosely applied in context. In fact, some of these frames are at odds with one another, while others share substantial overlap. This uncertainty about its "critical" value, theoretical

3 The Third Wave of feminism emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s particularly around the time of Anita Hill's congressional testimony about her sexual harassment, and it broadly focuses on critical approaches to intersectional identity politics, such as racial justice as well as the fight for equality, reproductive justice, economic security, social mobility, and safety for all LGBTQIA+ members of society.

purpose, as well as how feminists deal with it, seems to be a core theoretical and ideological problem of postfeminism.

Postfeminist Oblivion. This approach pertains to postfeminist interrogations of the temporal scopes of feminism, including notions of continuity and progress – and success and failure. Oftentimes this amounts to levying well-established and continually addressed critiques of Second-Wavers' lack of intersectional focus and blaming the modern complexities of women's access to contentment and equitable resources on the perceived failures of earlier feminist efforts. By fully ignoring the manifold contributions feminism has made and continues to make in and for women's lives, as Faludi argues, this amounts to a form of antifeminist backlash.

Postfeminist Self-Empowerment. This frame locates women's and girls' "agency" in a radical reinterpretation of "choice": the individualized arena in which they now "exert" their freedom takes place while shopping for makeup and clothes. Unfortunately, this "self-empowered" lifestyle is largely only achievable by already having purchasing power, thus neglecting the state of women across broader collectivities. Both McRobbie and Genz (among others) detail how this enculturated obsession with appearance caters primarily to privileged members of the status quo (e.g., primarily wealthy white women), and does little in the way of addressing the compounded obstacles faced by disadvantaged women leading diverse lives at the lived consequential intersections of race, class, sexual orientation, nationality, etc. This meritocratic bootstrapping presumes that success is earned, as is failure. Such preoccupation with oneself and buying things likely only further intensifies many postfeminists' inability to recognize and confront the larger patriarchal landscape oppressing their gender. The self-empowerment perspective ignores intersectional approaches and lacks any critical consideration of the concrete ways life conducts itself in friction or fraternization with patriarchal hegemony. This is a very exclusive, limited brand of empowerment. It renders the women who live outside of this privileged access invisible and irrelevant.

Postfeminist Criticality. This approach features two distinct applications across postfeminist culture and postfeminist theorizing. In postfeminist popular culture, this criticality pertains to often unfounded critiques of feminism's past or contrived contemporary forms of "false" activism by women on behalf of men. For example, some women may support prescription coverage for men's erectile dysfunction pills yet oppose the same coverage for birth control or other related contraceptive care. In academic work, Gill contends that postfeminism offers a contextual lens for modern critical feminist media analysis. This framing often assumes the form of critiquing presupposed neoliberal consumerism-as-choice frames that locate women and girls' choices as "agency," but these achievements merely reflect the status of one's consumer-consumptive preferences and privilege (related to self-empowerment). There is a problem here, too: postfeminist

media analysis prioritizes the buying power of the agent and lacks the appropriate theoretical accountability to interrogate *the absence* of diverse representations of women. Consequently, “the idealized postfeminist subject is a white, Western, heterosexual woman” with financial means (Butler 47). I question the critical value or depth of understanding achieved in this search for familiar patterns of errors. If a media text appears to be postfeminist, it is often readily found as such.

Postfeminist Feminine Pride. This championing frame of postfeminism is deployed by figures like Kellyanne Conway to “celebrate” their liberation from the “anti-male,” “anti-motherhood and family,” “anti-feminine” feminist myths produced by a threatened capitalist patriarchy in fear of sharing their wealth (central to the project of gender equality). It speaks to the perceived “reclamation” of traditional and domestically related feminine scripts, in opposition to the falsely constructed idea that feminism is against expressions of femininity and/or motherhood and family. The central spin in this deployment, as Conway executes it, is to reframe the feminist project as being oppressive to women for positioning them as “victims of patriarchy,” and instead embraces the postfeminist utopian generality that all women are “champions of circumstance” (Heim).

In considering these four postfeminist frames – oblivion, self-empowerment, criticality, and feminine pride – a blinder apparatus forms, revealing that perhaps, postfeminism is not really about anything. It seemingly (re)circulates outdated myths about feminism and clings to this negativity as emboldening women’s cultural advancement. As such, it is my position that postfeminism has no liberating aspirations. Rather, it seeks to halt and undo feminist progress without ever directly engaging with any of it, let alone considering or even acknowledging any actual contemporary forms of feminism (they are numerous and ever-expanding). Thus, feminism is sidelined as a mere prop – a ghostly piñata that only takes hits, without the opportunity to respond.

Next, I engage with the public persona and discourse of Kellyanne Conway as an exemplar of many of the divisive postfeminist tactics traced earlier. Before doing so, I locate myself as the author of this work and describe my intersectional identity in an effort to be transparent about some of the forces informing my distinct cultural location. I am a woman in her mid-30s who is White, straight, able-bodied, raised in a middle-class family, educated (in graduate school), agnostic, socialist, American-born, and feminist. I will take a moment to be more explicit about my understanding of feminism, gender, and womanhood because this work revolves around these terms. Feminism is a historical, ongoing ethical project focused on gender equality across all facets of life – social, economic, and political. “Gender” is commonly conflated with the biological categories of female or male that are assigned to us at birth. I feel that the social category of “women” is constantly evolving to the extent that nothing in particular deterministically

anchors its membership; it is open. I agree with Sara Ahmed's descriptions of feminism and "who" women are:

Feminism requires supporting women in a struggle to exist in this world. What do I mean by *women* here? I am referring to all those who travel under the sign *women*. No feminism worthy of its name would use the sexist idea "women born women" to create the edges of feminist community, to render transwomen into "not women," or "not born women," into men. No one is born a woman; it as an assignment (not just a sign, but also a task or an imperative)...that can shape us; make us; and break us. (14-15)

My political beliefs and values wildly differ from the ways Conway describes hers. Despite these obvious departures in thought, throughout the following analysis I do my best to be reflexive and bracket my personal biases. This work focuses on exposing the critical limitations of postfeminism as a productive lens for anything other than identifying what can usually already be clearly deemed as postfeminist. As such, postfeminism typically begets more postfeminism. Essentially, my argument is that both Conway and postfeminism largely function as contrived simulations. Postfeminism's ahistorical, decontextualized, and often dubious projections serve to conceal its motivating ideological foundations, thus making it all the more difficult to invalidate. *What is postfeminism and how might we recognize and counter it in cultural practice?* I return to this question later. Before moving on, I provide a brief explanation of what I mean by "ideology" as I consider it in relation to feminism and postfeminism throughout this work.

Ideology

I understand ideologies as cultural narratives that reflect and address people's particular existential and concrete lifeworld concerns. Louis Althusser considers the ways that ideologies shape people's identities and practices, even when such worldviews do not match up with actual reality and are *imagined*. Althusser contends that "Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (693). In other words, people create and participate in the production of narratives about their lives, forming ideologies, especially when these visions have little in common with the toils of one's lived situated reality. Ideologies are born out of the tension between people's self-understandings of their "real world conditions of existence" and "their relations to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there [through ideology]" (Althusser 694). In other words, ideologies often suspend people from their material realities by delivering them over to more appealing imaginary representations of their lives (694). Ideology instantiates a discursive correspondence between the objective world that lies beyond our reach and the symbolic representational exchanges we share with each other as we each strive to make sense of our existence as relational beings.

Kellyanne Conway: Postfeminist Opportunist

This analysis revolves around Kellyanne Conway because I feel that she functions largely as a production of postfeminism. Through her co-optation of postfeminism-as-alibi, Conway carelessly twists, manipulates, and exaggerates ideology in favor of her neo-conventional gender agenda. All the while, Conway appears to feign a convenient state of witlessness concerning the material consequences of promoting such stagnating antifeminist stances. I focus on Conway as a public figure with a high level of cultural visibility at this moment in time. Consequently, Conway also enjoys an almost unprecedented level of access and influence in conservative political contexts, and especially among conservative women. Further, as a top advisor to President Trump, Conway frequently appears on television to defend his actions and deflect any criticism of him. Conway embodies and dutifully narrates the paradoxical notion of assuming a practicable and sustainable postfeminist identity, as well as the distorted diplomatic energies it takes to maintain such a stance.

Conway's persistent efforts to discredit feminism are especially relevant to American women at this very moment, and likely to many women around the world. In the 2016 United States election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, 42% of women voted for Trump (Roberts and Ely). If we consider this metric intersectionally, Trump garnered votes from 62% of White women without college degrees, 45% of White women with college degrees, 26% of Latinas, and 4% of Black women⁴ (Roberts and Ely). The fact that so many women cast their votes for a man with a well-documented history of misogyny and multiple alleged sexual assaults⁵ – with lower-income White women overwhelmingly favoring Trump over Clinton (who has no tendencies towards misogyny or sexual assault) – deserves critical reflection and points to the populist upsurge of postfeminist sentiments festering in United States culture.

I locate Conway's discourse as representing a postfeminist text because she openly celebrates and disseminates this ideological stance. My rationale for selecting the three media interviews for attention is twofold. First, in each interview Conway openly discusses her biography, family and work life, and stances on feminism. Second, Conway's talk exposes some of the interpersonal, political, and broader sociocultural contexts informing her postfeminist ideology. These three interviews with media outlets took place as follows: with *Politico* at their Women Rule Summit in Washington, D.C., on 7 Dec. 2016; with *The Washington Post* at the Trump Tower, one week

4 Unfortunately, and strangely – though not unsurprisingly – *Fortune* magazine does not provide any data regarding Latina and Black women's levels of education within their consolidated percentiles, www.fortune.com/2016/11/17/donald-trump-women-voters-election/.

5 As of June 2019, 24 women have come forward to say that Donald Trump sexually assaulted them. Eliza Relman, *Business Insider*, 21 June 2019, www.businessinsider.com/women-accused-trump-sexual-misconduct-list-2017-12.

before Trump's inauguration (20 Jan. 2017); and with *Business Insider*, published 28 May 2017. I also include excerpts of Conway's relevant comments from other interviews to paint a fuller picture of her views.

My analytic approach involved studying the entirety of each interview before tracing emergent feminist- and postfeminist-related themes. These trends include Conway's comments on gender, motherhood and her career, feminism, and her self-identification as a postfeminist. As I discuss each of these three themes (Conway collapses feminism into postfeminism), I consider them in relation to the four previous definitional approaches to postfeminism (oblivion, self-empowerment, criticality, and feminine pride). In the final section of this work, I reflect on how Conway's strategic deployment of postfeminist discourse, and postfeminism at large, contributes to a critical quagmire in feminist theory. That is, I theorize some conceptual movements upholding postfeminism and aspire to address the related importance, and difficulty, of executing efficacious feminist critiques. I begin with a brief biography of Conway to better understand her intersectional identity as a cultural being.

Kellyanne Conway turned 50 on Trump's Inauguration Day (20 Jan. 2017) and wore a bright blue and white British officer's revolutionary-style jacket to the occasion.⁶ From more humble beginnings, Conway was the only child of her working-class single-mother in Atco, New Jersey (Heim). After graduating from Trinity Washington University and the George Washington University of Law, Conway married lawyer George Conway and the couple have four children. In 1995 Conway established The Polling Company/WomanTrend⁷ as a research firm specializing in polling, tracking, and predicting conservative women's voting trends (Heim). In the summer of 2016, Conway became Donald Trump's third campaign manager amidst the shocking revelation of a video in which Trump brags about objectifying and sexually assaulting women.⁸ By dismissing his conduct as ordinary "locker room talk,"⁹ Conway pledged her allegiance to Trump.

6 The \$3,600 wool A-line coat was previously available on Gucci's website, but has since sold out and can be viewed here: www.bergdorfgoodman.com/p/gucci-wool-a-line-coat-ivory-prod124243089?ecid=BGAF__Time+Inc+Brands&utm_medium=affiliate&utm_source=BGAF__Time+Inc+Brands (accessed 27 June 2019).

7 The homepage of Conway's former polling company states that she resigned as President and CEO effective 20 Jan. 2017, www.pollingcompany.com (accessed 10 June 2017).

8 During the last few months of the 2016 presidential campaign, an audiotape from the TV show *Access Hollywood* leaked in which Donald Trump is heard saying: "You know I'm automatically attracted to beautiful – I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything," *ABC*, 4 Dec. 2017, www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-04/billy-bush-says-infamous-access-hollywood-trump-tape-is-real/9224358.

9 *The Today Show*, 10 Oct. 2016, www.today.com/video/trump-campaign-manager-on-locker-room-talk-how-second-debate-was-good-for-democracy-782672451588 (accessed 10 June 2017).

Currently serving as counselor to President Trump, Conway states that she is focused on her “portfolio” of “veterans,” “women and children,” and “opioid use” (Borchers). Oddly, Conway lacks the professional experience necessary to meaningfully investigate any of these important issues. Regardless, Conway moved into the former office of Obama administrator, Valerie Jarrett (Cook). Jarrett previously chaired the White House Council on Women and Girls, as well as the White House Office of Olympic, Paralympic, and Youth Sport (Cook). Jarrett also co-chaired the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault (Cook). The glaring contrasts between the foci of these two women’s advisory posts seem to mirror the stark dissimilarity between former President Obama’s administration and that of President Trump’s revolving quagmire of ideologues, media pundits, and fellow billionaires. I begin with a discussion of how Conway talks about gender.

Gender

In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Conway is asked about the importance of being the first woman campaign manager (Trump’s third) to win a presidential election. Downplaying the centrality her gender figured into resuscitating the fledgling and misogynistic campaign, Conway says, “I never gave it that much thought during the campaign. And neither did Donald Trump.... I appreciate very much that I was promoted based on skills and vision and compatibility with him” (Heim). When asked about her prior critiques of Trump as being “unpresidential” and her characterization of his supporters as “downright nasty,” Conway accuses the interviewer of selecting “cherry-picked comments” that were “situational” (Heim). In reference to Conway’s 2005 co-authored book, *What Women Really Want: How American Women are Quietly Erasing Political, Racial, Class, and Religious Lines to Change the Way We Live*, she is asked whether these identity “lines” have truly been erased, or if they might “be even bolder than they’ve ever been?” (Heim). Conway’s equivocal reply is characteristic of her rhetorical strategy:

For some women they’ve been erased because women of all races and ethnic backgrounds, age groups, socioeconomic status, geographical differences, all work together. They share a common love of this country and the elation/struggles of what it means to be a woman in 2017. But for some women and for people who cover women or speak about women, those lines are somewhat bolder and brighter. I think in politics they seem brighter and bolder. But in everyday parlance, everyday culture, that’s just not true. We’re the peacemakers, we’re the great negotiators, the leaders and the managers of our households, of our workplaces. (Heim)

Conway's response indicates that identity facets of difference ("lines") affecting women's lives have largely "been erased" because as she vaguely alludes, women "work together" through their "elation/struggles." However, there are still victims of difference. *Especially* those who "cover women or speak about women," and the lines here "in politics" are "bolder and brighter" (e.g., herself); but in "everyday culture," these lines are "just not true." Conway goes on to describe *all* American women's cultural experiences through homogenizing neoliberal tropes that overlook any differences in the group. Consequently, a fluffy generic optimism defines *women* as "peacemakers," "negotiators," and "managers" of "households" and "workplaces." Many of these positive conventional femininely-gendered attributes link womanhood with passivity, compromise, and a responsibility to manage the household. Whether intentional or not, Conway's "ideals" echo Schlafly's arguments in support of her view that American women enjoy the best lifestyle of any beings on the planet.

Conway's genuine understandings of gender may never be shared, but her public thoughts indicate that gender is a thing conveniently hailed or ignored, depending on the potential to strategically capitalize on the context. For example, in an interview with *ThinkProgress*, Conway criticizes the idea of supporting low-income mothers because her own low-income single mother "didn't feel sorry for herself" (Raymond et al.). Conway continues, describing her mother's reality of being abandoned "with no child support and no alimony at a very young age with a child to raise, a high school education, and she just figured it out. She didn't complain. She didn't rely on government, she relied upon her own skill set, her own self-confidence, her own drive and moxie" (Raymond et al.). Conway performs a doubly concerning experiential hijack here by deciding how "doable" her mother's success with minimal means was, and by suggesting that this rarity is achieved through the whims of attitude alone: not complaining; "her own drive and moxie"; "she just figured it out." In presenting this anecdote as practically viable, or even realistic, "gender" and "class," not to mention race, are "lines" that Conway seems to have "quietly erased" from her awareness.

In publicly defending Trump's sexual violence against women as mere "locker room talk," Conway participates in the increased normalization of rape culture, further imperiling women's lives. When asked by an interviewer if her defense of Trump's admission of sexual assault was a difficult thing to explain to her children, Conway gruffly retorts how "It's a bit of a cheap shot to raise my kids into a question like that" (Heim). Unfortunately, Conway *will* raise her children into the potent social context of this question. We are all answerable beings. Continuing the interview, Conway again dodges the question about her children and instead disparages Hillary Clinton for her "lies" and for making a different "choice" than her mother did, in standing by a "cheating husband" (Heim). We quickly realize Conway is somewhere between understanding gender as something completely "erased" from

her awareness, and gender as a brand of evolutionary idealism that is best captured by traditional “cookie-cutter” gender roles. Ironically, Conway does not embody these stay-at-home conventions of womanhood; considering that she works full-time, it seems she is not a homemaker or even the “manager” of her own household.

Gender serves as a “political” scheme or capitalist marketing strategy for Conway. In fact, her previous polling business revolved around profiting from strategic surveys concerning gender. Conway’s overt use of gender as political manipulation aligns with the postfeminist definitional strategies (from earlier) of postfeminist oblivion and self-empowerment. Oblivion pertains to the dis-remembrance of time (her mother’s experience as a single mother; her own past experiences with gender inequality). Conway boldly attempts to speak for not only her mother but for all women, in saying that there is no longer gender discrimination (except for what she experiences from others when she talks about women or gender). This paradoxical and self-centered understanding that *no one else* experiences anything outside of what Conway decides reeks of postfeminist beguilement. Once Conway insulates herself within her experience of gender as not being an experience of anything other than hard work and “merit,” self-empowerment arises. Just like her dogged mother, Conway refuses “to complain” about (e.g., critique) gender oppression in favor of the fabled “drive and moxie” that has served both women so well. Successes are celebrated individualistically, and failures are blamed on others (usually feminists or “liberals”). In another interview, Conway explains that her mother always told her to “be yourself, have fun and accept whatever God has coming” (Heim). Conway mentions that her mother says working for Trump is “a blessing and [an] opportunity” (Heim). Conway’s bland accounts of gender appear to revolve around validating women’s humble obedience to patriarchal capitalist enterprise. Gender is quietly erased, poor single-mothers do not need or deserve any help, and every woman should immediately leave their cheating husbands – apparently with the exception of Ivana Trump, Marla Maples, and Melania Trump (Delkic).

Motherhood and Career Life

When Conway is asked about how her gender as a woman has likely been her most appealing asset for Trump’s campaign and administration, she typically dodges such questions by referring to her skillset and merit(ocracy). As a follow-up, Conway commonly performs her signature defensive art by deflecting an uncomfortable question back to the interviewer. Conway will frequently co-opt feminist stances while simultaneously mocking them – as she did in an interview at a conservative summit: “[S]o much of the criticism of me is so gender-based,” she offers without any examples (Delk). She also addresses the disapproval she receives from other women, insisting this behavior “totally undercuts modern feminism saying that they are for women” (Delk). While Conway usually refuses to answer questions about

“gender,” in an interview with *Business Insider* she admits, “I could tell you a great way that my gender has helped me with the president. I’m actually unafraid to express my mind, but I do it very respectfully. Very respectfully and very deferentially” (Relman). These careful words, “I’m actually unafraid,” convey a disconcerting meekness that suggests she probably is afraid. Why would a president’s close counselor feel the need to convince a reporter that the president listens to their advice when they speak? Conway adds that “there’s a femininity that is attached to the way one carries herself,” and especially so in her interpersonal dealings with Trump. “I don’t consider him my peer; he is my boss and he is my elder. . . so I don’t address him by his first name. That has actually allowed me, in my view, to respectfully but forcefully express my opinion on certain matters” (Relman). For Conway, her modesty flexes the strength of her femininity in its ability to appease this powerful man and still come off as harmless (postfeminist feminine pride). Conway apparently “attaches” a prim femininity to herself with the same detached ease she deploys when denying that gender oppression or the patriarchy even exist.

Conway describes an unsettling interaction she had with members of Trump’s inner circle concerning which job she would take in the White House. Conway is a skilled deflector and wordsmith and typically reveals nothing helpful or newsworthy, but she almost catches herself criticizing this room of men for being sexist before accepting this hypocrisy as the way things are:

And when I was discussing my role with other senior campaign folks, they would say, “I know you have four kids, but...” I said, “There’s nothing that comes after the ‘but’ that makes any sense to me, so don’t even try.” Like, what is the “but”? But they’ll eat Cheerios for the rest of life? Like, nobody will brush their teeth again until I get home? I mean, it just – what is the “but”? And I do politely mention to them that the question isn’t, would you take the job? The male sitting across from me who’s going to take a big job in the White House. The question is, would you want your wife to? And you really see their whole – would you want the mother of your children to do that? You really see their entire visage change. It’s like, oh no, they wouldn’t want their wife to take that job. So, it’s all good. (Politico Staff)

Conway clearly sees through the efforts of these men to pigeonhole her as being an “irresponsible” mother if she decides to work in the White House. However, she doubles back and spins this as them being concerned for their own families and wives, “So, it’s all good.” Conway also implies that she has help with her children because someone will be there to brush their teeth, whether she’s there or not. This is interesting because part of Conway’s conservatively appealing political identity is that of a hard-working mother and business owner who “does it all.”

In fact, Conway reflects on her visibility as a champion for working mothers everywhere:

A friend made a really fascinating suggestion to me; that maybe I could go higher....Maybe I can go home and see the kids and help them with homework and then go back. I'm like, "Sure, that'll work." But she is suggesting that I could maybe help America's women in terms of feeling less guilty about balancing life and career and perhaps Skyping or Facetiming and showing how that's done. There's something to that. So, we'll figure that out. But I've always felt like it was a very family-friendly workplace at the Trump campaign. (Politico Staff)

Conway is so eager to help "America's women" feel "less guilty" about juggling their careers with motherhood that she actually first needs to figure out how to do this with her own family, "So, we'll figure that out." One thing is clear – Conway does not appear to feel guilty about balancing her life and her career with her family. Strangely, it feels like Conway finds her friend's comment "really fascinating" because it is truly an idea she has never considered attempting. Might Conway go home to help her children with their homework "and then go back"? It would be intriguing to see what she would Skype or Facetime to inform other less-privileged working mothers "out there" how to not *feel guilty* about the necessity that they work and mother. This is assuming that "they" have internet access and time to listen to Conway's inspiring words and strategies – maybe go home and see your kids and then go back to work? The flatness and insincerity coursing through these comments play into Conway's self-empowerment frame of postfeminism, especially through her palpable indifference concerning the manifold privileges (like help with her children) afforded by her substantial wealth.¹⁰ Yet, Conway pretends she works in the same economic and daily circumstances as other working mothers out there and is almost giddy about how "they sure could use" some of her practical advice to feel less guilty about working double-duty days to put food on their children's tables. This obliviousness suggests that Conway views all working mothers as the same, and since she is a bootstrap success story it is equally possible for any other woman out there to accomplish the same feats.

Conway tells *The Washington Post* of her career aspirations: "I want to be famous for my children" (Heim). In a seemingly dramatic backfire, Conway explains how "One of my daughters said, 'Mom, I don't want to go to Washington and be known as Kellyanne Conway's daughter.' And I said, 'Well, then cure cancer, and I'll be known as ___ Conway's mother.' That's the way I look at it" (name redacted by me; Heim). It may be that

¹⁰ Conway has an estimated net worth of \$40 million; I note her ample wealth because, curiously, she rarely speaks publicly about her business successes, www.comparilist.com/kellyanne-conway-net-worth/ (accessed 13 July 2019).

Conway's daughter seeks to become her own person with or without curing cancer. She even manages to twist her own family's comments into self-serving rhetorical spindles. Conway actively ignores her daughter even as she quotes her, setting up a cancer-doctor-daughter pawn to perhaps make herself look like a "more" successful mother.

The postfeminist feminine pride Conway deploys in her working life is how she "femininely" and "deferentially" offers her advice to Trump. The "fascinating" revelation that she might see her children and still work in a single day, and then broadcast this epiphany to "American women" is a bit absurd. Millions of women perform this double-day of work daily – and they probably take little inspiration from Conway's lifestyle. Nevertheless, Conway confidently speaks for her mother, daughter, and American women. This seems to align with her daughter's frustration. Perhaps much like her conception of gender, motherhood goes unmarked and unnoticed until an opportunity presents itself for Conway to make herself look good and appear to work harder than other mothers (self-empowerment). Gender appears to be largely routine, aside from the firm expectation that women be feminine and not interfere with whatever the men are doing. Motherhood is different though; it is more revered.

Feminism and Postfeminism

Conway has spoken at length in recent interviews about her status as a "post-feminist, anti-feminist – a non-feminist, definitely" (Relman). Conway describes her feelings about feminism:

I don't consider myself a feminist. I think my generation isn't a big fan of labels. My favorite label is mommy. I feel like the feminist movement has been hijacked by the pro-abortion movement or the anti-male sentiments that you read in some of their propaganda and writings. I'm not anti-male. One does not need to be pro-female and call yourself a feminist, when with it comes that whole anti-male culture where we want young boys to sit down and shut up in the classroom. And we have all these commercials that show what a feckless boob the man in the house is. That's not the way I see the men in my life, most especially my 12-year-old son. I consider myself a postfeminist. I consider myself one of those women who is a product of her choices, not a victim of her circumstances. (Heim)

Conway's taglines of what feminism represents – "pro-abortion," "anti-male," "pro-female," women's "victimization" – do not align with any definitions of feminism that I have encountered. However, they do call to mind Schlafly's anti-ERA rhetoric from earlier. Those of us familiar with feminism would locate all of these sentiments as decidedly unfeminist, largely antifeminist,

and fully postfeminist.¹¹ The goals of feminism have always been clear: to work towards gender equality across social, economic, and political facets of life. Conway prefers to position herself as a “warrior” for men and describes “feminists” in the same blanket fashion as she does “American women.” Conway clearly understands what feminism is and fights for – otherwise, she would have difficulty deriving all of the clunky “anti-” and “pro-” labels she claims to dislike so much (except, of course, Mommy). Feminism advocates for women, men, and all people’s access to informed choices, reproductive justice, economic mobility, and access to healthcare (among other important causes). Feminism is about human rights, and Conway’s rhetoric seeks to refute the humanist scope of feminism’s expansive umbrella of dynamic and increasingly intersectional work. Conway provocatively oversimplifies, re-terms, and falsely positions feminist issues in “either/or” (anti-/pro-) frames, rather than “both/and” more inclusive approaches most feminists favor. Conway’s tactics signal that she knows exactly what feminism is and is not as she attempts to capitalize on emergent conservative and largely class-based (yet never named as such) fundamentalist sub-cultural discourses of “opposition.”

Conway captures the force of all four postfeminism frames in her postfeminist discourse – oblivion, self-empowerment, criticality, and feminine pride. She asserts postfeminist oblivion through strategically ignoring about how feminist “propaganda” has benefitted her and many women. Feminism is not “pro-abortion,” but steadfastly about reproductive justice, access to contraceptive choices, and healthcare. Reproductive justice includes persons who may hold the personal stance of being “pro-life,” but do not believe anyone should have the right to impose this same decision on *all* people. Everyone should have access to informed choices. Oblivion is a strategic mis-remembering that attempts to erase the taken-for-granted progress feminists have made across all domains of life. Second, the self-empowerment frame speaks to Conway’s understanding that feminism is “against” anything other than inequality. Conway seeks to champion that she is a “product of her choices, not a victim of her circumstances.” This ploy tries to diminish or “silently erase” the systemic inequalities faced by lower-income women, women of color, and many others who embattle societal oppressions obstructing their goals of economic survival and freedom of being. Self-empowerment prescribes a deceptively individualistic universality of success for those individuals who “achieve it” (like Conway) but offers little in the way of understanding why some people struggle harder than others to (possibly) attain a similar level of success.

11 For clarification purposes: I understand “unfeminist” to mean *not* feminist, although this stance does not feature intentional acts in opposition to feminism. “Antifeminism” actively works to discredit feminism, and “postfeminism” has various meanings. For example, someone deciding not to vote would be considered unfeminist, but not necessarily antifeminist or postfeminist, because these latter positions are motivated to discredit, mischaracterize, and dismantle feminism.

Postfeminist criticality, in Conway's context, pertains to phony advocacy postfeminists engage in on behalf of men (against "anti-male" feminist machinations). When imaginary battlefields are constructed, the difficulty for feminists to combat such grossly inaccurate depictions ("fake news") increases. Finally, the postfeminist ideal of feminine pride figures into Conway's (public) embrace of traditionally feminine, largely domestic-related social scripts. Conway wants men to be men! Why should her son or some boy in a classroom learn to sit still and follow the rules like the rest of his peers – he's going to be a man someday! I believe that Conway understands feminism better than her fear-stoking critiques might suggest. Like Trump, Conway is an ideological opportunist who is willing to say anything to convince others that they are the *real thing* – and that they actually know about, and care about what they are saying. In the final section of this work I consider postfeminism from Baudrillard's postmodern conception of the simulacra.

The Precession of the Equinoxes

Baudrillard's conception is inspired by astronomy. "Precession" draws its meaning from the Greek words "precede" and "precedence" and is commonly associated with the astronomical phenomenon known as the precession of the equinoxes. Two equinoxes occur each year when the sun intersects or is exactly above either the ecliptic equator (the earth's orbital path around the sun) or the celestial equator (the earth's "projected" equator toward the sun, or its center as negotiated among its own gravitational pull, axial tilt, the sun, and the moon) (Dobson 126). In other words, equinoxes occur on the two days each year when the earth is closest to the sun. During an equinox days and nights are equal in duration.

The precession of the equinox "consists of a slow rotation (period about 25,800 years)" during which the earth's rotational tilt gradually "sweeps out" due to the orbital gravitational pulls (*difference* forces) of the sun and moon (Dobson 130). For instance, picture a spinning top gyrating even as it begins to fall sideways. The sun and moon's gravitational pulls produce torque that eventually causes the earth to wobble on its axis; this wobbly oscillation ("nutations") resets the earth to its beginning axial tilt, restarting the precession (Dobson 130). Thus, torque (e.g., "difference") affects the earth's rotation throughout the entire precession period, but even during nutation, "the earth retains its shape." However, this instability "distort[s] the liquid part of earth's surface, pulling it out in both directions," causing disruptive tidal shifts or waves (Dobson 131). Consequently, the precession of the equinoxes is the slow process of the earth continuously weathering oppositional forces that eventually knock it off-kilter. This unstable misalignment then causes the earth to "reset" itself in its original axial tilt, even as the forces of difference are always already at work, again. There would be no precession without earth at its center.

The Precession of Postfeminist Simulacra

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the real itself.* (Baudrillard 1)

Jean Baudrillard theorizes how abstracted images come to replace the original entities they once merely symbolized or represented. Via a metaphor of map and territory, over time the original (territory) becomes fully discarded through the operational functions (of the “map”) in the postmodern economy of abstraction, simulation, and models of control. Baudrillard’s conception is typically used to analyze mediated images, but I envision a productive capacity for its deployment in looking at discursive ideological structures. I employ this model to explicate what I see as the theoretical commandeering of feminism by postfeminism. As such, I unpack each stage – abstraction, simulation, models of control – as Baudrillard discusses them, and relate these to the peculiar interrelationship of postfeminism and feminism. I contend that postfeminism is an ahistorical and paradoxical ideological operation that cannot exist outside of its assumed counter-positioning with feminism. Yet, postfeminism rests on radical mischaracterizations of feminism to argue its relevance. In other words, postfeminism is a simulated map without any authentic territory.

Postfeminist Abstraction. Baudrillard describes how postmodern abstractions are “no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept” (1). If we locate feminism as being representative of the originally real, the territory of gender equality, then we might interrogate postfeminism as an abstraction. Consequently, postfeminism is thus *not indicative of feminism itself* (“the map”), *nor a doppelganger of feminism* (“the double”), *nor a/n re/inflexive form of feminism* (“the mirror”), and is *unoriginal on its own* (“the concept”). From this perspective, postfeminism is dependent upon *its own production* of feminism to exist – since feminism’s authentic territory would render postfeminism obsolete. As Baudrillard observes, abstraction dispatches originality: “Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and the other, that constituted the charm of abstraction” (2). The postfeminist charm of abstraction and mechanisms of confusion deploy

“fake news” discourses and collapse the ready distinctions between postfeminism. Thus, postfeminism seeks to eclipse feminism by muddying and erasing the “old” before installing its “new” readymade and perceivable “sovereign difference.”

Postfeminist Simulation. Baudrillard points out that “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance” (1). Once postfeminism abstracts feminism, postfeminism becomes a *free-floating artifice* (“no longer that of a territory”), that *does not refer to anything* (e.g., feminism) (not “a referential being”), and is *unsubstantive on its own merits* (no “substance”). Baudrillard explains the interrelational complexity of this simulated production:

To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has.
To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have.
One implies a presence, the other an absence. But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending....Therefore, pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principles of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the “true” and the “false,” the “real” and the “imaginary.” Is the simulator sick or not, given that [it] produces “true” symptoms? (3)

Feminism cannot dissimulate from this relationship and “pretend to not have” what it *is* (a project of gender equality). But postfeminism can be understood as a simulation that “feigns to have” what it does not, and yet paradoxically, since it has been successfully abstracted away from the original territory (of feminism), it “produces ‘true’ symptoms” that only *this simulated hyperreality* can address. This ideological insulation or ideological negation is exactly how Conway and other postfeminists undermine feminist attempts to discount postfeminism. Postfeminism effectively blurs the difference (or relevance) of disparate cultural truths by deploying imaginary threats and subsequently moving to alleviate them. For example, women like Conway need to protect men in the patriarchy from the clutches of “anti-male” feminists and ignore that all women do not have access to adequate social and economic opportunities. In other words, truth or falsity, accuracy or abstraction, matter little for postfeminist simulations because its ideology centers around a continuously abstracting, now self-simulating hyperreal apparatus (more real-seeming than the actual real).

Postfeminist Models of Control. Baudrillard addresses how simulations like postfeminism attain cultural concreteness when they transform into abstractions, now simulating a foregone real. Simulations like postfeminism co-opt a “model of control. . . [that] can be reproduced an indefinite number of times” – it “no longer [even] needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational” (2). Consequently, postfeminist ideology is

spreading like wildfire since Trump's election. It is reproduced in all kinds of places – in coffee shop talk, online, in news media, by people like Kellyanne Conway, in television shows, films, and advertising, etc. Baudrillard's notion that simulations do not even have to be rational is a striking aspect that pertains to postfeminism. The rampant, patently false representations of feminism *are* irrational but are also characteristic of this ideological hijacking. When abstracted simulations accomplish these modalities of control, as Baudrillard explains, "It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere" (2). It is difficult to critique an operation without any locatable concrete context. Indeed, it is important to look at origins and history to better comprehend what is happening in our midst.

Unmasking Postfeminism: Four Potential Operations

This work has examined some of the ways postfeminism co-opts feminist practices and values, even as it acts as a figment of the very cultural mischiefs to which it claims to respond. Postfeminism works to preserve the patriarchal capitalist status quo. I have detected four postfeminist operations, which I term: *machination*, *dissemination*, *identification*, and *insulation*.

Postfeminist "issues" emerge and machinate their relevance by devising polarizing oppositions to well-publicized social issues that appear to be gaining traction. For example, how Conway feels the need to "defend" her son from learning appropriate classroom decorum because being polite may threaten his manhood someday. In contriving such antifeminist-focused "activism," postfeminism machinates its own imagined ideological "battlefields" that primarily exist *to be in tension* with feminist issues and aims.

Many postfeminist stratagems construct dramatized senses of agonism in relation to feminist efforts toward gender equality. This influence reflects the erroneous postfeminist sentiments that "feminism" actively seeks to dismantle "traditional" expressions of femininity, the sanctity of womanhood, motherhood, and/or wifedom. These nurturing familial roles rightly hold deep personal meanings for many women; for some, these domestic performances threaten to envelop their identities. The strength of such self-identification as "mother" and/or "wife" potentially transforms formerly abstract social issues like equal pay into a personal issue that threatens oneself and family. The fourth postfeminist operation, insulation, occurs after the previous three movements – machination, dissemination, and identification – successfully activate postfeminist insulation. Insulation features one's withdrawal from feminists' perceivably destructive social movements into the safe confines of the nuclear family home. If it feels like "the whole world" is particularly "against *you and yours*" then postfeminism has successfully agitated, exploited, and alienated women from even noticing inequality, and consequently, from desiring to fight for gender equality.

Kellyanne Conway is particularly cunning in her use of these four postfeminist operations. Conway synthesizes this postfeminist apparatus in her discussion of the travesty her twelve-year-old son suffers at school when he is forced to sit still and be respectful of his peers and teachers. Conway mischaracterizes feminists as “manhaters” who are hellbent on deploying “labels,” and seek to humiliate boys by instilling good manners. Conway abuses the cultural visibility she enjoys as a presidential advisor. She frequently appears on cable television to disseminate postfeminist machinations that “label” feminism as a “pro-abortion movement” intent on spreading its “anti-male propaganda” and “anti-male culture” (Heim). She is a loyal advocate for men’s empowerment – although, curiously, not for women’s equality. Conway proudly identifies as a postfeminist who stands on her own two feet because she is “a product of choices,” *not* a “victim of circumstances.” This postfeminist perspective on identity ignores intersectionality and conflates “choices” with “circumstances.” It suggests that these distinct and concrete existential realms are not only interchangeable but are also easily overcome simply by “choosing” to do so. Consequently, the “feminist” flipside of this calculating conceptualization designates some women as “victims” who *choose* to be victimized instead of a patriarchal *product* like Conway. She brings her variety of postfeminist indoctrination full circle in anchoring her identity as a “strong” mother and pro-male advocate for her son. She detests “that whole anti-male culture where we want young boys to sit down and shut up in the classroom” (Heim). The precession of Conway’s postfeminism revolves around men’s empowerment and women’s disempowerment. Men drive the economy while women surrender themselves to their families and become increasingly isolated from other women and many facets of public life.

The Desertion of the Real

What is the utility of postfeminism? This article has endeavored (however ironically) to point out some postfeminist themes and interferences across its (ab)use in ideological realms and as a supposedly “critical” scholarly lens. I identified four postfeminist thematic frames – oblivion, self-empowerment, criticality, and feminine pride – and then demonstrated how enthusiasts deploy these tactics in harmful ways. Kellyanne Conway is a conspicuous example of how unchecked postfeminist ideals come to be disseminated in our political and cultural landscapes. Postfeminism is not impervious to critique, although its strategies of abstraction, simulation, and models of control attempt to camouflage it as such. Further, postfeminism involves four potential operations I have called machination, dissemination, identification, and insulation.

Some feminists are focusing on the evolution of feminism and postfeminism. Recently Rosalind Gill called for a critical feminist focus on the “*political and ideological differences*” among feminists, as opposed to

examinations of “birth dates” and the “generational framings” of feminism (“Post-Postfeminism” 612). Susan Faludi now questions if feminism may have missed some important opportunities to connect with “blogosphere” feminists and working-class women, posing an important question: “Did white working-class women betray feminism, or did feminism betray them?” (“Where is Feminism” 5). Stéphanie Genz also focuses on the damaging political context bolstering postfeminism: “I suggest that postfeminism gives rise to a problematic and controversial stance that is doubly coded in political terms (being able to act in both conservative and subversive ways) while also repudiating ‘traditional’ activist strategies and communal demonstrations” (“Third Way/ve” 337). Deploying feminist theory to critique women has always been debatable, but it has also always been necessary. In an article for *Jezebel* magazine, Stassa Edwards asks, “What do feminists owe Kellyanne Conway?” Edwards is responding to the internet trolls attacking Conway’s appearance and clothing. Edwards’ take is that Conway’s appearance, style, age, and embodiment are not, on their own, sufficient grounds warranting feminist critiques. However, Edwards insists that it behooves feminists to *critique* Conway’s media-bolstered “narrative authority, one that involves lying to further the racist, sexist agenda of the White House and glibly dismissing numerous sexual assault allegations against her boss.” At the same time, Edwards is evenly cautious about feminists coming to Conway’s *defense*, as defending Conway is probably not “in the best interest of ‘all women,’” and is likely merely serving “the interest of maintaining the sanctity of the white feminine body.” I believe that the more centrally theorists position postfeminism in the ongoing feminist project, the more this project stalls in its reluctance to deconstruct and critique postfeminist ideology and related theoretical limitations. I encourage feminist theorists to rigorously assert our way out from under the stronghold postfeminism currently maintains over emergent theorizations.

Kellyanne Conway is an opportunist who s(t)imulates postfeminist sentiments in an effort to discredit the central relevance feminism holds for and in women’s daily lives. Postfeminism’s tricky practices of decontextualization and revisionist history create insular ideological forcefields that feminism must improve at deconstructing and critically circumnavigating. As a strategy, postfeminism relies on its ability to distract its believers from seeking any consensus beyond their individualized self- and homemade empowerment. Conversely, feminism is a collective movement that concerns itself with all women and all people. When this sounds like too much work and higher taxes, postfeminism speaks directly to the fatigued individual and reminds them that they cannot afford to care about “everyone else” (or *anyone* else). While postfeminism brazenly pronounces the “end” of feminism by attaching a four-letter “post” to feminism’s namesake, feminism will continue to weather unsteady cultural periods. Postfeminism seeks to isolate women and prevent us from gathering and talking about our experiences, raising

our voices, and collaborating on constructing an empowering collective consciousness. Postfeminism tries to distract us all from realizing our potent strength in numbers and from fighting for the righteous interconnected dignity of *all people's human rights*.

It is my argument that postfeminism is constructing “the desert of the real” within feminist theory by concentrating its focus on neoliberal frames of whiteness and privilege to the *exclusion* of systemically oppressed intersectional bodies and lives. This amounts to the feminist *desertion* of the real. We are failing to rigorously address concrete issues affecting women’s lives by focusing on what they watch on Netflix. When postfeminism is deployed to gauge whether a media text is postfeminist, it usually is. Now what? This practice abandons what really matters to people – the existentially lived consequences where the gendered body meets bone. Feminism has always been ethically and critically essential to improving women’s lives, seeking social justice, and actualizing a more just future for all. Feminist praxis is always necessary. We must continue this mission.

Works Cited

- Adriaens, Fien. “Post Feminism in Popular Culture: A Potential for Critical Resistance?” *Politics and Culture*, vol. 4, 2009, www.politicsandculture.org/2009/11/09/post-feminism-in-popular-culture-a-potential-for-critical-resistance/.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke UP, 2017.
- Althusser, Louis. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell, 2004, pp. 693-702.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. 1981. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, U of Michigan P, 1995.
- Borchers, Callum. “Kellyanne Conway vs. Jake Tapper, annotated.” *The Washington Post/The Fix*, 8 Feb. 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/08/kellyanne-conway-vs-jaketapperannotated/?utmterm=.747887211b5d.
- Butler, Jess. “For White Girls Only? Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion.” *Feminist Formations*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2013, pp. 35-58.
- Cook, Michael. “Kellyanne Fitzpatrick (Conway); Reality Check; You’re from Suburban New Jersey. Not the Paris Runway,” *The Huffington Post*, 26 Jan. 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/kellyanne-fitzpatrick-conway-reality-check-youre_us_588a83cee4b0020b224b433e.
- Delk, Josh. “Conway: Criticism of Me is ‘Gender-Based.’” *The Hill*, 16 July 2017, www.thehill.com/homenews/administration/342244-conway-criticism-of-me-is-gender-based.
- Delkic, Melina. “How Many Times Has Trump Cheated On His Wives?” *Newsweek*, 12 Jan. 2018, www.newsweek.com/how-many-times-trump-cheated-wives-780550.
- Dobson, Geoffrey J. “Newton’s Problems with Rigid Body Dynamics in the Light of his Treatment of the Precession of the Equinoxes.” Communicated by C. Wilson. *Archive for History of Exact Sciences*, vol. 53, 1998, pp. 125-45.

- Edwards, Stassa. "What do Feminists Owe Kellyanne Conway?" *Jezebel*, 6 March 2017, www.theslot.jezebel.com/what-do-feminists-owekellyanne-conway-1793006855.
- Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. 1991. Three Rivers Press, 2006.
- . "Where is Feminism Now?" *Democracy*, Symposium: America After Trump, no. 43, 2017, www.democracyjournal.org/magazine/43/where-is-feminism-now/.
- Genz, Stéphanie. *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- . "Third Way/ve: The Politics of Postfeminism." *Feminist Theory*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2006, pp. 333-53.
- Gill, Rosalind. Postfeminism and the New Cultural Life of Feminism." *Feminist Ghosts: The New Cultural Life of Feminism*, vol. 6, 2016, pp. 1-8.
- . "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, no. 10, vol. 2, 2007, pp. 147-66.
- . "Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2016, pp. 610-30.
- Heim, Joe. 2017. "'They never saw this coming': A Q&A with Kellyanne Conway." *The Washington Post*, 26 Jan. 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/they-never-saw-this-coming-a-qanda-with-kellyanne-conway-on-trumpsvictory/2017/01/26/2bf64c10-da96-11e6-9a36-1d296534b31e_story.html?hpid=hp_rhp-toptablemain_conway1130pm:homepage/story&utmterm=.b76656eda3de.
- Lake, Celinda, and Kellyanne Conway. *What Women Really Want: How American Women are Quietly Erasing Political, Class, and Religious Lines to Change the Way We Live*. Free Press, 2005.
- Lazar, Michelle M. "Doing 'Critical' in a Postfeminist Era: Reviving Critical Consciousness through Peer Dialogue." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, vol. 35, no. 5, 2014, pp. 733-48.
- McRobbie, Angela. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. Sage, 2009.
- , "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and the New Gender Regime." *All About the Girl*. Edited by Anita Harris. Routledge, 2004, pp. 59-69.
- Politico Staff. "What Kellyanne Conway really said about Mothers Working in the White House." *Politico*, 9 Dec. 2016, www.politico.com/story/2016/12/conway-working-mothers-white-house-232458.
- Raymond, Laurel, and Kira Lerner. "Kellyanne Conway's Twisted Vision of Feminism is the Norm at CPAC." *ThinkProgress*, 23 Feb. 2017, www.thinkprogress.org/kellyanne-conways-twisted-vision-of-the-feminist-movement-in-america-b9fbd61d6ab8.
- Relman, Eliza. "Kellyanne Conway and other Women Reveal what it's like to Work in Trump's White House." *Business Insider*, 28 May 2017, www.businessinsider.com/women-trump-white-house-2017-5.
- Roberts, Laura M., and Robin J. Ely. "Why did so many White Women Vote for Donald Trump?" *Fortune*, 17 Nov. 2016, www.fortune.com/2016/11/17/donald-trump-women-voters-election/.
- ushistory.org. "57c. The Equal Rights Amendment." *U.S. History* online index, www.ushistory.org/us/57c.asp.