GLOBALIZED BACKLASH: WOMEN AGAINST FEMINISM’S NEW MEDIA MATRIX OF (ANTI) FEMINIST TESTIMONY

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by

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B.S., St. Cloud State University, 2010
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A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree.

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GLOBALIZED BACKLASH: WOMEN AGAINST FEMINISM’S NEW MEDIA MATRIX OF (ANTI) FEMINIST ESTIMONY

By
Margarethe Mapes

A Thesis/Dissertation Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the field of Communication Studies

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

MARGARETHE MAPES for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in COMMUNICATION STUDIES, presented on April 4, 2016 at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

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MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Nathan Stucky

Feminisms are oftentimes confronted with dissonance, resistance, and backlash. Invested in criticizing the cultural and institutional emergence of patriarchy and calls to re-order structures of inequality make feminism threatening to status quo power dynamics. “Women Against Feminism”—a social media phenomenon and space for women to post anti-feminist messages—began gaining notoriety in 2013. By 2015, “Women Against Feminism” expanded to multiple social media platforms, gained thousands of anti-feminist submissions, and received ample support and criticism across news outlets. This study explores “Women Against Feminism” as a potential site of 21st feminist backlash, noting nuanced rhetorical strategies that rely on fearing feminism, declarations of interpersonal and intrapersonal love, and co-opting feminist ideology to propagate anti-feminist narratives. I situate backlash as a communicative phenomenon of perception rather than a clear-cut movement reacting toward a stated goal of progress by a social group. In this way, feminist progress functions as an illusory cultural script where backlash reacts toward the perceived enactment of a feminist goal, rather than (although not excluding) the successful feminist execution of that goal. Thus, this study dually investigates what backlash strategies are used while also uncovering how differing audiences perceive feminism. Finally, I set forth a series of suggestive practical methods for feminist engagement across dissonance and difference.
DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this document to my mother, Dr. Jan Kircher, whose scholarly and personal presence has guided me to become the feminist scholar that I am today. Mom, I am indebted to your sacrifices and am forever grateful.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCING “WOMEN AGAINST FEMINISM”

I am a feminist. I believe in equity between genders, fair distribution of resources, transgender equality, and the importance of collective action toward change—radical or reformist—to reduce oppression. Growing up with a single mother of three, feminism was not only something that I believed in, it was something that I lived. Because my feminist sensibilities are integral to my individual ethos as a scholar, activist, and person, I became disappointed and enraged by sources declaring that feminism is boring, outdated, and may be reaching an expiration date (Wakefield; Moore). I soon realized that claims of feminisms’ irrelevancy were just the beginning. Laura Bates speculates that feminism has become a modern scapegoat, where “feminism is ruining everything” has become common anti-feminist commentary—commentary that Bates labels as backlash (par. 3). The emergence of these observations—or its presence in my own work—coincided with a secondary phenomenon, the online “Women Against Feminism” campaign.

The “Women Against Feminism” campaign is an online forum for women who are unhappy with feminism to voice their concerns. “Women Against Feminism” (hereon WAF) developed its online photo campaign in 2013, and by the summer of 2014, WAF’s online presence had expanded as a virtual space where women declared why they don’t want or need feminism, photographing themselves with their concerns on a poster or placard. For example, one placard reads, “I know the dictionary definition of feminism, yet the words and actions of many modern feminists do not match that” (July 20). Tumblr and Facebook function as the main organizational sites for WAF; however, WAF lacks a centralized entity, instead privileging any and all contributions from women that criticize feminism. Many placards and posters begin with
“I don’t need feminism because”, followed by a list of grievances that range from, I don’t need feminism because “I love a man and he loves me!” (July 21), to “I believe in working for what I earn, not given entitlement” (July 21). Tumblr and Facebook (with overlap) host hundreds of photos within the WAF campaign from anonymous contributors. When I first encountered WAF, I sat in disbelief that thousands of women were collaborating in collective action against feminism through social media.

My first reactions of disbelief and anger were, admittedly, aimed toward participants of the social media sites. I had believed and argued, and still continue to believe and argue that feminism is for everyone. Unfortunately, I am reminded, “It is true that, to a great extent, young women today dissociate themselves from feminism” (Xinari 12). And, given the rise of social media, women have become increasingly vocal about their detachment from and distaste toward feminism. Rather than act on my initial response of blaming WAF participants, I instead propose a rhetorical engagement with the “Women Against Feminism” placards. While Robin Abcarian called participants of WAF “willfully ignorant,” I stand with Cathy Young who instead suggests that, “while the anti-feminist rebellion has its eye-rolling moments, it raises valid questions . . . that must be addressed if we are to continue making progress toward real gender equality” (“Stop Fem-Splaining,” par. 1). A major goal of this dissertation is to question what WAF is asking of and about feminism.

In this opening chapter, I outline my larger study, the contents proceeding in four sections. In the first section, I situate the WAF campaign in more detail, outlining what the campaign is and criticisms of WAF. I widen my scope of contextualization by positioning WAF as a social media experience, including current suggestive research on the impact of social media

1. The placards are transcribed as-is. I did not use editorial discretion to correct grammatical or spelling errors.
networking on culture(s) writ large, highlighting the communicative aspects of WAF as a phenomenon. In section two, I define feminism(s) and its key components and detail the historical legacy of anti-feminism globally. I provide a brief introduction to anti-feminist backlash to give an overview of the larger theoretical framework for this dissertation and the cultural backdrop facing status quo feminists. Following this theoretical mapping, I discuss feminist rhetorical criticism as the method of study and describe the parameters I placed on the data. Finally, in section four, I provide an in-depth chapter layout.

**Women Against Feminism: New Media Participation**

*What is “Women Against Feminism”?*

“Women Against Feminism” emerged in 2013 by women communicating that feminism is toxic and, as a modern practice, is no longer relevant. In WAF, women are invited to submit anonymous pictures that detail why feminism has failed them, why they disavow feminism, and why others should do the same. The content differs with each placard; however, women (or couples) hold the placards, tying the textual component directly to the first-person narrator visually present (see fig. 1.1).

![Figure 1.1 “Women Against Feminism.”](https://example.com/fig1.1)

*Figure 1.1 “Women Against Feminism.” Facebook. 28 Aug. 2014. Web. 15 Sept. 2014.*
Between July of 2013 to December 30, 2014, the WAF Tumblr site posted more than 1,900 pictures in the campaign. Currently, the WAF Facebook page has more than 36,000 “likes” in support of the campaign. WAF’s Facebook site outlines the purpose of the campaign, explaining the following:

This page has no official spokesperson because each of these women is her own spokesperson! Other people can speak their own mind and don’t need permission from this page (free speech, right?) . . . We don't have any "official" web site. Any other web site or organization claiming to represent this page and the Tumblr page was set up by someone else, but hey people can express their own personal opinions. The focus of this page is just to post women's responses to feminism and those photos should speak for themselves. If that starts a "movement" then great! (“About”)

The Facebook explanation claims that there is no “official spokesperson” for the campaign—a campaign launched across multiple media locations. An absent centralized entity makes determining the exact motivation for WAF difficult. Despite this uncertainty, it is clear that someone or a group of individuals scans and posts the received submissions before they’re made available on Tumblr and Facebook because no pro-feminist posts are visible. Put differently, the submission process for placards and photos requires a human element to approve that the placards are, in fact, anti-feminist before posting the submission on Tumblr and Facebook.

Uncertainty, though, does not eliminate speculation about who founded WAF. Beth Elderkin asks, “who are these women, and why do they reject feminism?” noting, “since all of the selfies are anonymous, it’s hard to really know anything about them, beyond what’s written on a piece of notebook paper” (par. 3). Anonymity—an option for participants—protects the
identity of women participating and, simultaneously, the founding members of WAF. In response to founder(s) remaining anonymous, Elderkin explains a current Internet theory that a men’s rights group may be using WAF as a vehicle for women to make anti-feminist arguments (par. 15). Anti-feminist journalist Janet Bloomfield disagrees, claiming to know the woman behind WAF and contends that the woman is choosing to remain anonymous for safety concerns (qtd. in Elderkin, par. 17-8). These theories, however popular, are impossible to verify without the founders’ explicit commentary.

Online bloggers offer an additional theory, speculating that WAF emerged as responsive to an earlier feminist new media campaign entitled “Who Needs Feminism” (Horan, par. 6). The “Who Needs Feminism” campaign originated during a 2012 class at Duke University with Dr. Rachel F. Seidman titled, “Women in the Public Sphere.” Dr. Seidman, a Duke professor specializing in women’s history, describes how her students were shut down by face-to-face peers, or called man-haters when they attempted interpersonal discussions about feminism, pushing them to social media spaces (549). Using Tumblr and Facebook, “Who Needs Feminism” photographed individuals with placards defining why they need feminism, similar to the current WAF photographic strategies. For example, one photo reads, “I need feminism because I’m tired of feeling like my life doesn’t begin until I meet ‘the one’” (Aug. 18). After launching the “Who Needs Feminism” campaign online, the sixteen founding women commented that they expected both dialogue and backlash (Callaway, par. 2). WAF’s mirrored online campaign tactics seem to suggest that WAF’s motivation is partially reactive to “Who Needs Feminism” and, perhaps, part of the predicted backlash.

By using social media, WAF has partially collapsed spatial boundaries, connecting women across the world. WAF continues growing, currently spreading beyond the original
Tumblr and Facebook organizational sites. Although the WAF Facebook page clarifies that their specific campaign emerged out of Tumblr’s “Women Against Feminism” efforts and that they are not responsible for additional websites, hashtags, or blogs with similar interests (“About”), WAF has expanded. For example, when I began my investigation of WAF in the summer of 2014, the Facebook group had approximately 18,000 likes. Now, in early 2016, likes have doubled, where more than 36,000 Facebook users have liked the page. Photos continue to be posted daily and weekly on Facebook. In addition, “women against feminism” as an organizational hashtag or tag line has developed on Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube. Across each of these different platforms, WAF placards and arguments insist that modern feminism has failed.

The continued rise in WAF’s popularity has produced both support and criticism. Casey Cavanagh, of the Huffington Post, argues, for example, that WAF demonstrates “how misguided too many people still are about what being a feminist actually means” (par. 4). A popular retort to WAF, Cavanagh’s statement centralizes the denotative meaning of feminism, placing worth in what feminism means over how it’s deployed in practice. One prime example of this response is explained in the following observation about WAF:

The reasons for abandoning the feminist movement were heart breaking.

“Because I enjoy being feminine. Because I’m not a victim. Because I believe in equality, not supremacy.” I mean – I’m with you on those things, ladies. I believe in those things, too, and I’m a feminist. This is the part that frustrates me, this is the bit where the record breaks and I stutter out the same response: that’s not what feminism means, that’s not what feminism means. That’s not, that’s not, that’s not what feminism means. (Thibeaux, par. 6, emphasis in original)
Heather Martin concurs, contending that WAF is a waste of time and energy and distracts from more relevant cultural issues because “ignorance is not bliss” (par. 1). Emily Shire, of the *Daily Beast*, echoes these sentiments in her article entitled “You Don’t Hate Feminism, You Just Don’t Understand It,” noting how “Many of the reasons these women claim for not needing feminism are embarrassingly bad” (par. 3). Shire describes WAF as housing bad criticisms of feminism, making it difficult for feminists to take the posts seriously. Similarly overt in her criticisms, Elizabeth Ballou argues that WAF is based on ignorance. In her article, Ballou posts samples of WAF photos, taking oppositional stances against the placards, focusing on why each claim is invalid or factually incorrect. Most criticisms focus on re-defining feminism for WAF, explaining why and how their interpretations of feminism are wrong.

Mockery and irony have also arisen as strategies to criticize WAF. David Futrelle began “Confused Cats Against Feminism” to mock the misogyny he interpreted as present in WAF posts. Confused Cats Against Feminism posts pictures of cats with placards and signs denouncing feminism. Futrelle notes that “cats need a place where they can post pictures of themselves holding signs denouncing feminism for assorted weird reasons that don't seem to have anything to do with what feminism is actually about” (qtd. in Davis, par. 2). The humorous response was created to point out the inconsistencies between what feminism stands for and how it is interpreted.²

Some writers scold these feminist responses to WAF. Lisa Knisely, an instructor of feminist theory, is disappointed in the feminist retort, commenting that “it’s almost as if feminists have forgotten that we have been arguing internally, sometimes quite bitterly, about what feminism is ourselves” (par. 5). Similarly, arguing that (some of) WAF’s arguments are

2. See Karen Sternheimer’s 2008 article entitled “Gender, Cats, Kittens, and Cougars” for a feminist criticism of comparing women to cats and felines.
valid and need to be addressed, Cathy Young writes, “many feminists have responded with nastiness that would normally be called misogynist” (“Women Against,” par. 6). Young argues that as a campaign, WAF is largely focused on equality while being critical of feminist techniques. Both Young and Knisely encourage a more generous read of WAF and certainly a more generous engagement. Gloria Steinem, commenting on WAF, noted the importance of asking why the women participating in WAF may feel attracted to anti-feminism (qtd. in Lisker and Cueto, par. 8).

Agreeing with Young, Knisely, and Steinem, I propose to take WAF seriously as a dissenting campaign of online anti-feminism. Specifically, I investigate central rhetorical components of WAF, placing those finding alongside backlash literature. A self-proclaimed anti-feminist site, I’m interested in WAF as both a product of and contributor to nuanced backlash strategies in the era of new media. Despite Susan Faludi’s claim that “a backlash against women’s rights . . . is nothing new” (60), Mansfield and Shames contend “[that] scholars are only recently beginning to investigate the dynamics of backlash and response” (630). Thus, I work to fill that theoretical gap in research by examining WAF through the theoretical framework of backlash. With this positioning in mind, this study asks the following questions: 1) How does WAF describe and construct feminism? 2) What are their major dissenting arguments? 3) How does WAF challenge my own feminism? 4) What modern feminist tendencies does WAF articulate as damaging? 5) How does WAF use social media to collaborate? 6) How can feminists engage ethically with WAF and dissenting parties in the future? In the following section, I work to more fully situate these key questions by articulating new media’s role in WAF.

New Media: The Medium in Context
The increased expansion and access to the Internet has led to worldwide participation on compiled social media sites. Facebook, launched in 2004, has expanded globally with over one billion users (McClean and Maalsen 246). As Adrienne Shaw argues, digital technologies “allow many more people to access the means of cultural production” (275). Facebook demonstrates Shaw’s accessibility claim, connecting millions of users, allowing individuals to add each other as friends or conversationally engage on product or discussion sites. Individuals connect interpersonally beyond situated geographies while also producing unedited arguments, making social media users both producers and recipients of globalized cultural knowledge(s). Hasinoff warns, though, to be cautious of blanket support of participation, noting that feminists “should carefully attend to how participation can reproduce power structures even while it promises to destabilize them” (272). Thus, accessible participation does not restrict content from reinforcing or resisting dominant ideologies and damaging rhetoric.

Addressing this concern, Shaw suggests that more scholarly attention to online participation that may cause harm is needed. McClean and Maalsen argue that the semi-permanent structure of social media encourages intimacy and conversation. They explain how social media operates in a “paradoxical space where ‘intimate’ confessions or conversations are forged without expectation of permanence” (244). Access plays one part in the high volume of participation in social media sites; however, the belief in freedom to delete or take down posts creates the illusion of security for posts to be unfiltered or harmful toward others. Comparably, globalization collapses spatiality, giving disparate bodies access to information while simultaneously reminding local individuals that their posts will be read around the world rather than in their neighborhood. Globalized social media offer spaces for intimate conversations and disclosure with some protection from interpersonal consequences.
Beyond the literal text-space, the shifting political terrain can be seen in and through social media. Virginia Vargas argues how politics have expanded beyond “formal spaces”—spaces marked by cultural expectations for political participation (906). Social movements have begun looking for new spaces and ways to re-articulate their needs and agendas—like altering narrative structures—because of an increasingly interconnected world. Unfortunately, as Vargas outlines, such interconnection, creating fragmentation and nomadic experiences, threatens individual identities. She argues that a “fear of marginalization” means that individuals insist that their one identity is true, excluding others before they are excluded (909). Individuals use social media sites as the mechanism to self-express their own identity in relation or resistance to other identity groups (such as feminism).

In response to a more globalized world, new forms of connection and access to information have meant collaboration across geographies. Social media, Shaw argues, have allowed “groups to produce new forms of knowledge and posit counter-discourses in a way that can and has spread widely” (276). For McClean and Maalsen, Facebook and Twitter are new globalized arenas that can transform feminist geographies by collapsing, without erasing, spatial constraints. Social media allow social groups to convene in an organized manner to address political and economic issues.

The increased connectivity caused by networking and social media do not, though, eliminate cultural structures and privileges. The Internet more broadly does not inherently lead to neutrality or create an a-political environment. In the case of WAF, for example, English is the overwhelming language choice amongst placards. Social media scholars Bruns, Highfield, and Burgess contend that, despite users frequently using multiple languages on social media sites, the language of choice usually highlights the intended audience (875). WAF’s general reliance on
English—both in the description and in placards—hints that the intended audience is English speaking. Similarly, though Facebook has risen to 1.4 billion users globally (“Stats”), it originated inside U.S. American culture from an American citizen. Facebook as a platform creates space to create formations despite spatial and geographic differences; those formations, however, are still restricted by language and the cultural expectation of an Anglo-audience.

With this background in mind, I ask, as a feminist: what are larger audiences learning about feminism through WAF? What kind of feminism is being outlined? Who is being targeted? When discussing the impact media have on the public at-large, Kroener argues, “The media undoubtedly ha[ve] some influence on the public; [they are] part of the process of the public formulating ideas about issues” (125). Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky concur with Kroener’s assumption of the power that mass media have in dispersing communication messages to larger audiences (257). Mark Poster, theorizing more specifically about media, argues that new media shape cultures, including how identities are formed (533), centralizing new media as a communicative phenomenon. Consequently, I believe that feminists should not ignore or purely belittle WAF because the implications such ignorance has on larger publics’ understandings of feminism. Rather, I contend that feminism(s) should engage with WAF because, as Poster’s argument suggests, WAF influences what being a woman means and how the identity is understood.

**Feminism and Backlash**

*(Cyber) Feminism: Defining An Ambiguous Movement*

Attempts to define feminism are wrought with push back and uncertainty. Beller, for example, discusses his attempts at defining feminism, noting that “Alas, no such two-bit or even 160-character phrase is forthcoming from this quarter, save for the idea that the concerns and
practices of feminism appear so diverse they seem to defy definition” (par. 9). Rosemarie Tong agrees, arguing in her book, *Feminist Thought*, how “feminist thought resists categorization into tidy schools of thought. Interdisciplinary, intersectional, and interlocking are the kinds of adjectives that best describe the way feminists think” (Introduction). Because WAF as an organizational phenomenon partially rests on understanding what feminism is not, this short section works to contextualize some suggestions about what feminism is, historically situating the movement and key commitments. In other words, in this section, I introduce one historical account of feminism to create a common vocabulary of feminist commitments. As a caveat, however, I must note that the history discussed and terminologies brought forth originate from my learned feminist history, a history steeped in academia and Anglo-American feminist practices.

From this perspective, Michaela Meyer offers a useful starting point when defining feminism and articulating feminist commitments. She contends that rejecting oppression or domination and criticizing practices that assert patriarchal power over individuals or groups constitute the essence of feminism (3). I appreciate Meyer’s use of “essence,” a term that situates feminism as ambiguous, plural, and divergent, while marking key commitments that run through feminisms. Despite this feminist essence, diverse feminist groups—committed to various political causes—have historically enacted feminism differently. Commonly, feminist scholarship tracks feminism linearly from 1st, 2nd, to 3rd wave feminisms. Kate Mondloch describes these waves in the following:

Contemporary Anglo-American feminism is typically periodized into three "waves": a first wave initiated in the nineteenth century and associated with the [woman’s] suffrage movement, a second wave established in the 1960s and
broadly focused on social conditions, and a third wave inaugurated in the early 1990s and focused on pluralism and the continued deconstruction of identity, including various "post" feminisms. (19)

As Mondloch’s brief historical synopsis demonstrates, the three waves have constituted an organizational strategy to track the progress of feminism over time and different institutional or theoretical commitments that take place, ranging from suffrage and reproductive rights to transgender equality and questioning the basis for dichotomous gender distinctions.

Diverse political commitments are also enacted within and beyond the waves, namely the following four categories: liberal, radical, Marxist, and intersectional obligations. First, for liberal feminists, minimizing patriarchal power occurs through reform and enacting changes at the institutional level. Tong discusses how, for liberal feminists, the overall goal is creating a society of freedom where both men and women have the opportunity to flourish (ch. 1). For example, the notion that women should be given equal access to education, or women should have the right to vote, are liberal feminist arguments. Contemporary liberal feminists argue that sexual equality is necessary for gender equality (ch. 1). Second, by contrast, radical feminists are revolutionaries who, historically, participated in anti-war activism and the civil rights movement (ch. 2). Radical feminists disagree internally, with some arguing to eliminate genders as identity categories in favor of androgyny, while others asserting that strict femme performances as women is a preferred route to end oppression. Third, Marxist feminists argue that classism is the root cause of oppression, foregrounding labor and production as mechanisms to devalue women (ch. 3). Finally, intersectional feminists criticized Anglo-American feminism for privileging middle-class and white experiences and leaving out the life experiences of women of color, migrants, and other intersecting categories of identity. Additional feminisms exist that I have
failed to mention here. In fact, differences in feminisms’ definitions, sensibilities, and methodologies are part of the attraction to feminism. The four categories listed above are not discreet but suggestive of the constant evolution of feminism.

Currently, feminists committed to different epistemological stances are extending their feminist sensibilities to online spaces for activism, recognizing that the Internet allows individuals to participate in a globalized arena where gender issues can be addressed and discussed. Regularly coined “cyberfeminism,” online feminist activism continues to grow. Barnett articulates the historic role of cyberfeminism, outlining that “the term ‘cyberfeminism’ surfaced in the early 1990’s” and became associated with feminist online activist work that “was characterized by ideas for changing society, its structures, and perhaps even the human itself in ways that would bolster prospects for women’s equality, relationships to new technologies and the movements and practices they inspired” (par. 1). Generally, cyberfeminism refers to practices and discourses that explore power relations through information technologies and the non-oppressive possibilities that new media may house (Beller). Social media provide an online space for feminist activists to engage in and with feminist practices.

Unfortunately, feminism(s)—online and offline—has been rejected, re-interpreted, and resisted for decades. As WAF demonstrates, social media channels have created opportunities for anti-feminist testimony, too. New media have only surfaced as one recent location for anti-feminist organizing. Historically, resistance to feminism and feminist ideological practices has been instituted individually, politically, and socially. The following section describes backlash as a recurring cultural trend. I provide an overview of backlash—the larger theoretical frame for this dissertation—to give a contextual snapshot of feminisms’ relationship to anti-feminist backlash.
Anti-Feminism and Historical Backlash

Anti-feminism as a strategy has a long history before WAF. Susan Faludi’s work in, *Backlash: The Undeclared War on American Women*, creates a compelling argument that backlash regularly accompanies feminist successes. For Faludi, backlash subtly dismantles women’s progresses and feminist efforts for liberation. As a strategy against feminism, backlash emerges from a fear of change (Brown 907, emphasis in original). Men, for example, may backlash against feminism in an attempt to reinstate lost privileges and power (Mansbridge and Shames 627). Mansbridge and Shames point to how pre-second-wave men became “accustomed to having the final say in household matters because ‘father knows best’”—a narrative disrupted through feminism, causing men to backlash because, “In such circumstances, a loss of these capacities causes outrage along with mere pain” (627). Changes to the status quo that are caused by feminism, or perceived to be caused by feminism, fuel backlash.

Men may arise as the first culprit for instituting backlash; however, women also participate in backlash. “In America, too, successfully persuading women to collaborate in their own subjugation is a tradition of patriarchy long-standing,” describes Faludi (62). Cathy Young articulates part of the anti-feminist history from women:

Female anti-feminism is nothing new. In the 19th century, plenty of women were hostile to the women’s movement and to women who pursued nontraditional paths. In the 1970s, Marabel Morgan’s regressive manifesto *The Total Woman* was a top best seller, and Phyllis Schlafly led opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment. But such anti-feminism was invariably about defending women’s traditional roles. (“Stop Fem-Splaining,” par. 3)
Here, Young notes how historical anti-feminist movements were grounded in support for more traditional gender roles. Beth Elderkin seconds Young’s analysis, arguing that anti-feminists historically organized in opposition to equal voting amendments. Currently, groups like the Concerned Women of America are working to dismantle and repeal the Violence Against Women Act, simultaneously arguing that economic inequality between genders is a myth (Valenti, par. 6).

Feminism is also met with backlash at an institutional level. Jonathan Beller argues that institutionalized feminism—academic feminisms—slowly dissipated. He writes:

> The now seemingly complete dismantling of institutionalized feminism has been the result of a diversity of practices, many of them reactionary and appropriating, but many of them more radical still than some of the forms of feminism consolidated as what is often referred to as the second wave—a moment which in certain respects represented feminism’s institutional heyday. (par. 1)

Beller’s quotation concedes the possibility of radical dissonance with feminism. For Beller, queer theorists, critical race theorists, and others lodged critiques of institutional feminism, revealing its shortcomings. A less traditional backlash strategy, anti-feminism has emerged from more leftist facets as well.

These suggestive citations demonstrate the prevalence of anti-feminism historically and have given an overview of backlash. The study of backlash is a study of 1) what practices and communicative patterns emerge in response to feminism, and 2) what perceived feminist changes backlashers are responding to. In WAF, for example, investigating the anti-feminist space is an exploration of backlash strategies along with insight into how feminism is constructed on each placard. For example, when one woman argues that she doesn’t need feminism because
“Evolution gave us different skills, this is NOT male oppression! I don’t need ‘a helping hand’ to succeed! A man helping open a door is not a ‘misogynist pig,’ he is a GENTLEMAN!” (July 16), rhetorically, she frames feminism as an anti-man movement interested in eliminating gentlemanly behaviors and erasing evolutionary differences. She backlashes by rejecting those feminist traits, instead supporting a view that men and women are inherently different and she communicates an appreciation of gentlemanly behavior like opening doors. The study of backlash becomes doubly beneficial for feminists because it allows identification of communicative strategies that defy feminism while giving feminists contextual insight into how non-feminist audiences perceive feminism.

WAF as a site to study the nuance of 21st century backlash is beneficial for two reasons. First, the women participating in WAF heavily draw on personal experience and individual opinions to declare themselves anti-feminists. From a feminist perspective, the study of WAF is a study of how and why women feel disconnected with feminism on a personal level. Participating in WAF is an embodied act; women use the placards to communicate their localized experiences of dissonance with feminism, either interpersonally or in response to larger feminist cultural trends. In addition, these personal narrations are first-person declarations from ordinary women, rather than news articles and full-length stories from journalists or writers. Put differently, women are speaking for themselves in these placards and they are communicating unhappiness with feminism.

Second, WAF as a social media phenomenon accounts for shifting communicative patterns and new technologies. While, certainly, backlash against feminism may arise in legislative spheres or more traditional news publications—spheres that Faludi heavily
investigates—this dissertation focuses on how emerging technological advances may lead to changes in backlash strategies and, reciprocally, feminist engagement across difference.

With this background in mind, I wonder, how can feminists continue communicating with and across difference despite differential proximity? Given women populate WAF online, does backlash resemble historic anti-feminist strategies? Have new strategies emerged? In the following section, I outline my research protocols and method for the larger dissertation project.

**Method**

*Feminist Rhetorical Criticism*

This study looks at WAF as a mediated communicative phenomenon through the lens of backlash. I decipher what communicative codes and themes are present through utilizing feminist rhetorical criticism. As Suzanne Daughton articulates, rhetorical “criticism unpacks an artifact's complexities, deciphering its possible meanings and the ways in which it encourages audience members to think, feel, and act” (98). Including a feminist lens, as Meyer outlines, means drawing attention to power relations within rhetoric and artifacts of study (6). Meyer argues, “feminist rhetoric should seek to discover how gendered concepts occur, how they are communicated in daily interactions, and how they transform the practices associated with the concept across cultures, spaces, and time” (9). As a feminist rhetorician, I approach WAF’s texts as gendered artifacts that communicatively affect how audiences understand women, men, gender, and feminism more broadly.

I believe a feminist rhetorical approach to WAF is necessary for two reasons. First, feminist rhetorical criticism has encouraged the incorporation of women into research. A partial goal of feminist rhetorical criticism has relied on recuperative historical readings of women, justifying and arguing why and how these women should be part of rhetorical or literary canons.
I argue that WAF participants should be eligible for such inclusion, despite, or because of, their dissenting voices. Meyer argues that, “Understanding the contributions of all women is an important step toward cultivating media literacy, a tool through which we can address systems of domination and bifurcation” (13). On a deeper level of inclusion, then, WAF participants contribute to larger dialogues on gender, specifically adding to new media dialogues, encouraging more analyses in power relations and media literacy.

Second, WAF is both women speaking—a central component of historical feminist analysis as described above—and women speaking about women and gender issues, creating representational alignments. For me, WAF highlights the constant struggle over language, the politics of naming oneself a feminist or not, and the implications of such naming devices. Cameron assists me in defining the implications of naming, noting that “names are a culture’s way of fixing what will actually count as reality in a universe of overwhelming, chaotic sensations, all pregnant with a multitude of possible meanings” (12). Feminist rhetorical criticism allows me to explicate the implicit struggles over language and naming within WAF and feminist responses.

*Critical Imagination, Strategic Contemplation, and Social Circulation*

Methodologically, I borrow from Kirsch and Royster’s explanation of feminist rhetorical inquiry and suggested protocol. Rather than a rigid list of steps, Kirsch and Royster articulate an enhanced model of inquiry. Critical of historical feminist rhetorical approaches that utilize the three R’s to research—rescue, recover, and (re)inscription—Kirsch and Royster argue that new models of engagement are necessary to create a more complicated, textured account of women’s lives. Thus, I will briefly outline their model of inquiry, unfolding in three parts: critical
imagination, strategic contemplation, and social circulation, and discuss my uses for each in this dissertation.

The first stage, critical imagination, begins with inquiring into the lives of the women that are present in the artifact(s) studied (in this case, the WAF photo campaigns). Kirsch and Royster, in this stage, foreground critical interrogation of research questions, noting that research should centralize the voices of women rather than the researcher’s. They ask, “how do they frame” their experiences (648, emphasis in original). Entrenched in deep listening, they encourage a dialogic approach toward research. The goal, they argue, is:

To look beyond typically anointed assumptions in the field in anticipation of the possibility of seeing something not previously noticed or considered. We look at people at whom we have not looked before (e.g., women, people from underrepresented minority groups); in places at which we have not looked seriously or methodically before (e.g., women's organizations). (649)

Taking their critical imagination into account, this methodological stage encouraged my interest in WAF, an anti-feminist organization unlikely to receive space in feminist magazines or journals. Similarly, a critical imagination encourages a rhetorical reading of the placards as dialogic—open ended—rather than static descriptors of the participants. Although my analysis is based on themes that emerged within the text and, in turn, a categorization and assessment about those themes, I approach each placard as an embodied representation of a woman’s experience.

The second phase, strategic contemplation, foregrounds the researcher’s phenomenological experiences, encouraging reflection and meditation about the material and experience of engagement. Noting that rhetorical criticism has a history of disembodied research activity, Meyer outlines how disconnecting the researcher from the scholarship encourages a
mythic objective viewpoint. However, she notes, “By refusing to name ourselves, and continuing
to position our subjectivity outside the realm of academic discourse, we as scholars actually rob
ourselves of a key component of rhetorical intent—writing that clearly articulates our own
methodological and epistemological foundations as a function and byproduct of authorship” (11).
Kirsch and Royster encourage such authorial reflection and naming through strategic
contemplation.

For my engagement with WAF, strategic contemplation means the inclusion of my
scholarly voice and my experiences, hesitations, and revelations about my research. From my
first experiences reading WAF posts I have struggled, at times leaving my computer in an
anxious fury, not understanding the intent of the women posting. Strategic contemplation as a
methodological strategy encourages my input as both valid and a necessary part of my final
constructed artifact, this dissertation. As a beneficial stage, Kirsch and Royster argue that
strategic contemplation opens “up spaces for observation and reflection, for new things to
emerge, or, rather, for us to notice things that may have been there all along, but unnoticed”
(658). In addition, strategic contemplation inform my recommendations for feminist engagement
with WAF, encouraging me to imagine what ethical engagement may look like from my
perspective as a feminist researcher.

Finally, the third stage is titled social circulation. In this concluding stage, Kirsch and
Royster encourage an understanding of how women function in social spaces—communities or
discursive groups. Arguing that the social circulates differently depending on context, Kirsch and
Royster note that texts and artifacts can be read as contradictory or complementary. Noting that
social circulation encourages “a more fully textured examination of social spaces” (665), this
final stage accounts for contradictory interpretations of texts, interpreting different readings as
contextually significant. Put simply, different groups understand concepts differently. Rather than neatly categorize these competing interpretations, social circulation balances these meanings, encouraging a more complicated reading and an expansion of understanding. For WAF, social circulation guided my inclusion of contradictory texts and placards, rather than attempt to create uniformity. For me, this similarly means presenting WAF as a phenomenon in academic and/or feminist circles to gauge reactions and encourage dialogue.

Critical imagination, strategic contemplation, and social circulation are three stages of feminist rhetorical inquiry, as proposed by Kirsch and Royster. In an attempt to shift the current landscape in research practices, Kirsch and Royster are proposing an enhanced framework of inquiry rather than strict protocols for research. I use this methodological framework to guide my feminist inquiry and criticism into WAF by 1) contextualizing the WAF placards as dialogic, 2) foregrounding my own voice and phenomenological experience with the research, and 3) complicating the contradictory matrices created through WAF. As Kirsch and Royster summarize, “The shift in practice here is a shift in the commitment to engage dialectically and dialogically, to actually use tension, conflicts, balances, and counterbalances more overtly as critical opportunities for inquiry in order to enable a conversation, even if only imaginatively, and simulate an interactive encounter with women who are not us” (652). In summary, I draw on Kirsch and Royster as a guiding framework for teasing out contradictory testimonials by women involved in WAF by situating myself in relation and tension with WAF placards. Below, I explicitly map the methodological parameters and guidelines I used in my preliminary data collection and will continue in the larger study.

Parameters and Thematic Groupings
With the previous framework in mind, in this final short section I map the specific themes and parameters I set on the data. Given the vastness of the potential data set—campaign photos, comments on photos, critical responses, tweets, Youtube responses—my data is limited to the Facebook campaign placards from January 2014 to December 2014. I chose these parameters because, despite WAF being created in the summer of 2013, participation and media speculation about WAF more frequently erupted in 2014. Similarly, the 12-month span allows placards to be included at various time periods within the selected year.

Secondarily, I transcribed the written text from each placard. During this process, I directly transcribed the text and did not make any grammatical or spelling edits. Examples that I utilize throughout this dissertation are word-for-word. Once transcribed, I used open coding to note the emergent rhetorical themes. Borgatti describes open coding as the “part of the analysis concerned with identifying, naming, categorizing and describing phenomena found in the text. Essentially, each line, sentence, paragraph etc. is read in search of the answer to the repeated question ‘what is this about? What is being referenced here?’” (par. 8). Through open coding—in conjunction with a larger feminist methodological frame—I tweak Borgatti’s question slightly, asking, “What does this assume about feminism? Feminists? What does this say about women? What is being referenced here?” Using these questions to place the data into thematic groupings aided in my textual deciphering of WAF’s potential meanings. Rhetorically, a focus on thematic groupings is necessary given the hundreds of photos that I surveyed in the analysis.

Similarly, while the general focus of my coding has been the textual component, I considered the physical presence and visual testimonial backdrop of the photos as well. Put differently, my focus on the text is placed within the context of the physical women in the
photographs. The women within the photos function as a powerful rhetorical testimonial where the content of the placards is read alongside and with that woman in mind.

In my preliminary thematic findings, I identified ten themes, including post-feminist discourses, defining consent, individualizing oppression, stereotyping feminists, and more. As these themes demonstrate, WAF, as a location of scholarly inquiry, has ample dimensions for research, unable to be fully encapsulated in this study. For example, gender and anonymity; Facebook as blurring the public and private; WAF as a postfeminist exemplar, are all potential scholarly entry points. After this preliminary coding, I re-coded the categorized themes to account for my larger theoretical frame of backlash. In other words, I read the themes alongside backlash to create an illuminating discussion about WAF. Chapter two will explain this process in more detail. In my final section below, I outline my chapters in detail to give a heuristic view of this dissertation.

Outline of Chapters

In Chapter 1, I introduced “Women Against Feminism” as a mechanism of backlash toward feminism. Chapter 1 has placed WAF within ongoing cultural dialogues about feminism, outlining WAF’s goals and purpose while simultaneously tracking dissonance toward WAF’s campaign. I also identified my own feminist goals and sensibilities, placing my theoretical positionality in relation to WAF placards. In addition to a general introduction to WAF, I have given an overview of my research questions and theoretically situated WAF as a new media phenomenon of backlash.

In Chapter 2, I trace anti-feminist historical and contemporary counter-rhetorics, situating backlash as my larger theoretical lens. To do so, I identify three categories of backlash rhetoric. In the first, backslashers construct feminism as a feared movement that leads to cultural crises. In
the second, feminism is framed as outdated. Women use their own heterosexual happiness as proof that feminism lacks necessity in status quo gender relations. Lastly, backlash co-opts feminist ideology and communicative strategies for anti-feminist means. These larger frameworks function as the theoretical organizational mechanisms for my analysis chapters. I engage with WAF’s texts by asking, if backlash rhetoric is present, does it mirror or extend rhetorics of fear, love, or co-option? I conclude Chapter 2 by situating my theory of backlash that will guide the analysis.

Chapter 3 is the first analysis chapter. In this chapter, I investigate the textual themes that utilize rhetorics of fear. I interrogate how WAF constructs feminists as angry women who hate men while simultaneously situating feminism as a movement detrimental to traditional beliefs. I place these findings in dialogue with literature on affect and emotive hierarchies to determine the implications for continued descriptions of feminism through negatively veiled emotional rhetoric. I also attempt to gain more insight into why populations fear feminism.

In Chapter 4, I analyze the second theme: using love as evidence that feminism is outdated. I uncover what postfeminist discourses are present in the WAF placards and map the potential implications for feminism. WAF regularly drew on love to prove postfeminist beliefs, using personal testimony to highlight self-love, empowerment, and heterosexual love to narrate interpersonal dynamics between men and women as healthy and happy.

In Chapter 5, I engage extensively with themes of sameness and difference within WAF—themes read as co-option of feminism ideology. Using sameness and difference, I place WAF in dialogue with ongoing feminist disputes on how equality can be achieved: are we equal because we are the same or should we respect one another’s differences? Noting overlap between feminism(s) and WAF, I compile a complicated and contradictory matrix of meaning within
WAF—and feminism—about how identity becomes situated and re-situated. I ask, is WAF’s co-option of feminism beliefs—however contradictory—a form of backlash?

In Chapter 6, I summarize the dissertation and discuss future routes of research. In addition, I examine how feminists can engage ethically and pedagogically with WAF. I contextualize a suggested road of engagement by mapping pitfalls of previous feminist online engagements. I proceed by arguing that feminists’ engagement across difference and dissonance functions as a necessary step toward facilitating dialogue and reform of feminism.

This summary has provided a brief preview of how the following chapters will unfold. I have worked in this chapter to offer a broader contextual overview of WAF and the research protocols. In Chapter 2, I provide in-depth insight into literature on backlash and operationalize backlash and its role for the remainder of the dissertation.
CHAPTER 2
DEFINING FEMINIST BACKLASH

In 2011, Ms. Magazine writer Stephanie Hallett observed that “feminist backlash is alive and well,” noting how “just three years ago Newsweek columnist Kathleen Parker engendered popular praise when she railed against feminists for contributing to the death of masculinity in her book Save the Males. And what about the national attack on reproductive rights that’s unfolded these last few months?” (par. 8-9). Pointing to Parker’s book and reproduction as clear areas of backlash, Hallett raises an important question for consideration: has anti-feminist backlash returned? If so, what does it look like? Does “Women Against Feminism” contribute to this larger trend in anti-feminism? Susan Faludi, in her popular feminist book, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women, writes how “a backlash against women’s rights is nothing new in [U.S.] American history” (61). For Faludi, women’s rights and progresses have been historically reversible and such reversibility can be traced throughout backlash mechanisms that have undermined feminist successes.

In my own opening moments of discovering WAF, the small placards felt like individual assaults on my own feminism. “Backlash” seemed too tame a description. For comfort and understanding, I began reading online responses to WAF, searching for feminist mentors to explain and respond to the hostile language that I had experienced and the vilification that I felt. While discussions of WAF were common in my online expedition, feminists and non-feminists alike seemed both disgusted by and thankful for WAF’s content. I wondered, how could feminists be thankful for WAF? As I demonstrate in Chapter 1, feminists such as Cathy Young and Gloria Steinem believe in the importance of criticisms toward feminism, and they emphasized the need for feminists to consider WAF’s insights. Upon reflection, these responses
complicated my own categorization of WAF as solely hostile and hurtful. As Young articulates, “One might assume that Women Against Feminism is a traditionalist backlash against gender equality. Yet many of the women say they reject feminism precisely because they are pro-equality” (“Women Against,” par. 2). Because some WAF content read, to me, like feminist arguments in support of equality, could WAF still be considered backlash? If, as Faludi argues, backlash functions by arguing that “women are better off ‘protected’ than equal” (38) and, as Young demonstrates, women within WAF argue for equality, then how do WAF’s properties function as backlash?

Before answering these questions of WAF, I find it necessary to contextualize backlash; thus, in this chapter, I theorize “backlash.” To accomplish this goal, I outline theoretical views on backlash—what constitutes backlash and its characteristics—both historically and contemporarily. Specifically, this chapter unfolds in three parts: 1) I begin by introducing three backlash theses, giving historical examples of anti-feminist backlash strategies; 2) I theoretically operationalize backlash as a communicative phenomenon, providing a working definition of backlash that will inform the remainder of this dissertation; 4) I conclude this chapter by giving a methodological layout, describing how backlash affected my coding and giving the reader a description of the themes that will be developed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. Noting trends and examples, I work in this chapter to give a landscape and cultural backdrop of how feminist and anti-feminist backlash messages are communicated and circulated.

**Backlash Strategies: Old and New**

Questions of feminism and anti-feminist backlash have become prevalent in higher education and in popular culture. Speculation heavily focuses on the relationship between feminist movements and the tendency for backlash to arise in response to such movements on
local and global scales (see Foster). As WAF demonstrates, feminism still remains a contested and controversial topic. In this larger section, I introduce three dominant theories of backlash: Susan Faludi’s popular work on U.S. American 1980s backlash followed by Sherryl Vint’s media studies work on the emergence of new feminist backlash texts. Lastly, I discuss co-option as a backlash strategy.

Faludi-Centric Historical Threads and Examples

In 1991, Susan Faludi’s book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War on American Women*, was first published, arguing that a media backlash against feminism was increasing. For Faludi, backlash was caused by the fear of women’s progresses; backlash texts describe women as “better off ‘protected’ than equal” (38). Faludi details that, in the 1970s and 80s, backlash was successful by simultaneously describing feminism as outdated and arguing that feminism led to the creation of unhappy women (Braithwaite 21). Found in historical and modern texts, Faludi describes a few examples of backlash:

Different kinds of backlashes against women’s mostly tiny gains—or against simply the perception that women were in the ascendancy—may be found in the rise of restrictive poverty laws and penalties for unwed and childless women of ancient Rome, the heresy judgments against female disciples of the early Christian Church, or the mass witch burnings of medieval Europe. (62)

Faludi’s summary demonstrates the historical prevalence of backlash. Unfortunately, women’s progresses and rights are frequently viewed as reversible (Douglas qtd. in Faludi 61). Indeed, different regions and cultures shift the contexts of backlash. In this short section, it is not my intention to map an exhaustive historical list of anti-feminist backlash; rather, I work to articulate common strategies utilized by backlash movements in a predominantly U.S. American context.
Specifically, I summarize Faludi’s backlash thesis, focusing on the prevalence of fear-based crisis rhetoric and the tendency for backlash ideologies to blame feminism for changing familial norms and the annihilation of traditional femininity.

Backlash, for Faludi, is caused by a fear and loathing of feminism. Given the centrality that fear plays in backlash, crisis rhetorics often surface. The use of crisis rhetoric functions by both suppressing feminist goals in the name of external crises and by blaming feminism for internal, nation-based problems. By using crisis rhetoric, gender issues are given a backseat to more relevant national concerns and feminism is labeled as responsible for changes deemed troublesome for the nation-state and for the familial sphere.

A fear-based rhetoric and the creation of crises emerge through Faludi’s discussion of contemporary backlash. For Faludi, “contemporary backlash” emerged from the New Right in the U.S.A., where backlash “first took shape as a movement with a clear ideological agenda” (242). Rooted in a conservative fundamentalism, members of the New Right advocated for traditional familial roles, demonizing feminism for ushering in an era of women’s empowerment. One fear-centered strategy used by the New Right was to depict “feminists as malevolent spirits capable of great evil and national destruction” (244). Feminism became the scapegoat for changing gender relations—gender relations that the New Right deemed as unwelcome, unnecessary, and unproductive for the larger realm of the state.

Similarly, the New Right described the feminist agenda as one that privileged the material over the moral, destroying the traditional family structure (Faludi 242). Arguing that the traditional U.S. American culture was stolen from them, the New Right exemplifies the deployment of fear rhetoric by pinpointing the women’s liberation movement as the culprit that has negatively restructured the family and “downgraded” the father’s role (Weyrich qtd. in
Faludi 244). In Poland, for example, “church officials and conservative journalists referred more and more explicitly to family and changing gender roles as the sources of child abuse” (Szelewa 41). Taken a step further, the changing familial structure—impacted by feminism—becomes responsible for any residual impact of that change, regardless of evidence to support such a claim. Lucy Delap, tracking anti-feminism in Edwardian England,³ argues that “anti-feminism may emerge as a rich source precisely because ‘antis’ sought to portray women’s demands as a slippery slope” (378). In other words, if women are granted equal rights, child abuse and the downgraded fatherly role are only the tip of the iceberg.

Connected to the familial crisis, the destruction of the traditionally feminine woman also functioned as a retaliatory backlash strategy, according to Faludi. Couched in early 20th century nostalgia, backlashers articulated feminism as responsible for destroying the innocence and morality of women. Kristen Myers discusses how this strategy currently plays out, noting that anti-feminist texts in popular culture position the proper and submissive girl as both privileged and lost in the past (193). By positioning the proper girl as gone, backlashers have nostalgically privileged a past cultural norm of women and belief that the proper feminine woman should be passive. This shift in fear rhetoric positions feminism as the center of cultural changes that are damaging, favoring a traditional and static view of women.

The most prevalent crisis that feminism caused, backlashers argued, is the unhappy woman epidemic. In this dominant strategy, backlash ideologies affirm that “feminism is not only bad for society as a whole; feminism is bad for women” (Browne 907). The argument unfolds by claiming that women suffer disillusionment and misery because of equality (Faludi, Preface). As one woman describes: “Feminism has been nothing but a burden for my generation.

³ The Edwardian era refers to a time period during the reign of King Edward VII in early 20th century England where excluded populations began integration into the labor force, such as women.
It’s too much” (qtd. in Faludi, Preface, emphasis in original). Women’s liberation means women are expected to succeed, to work out of the home, and to advance beyond the home. Unfortunately, media outlets began reporting on burnout and unhappiness, citing studies that working women experience depression at a higher rate than housewives (Faludi 53). The accuracy of such studies aside (although Faludi staunchly rips them apart), feminism as responsible for the depression and unhappiness of women also functions as an anti-feminist rhetorical strategy. Placing feminism at the center of cultural crises tells a successful story by persuading women that feminism is the cause of their unhappiness and should be feared. Faludi notes, “successfully persuading women to collaborate in their own subjugation is a tradition of particularly long standing” (62). Here, backlashes created connections between feminist emancipation and changing status quo policies and cultural norms. If a bad thing happened, chances are that feminism was to blame; thus, we should fear the success of feminist goals.

One question remains: who is responsible for the circulation of this fear and loathing? What institutions would promote or publish such materials? For Faludi, backlash rhetoric permeates media outlets and popular culture. She specifically criticizes representations of women in Hollywood movies. The list of institutional examples of cultural backlash that Faludi draws on include, but are not limited to: The U.S. Attorneys General’s Commission on Pornography, popular psychology manuals, Vanity Fair, and the New York Times. Similarly, Kristen Myers concludes that popular television networks like Disney and Nickelodeon circulate messages that are anti-girl power, privileging more traditional representations of femininity. Myers contends that millions of viewers audience such shows (193). There is no central hub or individual person pulling the backlash strings, Faludi contends. On the contrary, backlash is dispersed through diffuse messages from non-centralized entities that circulate throughout media outlets.
While I have described these strategies as “historical,” there is a continuation of this rhetoric today. Szelewa, discussing backlash in Poland, argues that the 2008 international economic downturn resulted in a justification for stern Polish austerity. Specifically, Szelewa articulates how the crisis “[facilitated] certain social anxieties and fears. Economic hardships might be a trigger for populist political [mobilizations] that aim at [channeling] current frustrations against scapegoats” (36). Economic hardship on an international level amplifies cultural fears and creates uncertainty. Such uncertainty justifies reducing or eliminating feminist political items. Similarly, Michelle Rodino-Colocina found that women running for office in the United States privileged femininity and traditionalism to boost their popularity. Conservative and anti-feminist icon Phyllis Schlafly, in a 2014 NPR interview, concluded that feminism continues to make women unhappy, noting how feminism makes women “believe that we live in a discriminatory and unjust society, and that [women] should look to government to solve their problems” (qtd. in M. Martin, par. 18). These are just a few modern deployments of backlash.

To conclude this short section, I’d like to highlight some criticisms of Faludi’s approach toward backlash and the examples I have listed above. First, Faludi’s categorizations and examples assume a stable feminism that rests on a Euro-American feminist history (Browne 909). By stable, I am suggesting that, at times, Faludi fails to present feminism in the U.S.A and elsewhere as fragmented or diverse. In reality, and as I outline in chapter one, individuals identify and organize around multiple feminisms with a range of goals. Second, Faludi writes in binaristic terms, where an event or action is either feminist or anti-feminist when a single message could inhabit both sensibilities. With this summary and these pitfalls in mind, below I outline Sherryl Vint’s new backlash thesis, based in contemporary media studies.

_Ideological Strategies of New Backlash_
In the previous section, I summarized Faludi’s backlash thesis, noting the central role that fear rhetoric has and continues to play in backlash strategies. Since Faludi’s monumental work, anti-feminist backlash literature has begun to expand and work has attempted to update Faludi’s findings. One such scholar, Sherryl Vint, in her article entitled “The New Backlash: Popular Culture’s ‘Marriage’ With Feminism, Or Love Is All You Need,” articulates changing backlash strategies in an era of new media. In this section, I introduce a second backlash thesis, Sherryl Vint’s “new backlash.”

The new backlash, as articulated by Sherryl Vint, has shifted since Faludi’s analysis of the 1980s. Rather than overt vilification of feminism based in fear, new forms of backlash acknowledge the unlikely return of traditional femininity, instead drawing on love. Vint summarizes:

In the new backlash, women’s equality is treated as a fact that no sensible person would deny, but feminism is made to seem ridiculous and passé in its insistence on still talking about gender discrimination when we all clearly live in a postfeminist utopia. New backlash compromises feminism’s ability to critique economic and other gender divisions that still disadvantage women, and it evacuates political consciousness from the consumption of popular culture by reducing gender questions to personal stories, refusing to acknowledge structural problems. New backlash motivates not through fear as in 1980s backlash culture, but through love. (162-3)

Rather than defer to arguments that feminism has ruined the family structure, the new backlash assumes that gender equality has been reached. Happiness for the contemporary woman is thus
possible by realizing individual contentment through heterosexual relationships, making feminism unnecessary. In other words, women really can and do have it all.

As the above paragraph demonstrates, one difference between Faludi and Vint’s theses centers on the status quo relevance of feminism. For Faludi, because backlashers fear feminism, feminisms’ goals are linked with hazardous implications, denying feminisms’ relevance outright. However, in new backlash texts, postfeminism frames feminism as historically relevant but no longer necessary. Postfeminism, as described by Vint, assumes that feminism is no longer needed and that its principles are outdated precisely because women can find solitude and happiness in their romantic relationships. Fearing feminism is unnecessary because feminism itself is unnecessary.

Angela McRobbie, a feminist cultural scholar, also argues that postfeminism is a vibrant anti-feminist strategy. McRobbie contends that, beginning in the 1990s, more overt feminist issues—equal pay, reproduction, and others—became integrated into the U.S. American cultural consciousness through the incorporation into magazines, films, law, and education (“Postfeminism” 257). The result, however, meant pop culture outlets began taking feminism into account before subtly denouncing it, declaring it dead and unnecessary. McRobbie notes how “popular feminism is celebrated in such a way as to suggest that the politics of feminist struggles are no longer needed. Seemingly supplanting feminism per se, and appearing to adopt the interests of girls and young women, commercial culture finds a [license] to speak on their behalf” (“Young Women” 533). Storylines of the independent and economically autonomous women who are sexually enlightened are just a few examples of how popular feminism is deployed in films, television series, columns, and more.
Love thus plays a crucial role in new backlash and in postfeminism by suturing women’s happiness with romantic love. Men, now, respect women and are capable of fostering healthy and happy relationships. For example, “by making the right man the solution to the dilemmas of gender discrimination, new backlash texts make feminism comedic in the present and imply that even in the past feminism must have been mistaken or exaggerated problems because love is real, natural, and unchanging, preventing us from ever imagining a world in which most men treated women badly” (Vint 163). Never mind that not all women choose romantic partnerships and certainly not all women are heterosexual. As a strategy, describing feminism as somehow unnecessary in the status quo hinders the viability of feminist critique. After all, how can criticism of a system be valid if the system no longer exists because men love women and would never hurt them?

Similarly, as the reliance on love demonstrates, new backlash texts individualize women’s stories and use those stories as proof of happiness. For example, circulating stories of the happy and successful women who have “made it” discourages larger feminist critiques of economic inequality and structural oppression that still exists. Because one early feminist agenda item relied on gaining economic equality, women in leadership roles are now used as proof that such equality has been reached. Consequently, backlash strategies have shifted, accounting for feminism and declaring it unnecessary given women’s individual successes.

A nostalgic privileging of femininity is one last area of divergence between Faludi and Vint. As described in greater detail above, The New Right, as one example, privileged the early 20th century norms of femininity; however, Vint argues that such a nostalgic privileging has passed. She writes how “the new backlash realizes that it is unlikely that women en masse will be forced back into the home and exclusively domestic roles” (162). Modern women’s successes
are used as evidence that such a return is unnecessary because, now, women are happy and
tested because, now, women are happy and loved. If women love themselves, backlash texts argue, then feminism has accomplished its goals and should dissipate.

Vint draws on movies and television productions as evidence for this new backlash
culture. In *The Stepford Wives*, for example, a couple moves to Stepford, a suburban town where women are turned into perfect home-making robots. However, the main character and her husband decide, together, that she won’t be turned into a robot because robots can’t love, only humans can. Interestingly, this move positions manhood and masculinity as respectful of women, commentary more consistent with 21st century narratives. From this perspective, Vint argues, feminism is framed as passé because love conquers patriarchy. If patriarchy still existed, the man would have chosen the robot.

While Vint draws on film, new backlash texts are evident in diverse cultural locations. Beyoncé Knowles, for example, embodies and is framed as the perfect woman who has achieved massive success in her career and discovered romantic love. A singer, wife, and mother, amongst other titles, Knowles is regularly applauded for her persistent hard work and, as Noreen Malone describes, Knowles now “has it all.” Of course a large part of that success is her marriage and the birth of their first child, a narrative that fits nicely into Vint’s thesis that romantic love leads to happiness.

Knowles is just one example of the expanded cultural terrain of new backlash texts, according to Vint’s thesis. As I have summarized, new backlash texts have adapted, framing feminism as passé because women can and do find happiness in love. Below, I add to Vint and Faludi’s summaries by describing the central role that co-option plays in backlash. Faludi and Vint, at least subtly, assume a stable feminism that backlashers respond to. Co-option as itself a
strategy of anti-feminism complicates and blurs such stability. Rather than a distinct theory of backlash, I encourage readers to view the following section as an addition to Vint and Faludi’s theses.

Feminist Co-Option: The Blurred Boundaries Between (Anti) Feminism

Faludi’s focus on fear and Vint’s emphasis on love function as immense contributors to my overall understanding of feminism and backlash. In this section, I describe a third contemporary backlash strategy: the co-option of feminist rhetoric. Unfortunately, individuals, groups, and organizations have begun drawing on mainstream feminist agenda items to garner support, regardless of the organization’s actual endorsement of feminism. Although the scholars in the section may not use the language of backlash, I will outline how co-opting feminist ideals undermines feminism overall and, thus, supports backlash ideologies. It is my goal in this short section to introduce the reader to emergent strategies that have not yet fallen under the backlash umbrella.

Rather than be fearful of feminism or paint feminism as passé, this third strategy incorporates feminist agenda items to bolster superiority. Hester Eisenstein labels such co-option “mainstream hegemonic feminism.” Eisenstein summarizes:

The many feminist struggles of the 1970s have been selectively filtered into what I call hegemonic, mainstream feminism, of a kind that can be readily used by people who are anything but woman-friendly. In recent years mainstream [organizations] have begun to acknowledge that women play a major role in economic life . . . This apparent acceptance of feminist principles is in fact an attempt to co-opt the energies of feminism into the project of corporate globalization. (413-4)
Mainstream hegemonic feminism, drawing on the liberated, independent, and working woman trope, intimately connects feminism with economic equality. Because economic autonomy and access to the workforce were formidable parts of second-wave feminism in a U.S. American context, and because women in the workforce produce(d) a profit, national and international institutions utilize feminism rhetoric to garner support. Eisenstein summarizes that in the 1970’s, feminism began emerging across the globe. Certainly the multitude of feminisms worldwide was and remains plentiful; however, hegemonic global feminism propagates economic autonomy as inherent to a global feminist agenda, individualizing women and creating an economically useful feminism.

By pointing to equality as the end-goal, mainstream hegemonic feminism has co-opted feminist rhetoric and has been deployed to justify intervention and exploitive policies. Eisenstein describes how “the ‘development’ of women has become a substitute for state-led economic development in Third World countries. To eliminate poverty, it seems, it is no longer necessary to create an economy that meets people’s needs. Now a focus on women’s leadership is sufficient” (422). States are labeled as un-progressive under the guise of feminism if women are not integrated into economic structures. However detrimental, this one-dimensional understanding of feminism continues to circulate as the feminism or, at the very least, circulates as a metonymy for all of U.S. American feminism.

For example, McRobbie explains how “equality” has become a cultural norm, propagated through an instrumentalization of Western feminist ideals, seized by neoliberal government bodies (“Preface” xvii). Equality has become an assumed norm amongst Western countries, making feminist attempts to discuss inequitable gender relations difficult, particularly when an agenda of “equity” becomes hijacked by agencies of the state “in order to pursue a completely
different agenda which often entails the denigration of other cultures” (McRobbie, “Preface” xviii). McRobbie’s quotation points to growing governmental trends to intervene or gain support for state-based actions abroad under the feminist umbrella. A growing sense of interconnection, an entanglement of global power relations, and the co-option of feminist ideals and ideologies marks the changing context to determine the shape and location of anti-feminist backlash.

As Eisenstein and McRobbie’s analyses demonstrate, understandings of feminism and backlash are highly contextual. Institutions, quite successfully, have adapted feminism, leading to co-option and one-dimensional understandings of feminism. However, is it possible that feminism and anti-feminism can contain the same characteristics? Has feminism become so co-opted that it is beyond saving? Whereas Faludi blamed certain ideological groups like the New Right for overt feminist backlash, currently, no such ideological boundaries can be drawn so confidently between feminists and anti-feminists. In turn, this third strategy, the adoption, co-option, and deployment of feminist rhetoric, clearly demonstrates the blurriness between the categories of feminist and anti-feminist.

Former Alaskan Governor and Vice Presidential Candidate Sarah Palin and the “Year of the Conservative Women” are examples of the foggy relationship between feminism and anti-feminism and the possible co-option of feminist ideology. Palin labeled herself and conservative voters and candidates as “mama grizzlies,” a new generation of serious and successful women (Rodino-Colocina 81). Christine O’Donnell, a tea-party candidate, consistently called herself both a mama grizzly and a feminist. These candidates utilized “mama grizzly” to signify their presence as motherly and protective and women able to get the job done (83). In reality, O’Donnell opposed abortion in all cases, a traditional feminist agenda item (83-4). Rodino-Colocina describes how these women connected their ideals with first-wave feminism, working
to instill a more traditional understanding of womanhood and femininity, foregrounding a conservative feminism as the original feminism (86). Thus, despite the women supporting anti-feminist legislation, they successfully deployed feminism to gain support and popularity. Again, I ask, does this constitute backlash? If so, is it emergent from fear or from love? In the following section, I provide a working definition of backlash, subsuming both love and fear, in the hope that gaining a more clear vocabulary will insight more complicated and insightful feminist dialogues.

**Backlash Operationalized**

In this chapter, I have introduced three main backlash theses: Faludi’s characterization of backlash based in fear and loathing of feminism, Vint’s new backlash thesis that postfeminism and love now define backlash strategies, and the tendency for organizations and non-feminist institutions to co-opt feminist rhetoric. Although these characterizations of backlash are useful, providing a working landscape of how backlash has been historically deployed, they fail to account for a larger theoretical frame to categorize backlash, particularly in a time of increased globalized co-option of feminism. In this section, I condense the three theses to operationalize backlash as a communicative phenomenon based on perception. In other words, backlash can draw on love and fear, depending on the contextual and perceptual dynamic of its dispersal. In what follows, I define backlash before describing how backlash will function for the remainder of this dissertation.

From a denotative standpoint, backlash is defined as “a strong and adverse reaction by a large number of people, especially to a social or political development” (Google Dictionary). As a noun, the Merriam Webster Dictionary also adds “a sudden violent backward movement” as a definitional supplement to backlash. I find these two dictionary-based definitions, although
generic, as a useful guide to theorizing backlash for two reasons. First, to label an event or phenomenon backlash, there must be a prior subject under attack. In other words, backlash requires a reaction to something like, for example, feminist ideologies. Second, a reactionary response by an individual does not qualify as backlash. As the definition states, “a large number of people” must communicate reactionary messages toward a prior subject to qualify, from a definitional perspective, as backlash. Backlash must be understood as a large cultural phenomenon rather than one event that is reactionary in nature.

Ann Cudd, in the book titled, *Theorizing Backlash*, preserves the denotative meaning(s) of backlash described above and extends the definition by incorporating connotative implications. Cudd concedes that backlash connotes something to avoid (5). For example, a strong reaction by a group to public policy reform that gives women access to voting rights would constitute a backlash because it assumes that access should not be granted. In other words, we should avoid structural changes that allow women to vote. In addition, Cudd extends this definitional net of backlash to include the discourse of progress. Cudd defines progress as “a relational term that implies an end or goal toward which the thing progressing is moving” (6); thus, when a social group progresses, they have successfully reached their goal. For example, I might argue that women, as a social group, progressed in the U.S. American context when the 19th Amendment passed, giving women the right to vote. Backlash becomes clear, though, during periods of regression. For Cudd, “backlash is clearly in evidence when oppression is greater than in a previous period with respect to some social group” (9). Similar to Faludi’s analysis, Cudd’s quotation demonstrates how, when legislation that protects women is overturned, backlash may be responsible for the action.

4. I chose these dictionaries in anticipation of their wider public access.
Of course the boundaries between progress and regression are readily unclear, hazy, and messy. What constitutes progress for one group may not be in line with progressive goals of another group. Even within feminism, as Chapter 1 demonstrates, different theoretical standpoints merit different approaches toward equality across genders. Progress for some denotes regression for others. An increased global expansion of hegemonic feminism (e.g. co-option) means deciphering feminist goals from corporate greed can be tricky. Roe v. Wade, the 1973 legislation that legalized abortion, may be framed as regression for some feminist organizations while other feminists, including myself, may view Roe v. Wade as progress by giving women access to reproductive health and freedom. To situate backlash as definable based on the qualifier of progress changes based on the lens and framework from which you approach a topic, event, or phenomenon. If Roe v. Wade were overturned and abortion ruled as illegal on a national scale, I would view that action as regressive to the initial goal of reproductive freedom.

Although Cudd’s analysis is helpful, I want to situate backlash as a communicative phenomenon of perception rather than a clear-cut movement reacting toward a stated goal of progress by a social group. In this way, progress functions as an illusory cultural script where backlash reacts toward the perceived success of a goal, rather than (although not excluding) the enactment of that goal. For example, a social group could engage in backlash against racial progress and the perceived goal and/or consequences of racial equality policies; however, such a reaction may be based solely on the perceived consequences of the backlashers and not the intended goal of social groups organizing around racial equality. Feminist backlash, then, may be responsive to and triggered by particular policy goals marked as progressive but those reactions are still centered on perception. Put differently, feminists may not assume an action is progress while backlashers might because each group perceives the outcome differently.
I believe this is an important distinction to highlight. My goal is not to theoretically situate backlash rhetoric in relation to particular feminist groups, although that may be possible in some instances. Rather, my goal is to note the cultural perceptual slippages around progress and how backlash functions as reactionary to the backlasher’s perception of an ideology rather than specific ideological roots. Victoria Browne’s explanation of pre-emptive backlash assists me by describing how backlash is pre-emptive because “it is a response not to overwhelming and disorienting changes that have already happened, but rather to signs that such change might be coming” (907). The perception of progress or change to status quo norms ignite backlash.

Backlash as connected to perception can be seen through Faludi’s description of how and why backlash occurs. For Faludi, backlash against feminism occurs because of fear and loathing, where a “hostility to female’s independence has always been with us” (10). Faludi is not alone in centering fear as the motivational impulse for backlash politics. Kendra Reynolds similarly concludes that backlash occurs as a paranoid reaction to women’s progress (35). The use of progress in Reynolds’ quotation connects such fear with Cudd’s larger thesis described above: members of privileged groups fear others’ progress, reacting with an increase in oppressive politics to counter the decrease in power they perceive for themselves. Based in a zero-sum game, the assumption that an increase in progress—whatever progressive goal is set—would somehow lead to a decrease in another group’s power is not universally true. However, such fear motivates imaginary depictions of the worst, demonstrating perception as the connective tissue between progress, fear, and motivations for backlash.

Vint’s new backlash thesis, a thesis that relies more on love than fear, is also subsumed through re-centering backlash as perceptive. As Vint argues, new backlash relies on love, where

“love is real, natural, and unchanging, preventing us from ever imagining a world in which most men treated women badly” (163). As I summarized above, this approach works in a postfeminist frame, focusing on the stability of interpersonal relationships to prove that equality has been reached. The deployment of new backlash uses the “men know best and only want what’s best for you” mentality. Backlash as perceptive accounts for the deployment of love by arguing that no additional rights for women need to be granted because individual women’s happiness function as proof. Progress, within the new backlash thesis, is re-framed as unnecessary and any feminist attempts at reform or goal setting can be dismissed as frivolous change to an already perfect system of equality. For Vint, the expansion of this strategy—the deployment of love and postfeminism—steadily increases at the detriment of feminist ideals.

As the denotative definition used to open this section demonstrates, however, one reactionary event does not qualify as backlash. Cudd, in line with this interpretation, argues that backlash functions through a series of events “that lead to the crystallization of the attitude toward the social group” (11). For example, Faludi’s backlash claims draw on evidence that includes the following: newspaper articles, magazines, books, political platforms, scholarly articles, published research, to name a few. The breadth of Faludi’s evidence speaks to the distilled and subtle entrenchment of backlash ideologies and demonstrates the plurality of its ideological dispersal.

To better demonstrate how backlash ideologies function, I draw on Keith Burgess-Jackon’s machine metaphor. He describes this metaphor in the following explanation: “A backlash occurs when sudden pressure is applied to a smooth-running mechanism, such as a series of gears or wheels. The pressure disrupts the mechanism, which responds by lurching, jarring, or striking back...the machine is ‘striving’ to retain its equilibrium” (20). For Burgess-
Jackson, and myself, this metaphor emphasizes the mechanisms of feminist backlash: institutions, systems, governments, and cultural norms function smoothly until a disruption occurs—a request for equitable access to jobs, for example—forcing the machine to retract and backlash. Adding women to the workforce disrupts how the machine has been processed and programmed to function. Machines, able to quickly garner control over small-scale glitches, are unable to avoid striking back and lurching when the mechanics are in jeopardy. For new backlash strategies, cultures are told no such progress can or should be made to the already smooth-sailing structure and, if criticisms of the system do occur, they are disqualified as the unhappy woman who hasn’t found love.

Thus, while Faludi’s, Vint’s, and Eisenstein’s scholarship focuses more on the strategies used within the mechanic retraction, this section has worked to give a larger picture of how and why backlash ideologies emerge. Specifically, I articulated a theory that situates backlash as a communicative phenomenon that relies on reactionary perceptions toward a social group and comprised of multiple individuals and events. Drawing on Cudd specifically, I have theorized backlash as mechanistic, responding to the perceived progress of a less advantaged group, at times denying the viability that oppression exists at all. Rather than exclusive of the three backlash theses I began this chapter with, this section subsumes those theses to give a larger working vocabulary. In the last section of this chapter, I summarize how such a vocabulary will function for my analysis chapters, Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

**Perceptual Backlash: A Methodological Description**

In the opening pages of this chapter I asked, is WAF an example of backlash? This chapter has worked to complicate the answer by discussing the various backlash strategies. However, I cannot deny the similarities between WAF and the backlash strategies I have
outlined above; thus, for the remainder of this dissertation, I engage specifically with WAF’s content in relationship to backlash. Before this occurs, I conclude by discussing how this chapter will methodologically inform Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

In summary, I have outlined how three main strategies are concurrently present when backlash occurs, according to various scholars. However, although each scholar succinctly pinpoints strategies of backlashers, they do not (always) pinpoint what those strategies communicate about the perception of feminism. In response, I have suggested that each instance of backlash should be not only be considered for its reactionary strategy but also how the ideology present perceives feminism. Put differently: we must examine how backlashers perceive feminism so feminists can adjust their/our messages and respond in ethical ways. Backlash texts not only inform feminists that anti-feminists groups are actively dissonant but also communicate how those groups understand feminism writ large.

Backlash as a perceptual phenomenon that draws on fear, love, and co-option functions as my overarching theoretical and methodological outline. As I discussed in Chapter 1, my coding of WAF content led to the emergence of 10 themes. With backlash as the backdrop, I ask two main questions of each theme: 1) What backlash strategies, if any, are present? 2) What does this theme communicate about the individual’s perception of feminism? I find these two questions necessary to accomplish two larger goals. First, are there consistencies between WAF and previously utilized backlash strategies and ideologies? For example, does crisis emerge as a mechanism to resist feminism, similar to Faludi’s findings? In order to answer if WAF constitutes backlash, this question places WAF in historical conversations to determine if parallels exist. The second goal asks how is feminism perceived? Do certain strategies rely on
similar perceptions of feminism? If so, what are they? For example, if a WAF theme utilizes love as a strategy, do other themes that utilize love similarly perceive feminism?

With these goals in mind, I proceed in the following manner. Chapter 3 explores WAF themes that rely on fear-based backlash strategies, analyzing the implications, and exploring both the consistencies and inconsistencies of how each theme perceives feminism. For example, I will examine how WAF placards utilize feminist stereotypes, demonizing feminists, scaring readers into the perception that all feminists are angry, bra-burning man-haters. I follow this pattern for Chapters 4 and 5; with chapter four focusing on WAF themes that utilize love-based strategies while chapter five examines strategies of feminist co-option. These three analytic chapters assist me in creating ethical recommendations for engagement with anti-feminists. As Keith Burgess-Jackson succinctly concludes, “As long as even one person has an interest in thwarting sexual equality, which is to say as long as anyone has a stake in the sexist status quo, there will be attempts to undermine and defeat feminism—to throw a wrench, as it were, into the feminist works. This may be discouraging, but it is also, strangely, empowering, for to be forewarned is to be forearmed” (34). For me, and for this dissertation, the means of equality rest on understanding the means of dissonance.

6. In this quotation, Burgess-Jackson conflates sexuality with gender. Sexuality and gender, while similar, at times, in theories and practical activist work, are also dissimilar. See note 4 for suggested reading.
CHAPTER 3

SCARY FEMINISM: THE ANGRY FEMINIST TROPE AND ANTI-TRADITIONALISM

In Chapter 2, I outlined literature on feminist backlash, describing how backlash has emerged historically in response to perceived feminist progresses. I focused on three rhetorical strategies utilized for backlash: fear, love, and co-option. In this chapter, I interrogate the relationship between one strategy, fear, and WAF. Feminism’s attachment to larger ideological structures mean that feminism conjures a multitude of responses that include hostility and resistance from men. Susan Faludi asserts that hostility by men is caused by a fear and loathing of feminism because the feminist movement threatens the economic and social status of men (10). Men fear the loss of privilege by social changes that feminists demand. As I detailed in Chapter 2, when the progress of one social group may affect the normative structures that privilege another, fear has the potential to motivate a resurgence of backlash. Feminism challenges male privilege; thus, men may lash back due to fear.

For example, I took an Algebra class in tenth grade. During the semester-long course, the instructor would regularly refer to the class as “guys.” “Hey guys,” he’d say, “Take out your homework.” After one such address, I raised my hand, noting that, “We are not all guys.” Angrily, my teacher replied, “It’s just a cultural phrase. It refers to everyone. It’s normal.” From my feminist standpoint, my request seemed minor. For me, guys meant men. It excluded me, a non-man. At the time, I couldn’t process his angry response. Now, however, I know that my feminism had threatened him, asking him to recognize that “guys” is not a universal address. My feminism required him to monitor and change his language choices, a request that necessitated his acceptance of censorship, however small.
Men are not alone in fearing feminism; women’s narratives also draw on fearful rhetoric. “Women Against Feminism” demonstrates such fear, where fear becomes the justification for some women’s participation in collective resistance against feminism. At first, I found this fact surprising. Estelle B. Freedman in her book, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism*, notes how fearful populations are of feminists. She writes:

Ask most people in Europe or the United States if they believe that women should have equal rights, and they will answer in the affirmative, as did 85 percent of Americans in an opinion poll taken in 2000. Ask them if they are feminists, however, and most reject the label . . . Ask others what they think of feminists, and you may hear a string of negative associations: radical, man-hating, bra-burning, and worse. Women may be acceptable as equals, but feminists are often seen as frightening, threatening, or simply unnecessary. (13)

Freedman’s quotation makes a centrally relevant assertion for this chapter: U.S. Americans support equality but are fearful of feminism, finding feminism threatening and frightening. This chapter investigates Freedman’s claim, asking: how do we know that fear is central to WAF’s texts? What does fear look like within WAF? And lastly, why such hatred toward feminism? More specifically, why do women hate feminism? I find it easier to understand how certain feminists’ political agendas may and have affected men’s access to cultural privileges, but feminism opens up opportunities for women, right? Why would women be fearful of feminism?

The motivation and intention, “why” opponents are fearful of feminism, has been theorized. In short, feminisms’ reliance on change fuels sentiments that feminism should be feared and, thus, rejected. A short Google search of feminism returns definitions claiming that feminism includes “organized activity” and “advocacy of women’s rights” (Merriam-Webster,
Oxford). This language describes feminists as advocates of change and supporters of political and cultural restructuring. Katherine van Wormer notes how “with social change, resentments and animosities build up” (par. 5). A disruption of the normative machine—a machine that overwhelmingly privileges a man’s body—should not only be stopped, it should be feared, as van Wormer’s quotation highlights. In turn, feminist psychologist Dr. Jean Baker Miller observed, “the leaders of backlash use the fear of change as a threat before major change has occurred” (qtd. in Faludi 11, emphasis added). On a basic level, fear becomes a predictable response to the feminist requirement of liberation and change marked by its definition, even if changes have not yet been made.

Why fear arises toward feminism expands beyond resistance to change. Feminism not only demands equitable distribution of resources and access to land and property, to name a few, such feminist demands emerge from a powerful critique of social hierarchies. Freedman contends:

No matter how insightful its politics, feminism feels deeply threatening to many people, both women and men. By providing a powerful critique of the idea of a timeless social hierarchy, in which God or nature preordained women’s dependence on men, feminism exposes the historical construction, and potential deconstruction, of categories such as gender, race, and sexuality. Fears that feminism will unleash changes in familiar family, sexual, and racial relationships can produce antifeminist politics among those who wish to conserve older forms of social hierarchy. (“The Historical Case” 36)

Feminist criticisms of cultural and societal norms are criticisms of the mind, how people have learned to think, process, and communicate with one another. Feminists’ demand that
women have equal access to the work place and demand that those women are treated with interpersonal respect while employed. Policy and organizational practices and interpersonal interactions are all scrutinized.

Lisa Marie Hogeland contends that feminism politicizes gender consciousness, an explanation that accounts for Freedman’s startling statistic that there exists a high percentage of support for gender equality; however, when people were asked if they identified as feminists, the percentage dropped from 85% to 29%. If feminism, historically, has supported gender equality, why would survey participants so staunchly avoid such identification? For Hogeland, feminism forces issues of equality to become political and, because the personal is political for feminists, equality becomes everyone’s problem. Politicizing gender creates individual accountability where inaction itself leads to consequences. Feminism makes change everyone’s problem. Populations might not fear feminism itself but fear what feminism requires of them, where, Hogeland outlines:

It is less other women's difference that we fear than our own implication in the hierarchy of differences, our own accountability to other women's oppression. It is easier to rest in gender consciousness, in one's own difference, than to undertake the personal and political analysis required to trace out one's own position in multiple and overlapping systems of domination. (par. 15)

Gender consciousness, generally, means a consciousness of the inequality between genders. To politicize such consciousness requires an individual to look internally at their own gender-based relationships along with larger systems and institutions. For me, it has required that I reflect on my treatment of other women, who I will vote for and who I will not vote for, and who I date, to name a few.
Politicizing gender consciousness may spark fear among women. Rather than empower women, the insistence that the personal is political can be threatening to a woman’s understanding of her own identity (Hogeland, par. 8). If an identity is contingent on sustaining an intimate relationship—especially a relationship that follows the linear heteronormative familial line—then fear may arise from feminists’ questioning the dynamics of that bond. For example, women who stay at home rather than enter the workforce may find feminism threatening to that choice or, at the very least, feminism may question the power dynamics and expectations between the breadwinner and the non-breadwinner within their home space. Feminism places a woman’s identity and interpersonal choices in context, marking them as part of larger cultural and systemic systems that have not, historically, privileged women.

One repercussion of gender awareness is a shift in consciousness, causing fear. Fear transcends generations, where “women of all ages fear the existential situation of feminism, what we learned from Simorre de Beauvoir, what we learned from radical feminists in the 1970s, what we learned from feminist women of color in the 1980s: feminism has consequences. Once you have your ‘click!’ moment, the world shifts, and it shifts in some terrifying ways” (Hogeland, par. 12). Feminism functions as a new vocabulary, a gateway to re-reading reality. Even as a self-identified feminist, I have felt and experienced fear around what feminism requires of me. I avoided long-term relationships for years, unsure if I could reconcile my feminist sensibilities inside a heterosexual relationship. I didn’t hate men, but I feared that my demands within the relationship—being treated equally, the language used, for example—would ultimately lead to the deterioration of that relationship. A gender consciousness is emotionally and intellectually exhausting. I have re-thought my teaching, my family relationships, with whom I can sustain
friendships, where I can eat, and more. In some ways I wonder, can I really blame women who fear feminism?

Unsurprisingly, fear becomes a politically efficacious backlash strategy. Tomlinson explains that these strategies are not neutral; indeed, “they are deployed deliberately as part of a set of productive tools carefully calculated for use on behalf of conservative social movements that have devoted enormous resources to reinforcing their own interests and to suppressing social movements that do not align with them” (4). Such emotive and affective strategies, drawing on larger cultural fears surrounding feminism—partially due to the explanations above—position gender equality and feminism as mutually exclusive. Or, to reframe, an individual can more easily support gender equality while disavowing the evil feminism that they have learned to fear.

The structural and individual changes required by feminism shed light on what may motivate participation in “Women Against Feminism.” Above, I’ve outlined why individuals may fear feminism, and David L. Altheide’s research speaks to how such rhetoric continues to circulate. The rhetoric of fear within WAF does not exist in a vacuum; it exists as another repetition. From a communication perspective, fears deployed and embedded in cultural narratives surrounding feminism are repetitive, infused in popular culture, media, and interpersonal relationships. Altheide, in his article “Notes Toward a Politics of Fear,” concedes that fear becomes repetitious, creating a standard interpretive frame for audience members (38). Because fear has infiltrated so much of popular culture, Altheide argues, fear has become a normative expectation in how individuals understand and process information. Fear as an audience expectation means that viewership of mass media or readership of literature becomes contingent on its presence; fear becomes integral to entertainment and argument. Individuals expect to be scared. In the context of feminism and WAF then, communication patterns reliant
on fear become circular: the presence and repetition of fear from external sources (i.e. the media, popular culture scripts) subsequently inform individual understandings of feminism. Those individuals then continue creating identification between feminism and fear.

The preceding discussion has worked to expand on concepts briefly introduced in Chapter 2 in order to establish a larger landscape and a common vocabulary for understanding how and why fear functions within and around (anti) feminism. In the remainder of this chapter, I examine how fear surfaces within WAF and how those rhetorical constructs influence the relationship between WAF participants and feminism, examining how WAF placards’ sustain larger perceptions of feminism as a detrimental, angry movement. After my initial thematic coding of the WAF placards, I organized each general theme by asking: What backlash strategies are present? I found two prevalent examples that relied on or deployed fear-based rhetoric: 1) the angry-feminist trope and 2) feminists as responsible for the destruction of traditionalism. In the analysis that follows, I argue that these two sub-themes surface as a part of ongoing narratives that feminists are all angry and hateful women, reducing feminists to interchangeable, irrational women with unruly, unpredictable ideas. Sonja Foss assists my rhetorical journey, reminding me that through an examination of oppositional rhetoric, a more complicated understanding of motivations for action surface (275). It is my hopes that through an in-depth examination of the angry feminist trope and traditionalist rhetoric, a deeper understanding of fears as an anti-feminist rhetorical device will emerge. I conclude this chapter by teasing out epistemological and ontological implications of larger fear-based perceptions of feminism.

**Fear-Based Strategies: Analyzing WAF**

Fear plays a vital role in rhetorical strategies that fuel anti-feminist backlash. As I have demonstrated in the introduction, repetitious messages that frame feminism as both an ideology
and a group of individuals to be feared have regularly circulated in popular culture. With that contextual and theoretical information in mind, I shift in this section to an analysis of two rhetorical themes parsed out from coding the WAF placards. Below, I analyze the angry feminist trope, identifying how negatively charged emotions and physicality become feared as normative feminist behaviors. I investigate how fear arises through the angry feminist trope and what the trope communicates about and toward feminism. I conclude with a theme reliant on traditional nostalgic texts, investigating the role that misandry and anti-victimhood rhetoric play in traditionalist backlash strategies.

The Angry Feminist Trope

Feminists are angry. This simple statement carries an incredible amount of cultural capital. As Vaidehi Joshi contends, “Whether we like it or not, the reality is that being a feminist today has the negative connotation that you are a harsh, shrill, heartless, stone-cold bitch” (par. 6). In my personal experience, I find this unfortunate narrative description of feminism quite common. So common that the assumption of anger pre-supposes any interpersonal interaction that I, as a feminist, might engage in. Scholar Barbara Tomlison argues that the angry feminist label has become an all-too-common cultural trope, drawn on regularly as an all-encompassing label for feminists. She describes the trope’s characteristics:

Deployment of the trope of the angry feminist illustrates a number of the trope’s main features. Its purposes are openly political; it is available for immediate use; it is timeless and contextless; it requires no research; it is unfettered from evidence; it ignores inconsistency or contradiction; it makes no attempt to be “fair”; it is impossible to refute; it allows no mechanism for rebuttal. (7)
For Tomlinson, backlashers benefit from deploying the trope because it forecloses discussion by discrediting feminists’ arguments at the start, individualizing and collapsing feminism to a negatively veiled emotion. Anger, unhappiness, and bitchiness become connected characteristics of the trope, drawn on to frame feminists as a group to be feared, irrational in their behaviors and thought processes.

This was a difficult trope for me to examine. The prevalence of intense feminist stereotypes—reliant on the angry feminist trope—knocked the breath out of me. As one placard reads, she is anti-feminist because “I don’t want a clutch of man hating, hysterical, rape obsessed attention seekers to go around claiming that they speak for me” (Aug. 8, see fig. 3.1). In one sentence, the author of this placard 1) accuses feminists of hating men, 2) creates an association between feminists and mental illness, i.e. “hysterical,” 3) undermines efforts to reduce rape by calling those efforts an obsession, 4) describes a group of women as “clutch,” a word that simultaneously refers to a brood of chickens, implying that feminists are just a bunch of women clucking like chickens, and 5) represents feminism as a movement that speaks for all women. This is a rhetorically intense sentence for me as a researcher because the statement, at least partially, relies on describing the personality traits of feminists as horrifically undesirable. It is a sentence that undercuts the hours of labor that feminist men and women have done in the name of social justice. In this section, I analyze the angry feminist trope, emergent through WAF rhetoric, that characterizes feminists as shrill, angry, and aggressive, reducing feminists to assumed personality traits and undesirable physicality.
The reduction of feminist agenda items to undesirable personal traits as part of the angry feminist trope is frequent in the WAF placards. For example, another placard reads: “Instead of empowering ‘all people’ they TEAR DOWN anyone who is openly not feminist” (July 30). This woman takes empowerment into account—a commonly understood feminist ideal—to argue that feminists, in practice, disempower their critics. “Tear down,” written in all capital letters, communicates an aggressive-ness that feminists convey when interacting with “anyone who is openly not feminist.” To tear something or someone down has a profoundly negative connotation, implying destruction, splitting, or splintering, all synonymous with tearing. When confronted, this placard contends that feminists will rip and shred at a dissenting person, sustaining a negative narrative about feminism.

An August 8 post also frames feminists as angry and condescending, noting, “Every feminist I know is always angry, miserable and cynical.” The claim is quite extraordinary in its
assessment that "every feminist" the author has interacted with qualifies as "angry, miserable and cynical." By marking feminists as miserable, the word choice communicates that feminists’ internal state is one of stark unhappiness. Oxford Dictionary defines “miserable” as someone wretchedly unhappy, dejected, and depressed. Feminists become identified as cynical and miserable beyond interpersonal outbursts of anger; indeed, the very being of feminists is attached to continued negative beliefs and attitudes.

The August 8th placard author uses her personal experience as evidence of how she knows that feminists are always angry; stating, “Every feminist I know” demonstrates how first-person narrations are common within WAF. In a second example, the woman states, “I feel more oppressed by feminists than I do by men” (Aug. 17). Feminists become immediately identified as the subject responsible for the oppression of “I”; her intrapersonal feelings of oppression are used as proof. In reality, these placards lack the necessary context for us to be able to judge the truth of their claims: there is no discussion about the circumstances for feminist anger, outrage, or supposed oppression. Instead, "anger" and “oppression” become deployed as merely words that in-and-of-themselves provide enough evidence to justify themselves as a conclusion. The angry feminist trope consistently excludes context, assuming that no matter what is said or done, feminists will always respond angrily. Anger has become such a powerful communicative symbol that its connection to feminism affirms itself, particularly when accompanied by first-person support.

Disparaging comments toward feminism regularly lacked context throughout the WAF placards. A post from July 29th, for example, reads, “I can hold my own beliefs without an army of angry vaginas backing me.” To state that the author can hold her own beliefs without an army is to imply that 1) feminists are unable to individually articulate their beliefs and goals without
others and 2) that feminists rely on violent organizing mechanisms to eradicate dissonance. The sentence frames feminism as an army without a cause, just fighting to cause harm, excusing the elimination of context by implying that feminists are always just an angry army of women looking for a battleground in anti-feminist discussions. The violent metaphor of war is substituted for context and content.

The statement also reduces feminists to female genitalia, the vagina, collapsing feminism’s complexity. Reducing feminism to the vagina allows the reference—the vagina—to stand in for feminism overall. Rather than an “army of feminists,” for example, the author purposefully substitutes a singular body part, locating the worth of the feminist agenda into the vagina. A dangerous reduction, this synecdoche binds anger to the vagina, implying that the vagina is the irrational cause of anger because, as the sentence reads, the army is always an army of “angry vaginas.”

Anger becomes a gendered device used to discipline women’s behavior. As an outwardly projected emotion, anger is understood as an emotive display that is unladylike. Its very presence in feminists—a claim that WAF placards assume as always already true—is listed as reason enough to be anti-feminist. Unlike men’s “righteous anger,” feminist anger is delegitimized before a discussion of why the anger originated is allowed. The angry feminist trope partially relies on these gendered affective assumptions to rally anti-feminism.

The prevalence of the angry feminist trope expands beyond the deployment of anger and negative personality traits and also includes disparaging descriptions of feminists’ physicality. Barbara Tomlinson explains this pattern, noting, “contemporary U.S. political and academic discourse abounds with a recurring set of formulaic claims that feminist scholars (and feminists in general) are angry, unreasoning, shrill, humorless, ugly, man-hating, perverse, and peculiar”
(1). As Tomlinson’s summary demonstrates, using “angry” to describe feminists is only the tip of the iceberg; negative comments about feminists’ physical and mental health are also common and deployed as something to avoid and to fear.

Women of WAF rhetorically suture feminism to disparaging physical attributes. Sharon Mavin et al. call this technique "abject appearance," theorizing that abject appearance arises when women are reduced and judged by their physical appearance (449-50). They note how “through abject appearance women silence other women’s doing of gender well and differently, allowing only certain gendered performances” (459). An example of abject appearance can be seen in a September 29th post, stating, “I’ll be DAMNED if an overweight, insecure, unhealthy female tells me how to respond to the men in my life.” This statement is fruitful when examining how stereotypical physical attributes are deployed to frame feminists negatively, reducing feminist worth and credibility. By claiming that she will be damned if she listens to overweight, insecure, and unhealthy females, this author 1) conflates health, weight, and insecurity, assuming someone of an “ideal weight” automatically has self-esteem, 2) assumes that listening to someone is dependent on their physical attributes and their own self-worth, and 3) communicates that feminisms’ only purpose is teaching women how to respond to men.

Comments based on abject appearance heavily rely on negative stereotypes of feminists generally, affirming that feminists are not invested in their physical appearance. The above placard from September 29th relies on normative standards of beauty as preferable, sustaining discourses that feminists exhibit unacceptable physical traits. Textual references to health and weight are two examples. Overweight women exist outside the boundaries of normative femininity and, as communicated in the placard, overweight women and feminists are one and
the same and should be disciplined through silence, where women choose not to listen to feminist ideas. Intellectual worth becomes pre-determined through physical appearance.

Physically demeaning rhetoric emerged in an August 8th placard, reading, “Honestly, a bunch of topless women taunting and harassing the public to get a message across is disgusting and ridiculous,” implying that all feminists are always topless, a physical trait that is labeled both “disgusting and ridiculous.” Using “honestly” to begin the statement rhetorically situates this author as a communicator of known yet silent truths; it disciplines women’s bodies by calling their presence disgusting, a claim that readers should believe because the author is just speaking honestly. In addition, the author connects negative feminist physical attributes with negative behaviors and attitudes by claiming that feminists use harassment and topless-ness as mechanisms to relay their messages. Feminists become feared because of their unruly and non-normative body practices and their taunting interpersonal exchanges.

These statements become successful backlash strategies by asking the reader to ponder the following: if feminists are an angry army of vaginas, is feminism something you want to associate with? If feminists are hysterical, do you want to be a feminist? If feminists are all insecure, do you want to listen to them? By defining feminism through undesirable emotions, the placards create a narrative terrain where, for readers, it becomes increasingly difficult to move beyond the negative feminist connotations. For Barbara Tomlinson, “deploying affectively charged strategies that float free of evidence, clichés like the angry feminist put animosity—not argument—at the center of political discussions, interpelling readers as always already antifeminist” (1). The WAF authors position the readers and audience members as already antifeminist by relying on structures that assume certain emotions are acceptable while deeming other emotions as unacceptable.
Returning to the WAF placards, thematically, emotions become hierarchically devised, privileging rational thought. One participant wrote, “Feminists only see what they want and the use of logic and critical thinking with them is useless” (Aug. 24). As the text states, an appropriate argument contains logic and critical thinking while irrationality should be eliminated. Although the author of the August 24th placard above fails to identify a particular circumstance or outline a scenario where a feminist failed to argue rationally, Frances Bottenberg contends that “women expressing strong, self-assertive emotion are standardly assessed by both men and other women as acting inappropriately. Women are socially expected to avoid behaviors such as acting assertively, demanding things loudly, showing fierce, self-interested emotion” (92). The placard above privileges logic and critical thinking, thought processes supposedly absent from feminists, making feminist thought inappropriate and always already outside the bounds of argument. Feminists’ strongly worded claims become collapsed to irrational thought, lacking critical thinking, a method used to place women outside the bounds of appropriateness.

A second example assists me in articulating WAF’s emotional hierarchy. On August 28th, one WAF women wrote that she does not support feminism because “I don’t blindly cling on to emotional arguments/propaganda.” Propaganda, defined, means “ideas or statements that are often false or exaggerated” (Merriam-Webster), requiring some level of embellishment by the communicator, attempting to mislead. An argument, for this author, becomes propaganda when emotions are involved, as evident by the placard’s use of “emotional” to qualify “arguments”. Emotional arguments and propaganda become synonymous. Thus, a deeper reading of this sentence reveals that the author, the “I,” is placed at odds with the feminist non-I who “blindly clings” to emotional arguments. Feminist ideas become conflated with propaganda and emotional arguments—ideas that, by their very definition, are exaggerations—where feminists
become those who utilize feminist propaganda, incapable of non-emotional and non-exaggerated thought.

As two additional placards note, “I don’t base my opinions on biased, outdated ‘facts’” (July 30), and a second notes that feminism is “full of lies” (Aug. 8). The very foundation of feminism is made suspect by associating its content—however absent from the placards—with an unacceptable form of reasoning, reasoning absent facts. Both examples function as assessments of feminist thought, claiming that information provided by feminists is lies, based on outdated facts. Their assessments, though, lack any structured information to determine how one arrived at such findings. What facts are outdated? What lies do feminists tell? Instead, a general dismissal of feminism becomes sufficient by the mere suggestion that feminism lacks “real” facts.

Tomlinson contends that propagators of the angry feminist trope become successful through characterizing feminists as prisoners to irrationality and emotion (16). Suturing feminism to a pattern of irrationalism fits into larger misogynistic storylines where women are constantly at risk of ‘losing their minds.’ Bottenberg explains:

The misogynistic suppositions of that story go something like this: while man is the rational sex, his virtue and self-transcendence lying in logic-dictated thought and action, “woman is Other”, as de Beauvoir classically put it: sensuous, sensitive, and sentimental. Hers is the sex most “in tune” with the human senses and bodily nature, and, whether as a result of this or not, her sometimes only dimly conscious emotions, rather than her fully conscious appreciation of reasons, are her chief guides in thought and action. (92)
As Bottenberg’s quotation highlights, women are narrated as inherently and naturally emotional, unable to reasonably place emotions in check. Interestingly then, the women within WAF partially reject a long-time assumption of patriarchal society: that women are irrational and emotional. Instead, the women who participate in WAF attempt to re-narrate their identity as anti-feminist by noting their own rationality, firmly placing themselves as anti-feminist because, unlike the angry and irrational feminists, WAF women are reasonable.

The matrix of the angry feminist trope relies on fears of the unruly and the non-normative. Feminism becomes feared because it falls out of line, defined as irrational, angry, and unpredictable. Feminists are uncontrollable because they are emotional. The success of this backlash strategy relies on its repetition and, Tomlinson explains, “Feminist emotion and irrationality are a nexus and a knot where various lines of argument are tied together. They form one of the most repeated elements inside contemporary antifeminist discourse” (9). Feminist emotive characterizations, angry outbursts, and unattractive physicality all become argumentatively knotted through the angry feminist trope; all supported through subtle fears of the uncontrollable woman. Feminists and feminism become feared because they exist as chaotic by their very nature. Anti-feminists draw on that fear over and over.

The angry feminist trope also becomes a successful backlash strategy by relying on historic rhetoric claiming that women are unhappy under feminism. As I outlined in Chapter 2, backlashers claimed that women became more depressed and less content when they were given rights and access to employment, for example. The angry feminist trope becomes an extension of this strategy by constructing feminists as always already unhappy and always already angry about their circumstances.
I want to conclude this section with a necessary statement. Not all feminists are angry; however, as Suzannah Weiss concedes, “Many feminists are angry, because there are a lot of injustices in this world to be angry about. But [feminists] are not, as the stereotype goes, simply angry people who use feminism as an outlet for our anger” (par. 5, emphasis in original). There is rational, factual, statistical evidence in support of a wide range of feminist-supported reform and revolution. I have twice mentioned the role of repetitious communicative acts in sustaining narratives that feminists are angry and irrational. I have done so to argue that these narratives are not reflections of reality; not all feminists are angry, but as a feminist, I believe anger is a valid and, at times, necessary response to the vast inequality caused by patriarchy. As this section demonstrates, the context by which anger arises affects how a reader understands anger. WAF, partially reliant on the angry feminist trope, demonstrates how feminism becomes feared through negatively veiled emotive lenses. In the following section, I more deeply investigate the presence of fear in framing feminism as anti-traditionalist.

The Crisis of Traditionalism

Rebecca Groothuis in her book, *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Culture War Between Traditionalism and Feminism*, describes nostalgia as motivation for anti-feminist attacks, embedded in a fear of change. She writes, “Factors clearly at work in the antifeminist response are nostalgia from the [1950s] American suburban home life and a fear of social change” (162). Although 15 years have passed since Groothuis published her work, a nostalgic traditionalism still haunts feminist progression. Susan Faludi, as I outlined in Chapter 2, also argued that backlashers frequently claimed that populations should fear feminism for its potential to destroy traditional values and the nuclear family. One should fear feminists because they caused the demise of the nuclear family unit and a better time in U.S.-American history, the
reasoning contends. In this section, I extend Faludi’s analysis and Groothuis’ observations. I find that fearing feminism for the destruction of family values is still present in WAF placards, framing feminists as responsible for a crisis in marriage. (I use marriage here in reference to one theory that marriage should be a privilege accessible only for one man and one woman.) I supplement these earlier findings with additional analytic insights; namely, that misandry and anti-victimhood rhetoric also function to sustain a persistent narrative of U.S. American culture and traditional notions of femininity.

WAF placards deploy historically paralleled rhetoric that feminism is responsible for a crisis in marriage and the destruction of traditional family values. One text simply states: “It’s not wrong to believe in traditional family values” (Nov. 5). Below, I outline one WAF placard in detail, a longer submission that intimately connects feminism with changing marital values and gender roles. It reads:

I am a woman. I adhere to traditional gender roles. I am a Christian and a conservative. I aspire to be a stay-at-home mom one day. I have known a variety of feminists, all of whom responded to my personal choices and beliefs with scorn and hatred. They have done nothing but dehumanize me and my family, friends, and colleagues who hold the above beliefs and make the above choices. I don’t need feminism, and I will not allow individuals to quote dictionary definitions at me and call me ignorant. The dictionary still defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman, which isn’t always the case in practice. Feminists have changed the definition, and I don’t want to be, in any way, associated with modern, third wave feminism. (Aug. 6)
The long placard is chock full of content and assumptions surrounding feminism. The author begins by listing descriptions of her own identity. She is a conservative, Christian woman who adheres to traditional gender roles and, in the future, hopes to be a stay-at-home mom. I point out these descriptions because, in the sentence that follows it, she implicitly places feminism at odds with each characteristic. By writing that she has known feminists, “all of whom have responded to my personal choices and beliefs with scorn and hatred,” she implies that all feminists condemn conservatives, Christians, traditional gender roles, and stay-at-home mothers. All feminists have hated her personal choices, which, as she herself wrote, include being a stay-at-home mom. In fact, the author accuses feminists of dehumanizing her family out of intense opposition to these life choices. Similarly, because her qualifications for feminism require hatred and scorn for her personal choices, women who lack those qualities are invisible to her as feminists. Women who have not exerted scorn toward her personal choices, even if they identify as feminists, are not labeled as such. Every instance of anger becomes proof that feminists are hateful, disallowing alternative experiences.

Her list of identities subtly places these categories at odds with feminism, defining conservative and Christian as always already anti-feminist. By stating that “I will not allow individuals to quote dictionary definitions at me and call me ignorant” — individuals that we can presume are the third-wave feminists she rejects — her anti-feminism becomes a reactionary response to fearing ignorance and feeling ignorant. In other words, her decision to begin with a list of identity categories becomes a strategic rhetorical move, listing characteristics that she believes feminists reject in a moment of self-assurance and confidence. She is the list of things despite being called ignorant and having hateful responses from feminists. She is anti-feminist
because her life decisions to be a conservative Christian are—in her experiences with feminism—at odds with feminist practices.

In addition, this author blames feminism for the changing cultural understanding of marriage. The author, noting that marriage is defined as the union between a man and woman, concedes that such a definition has changed connotatively in practice because of feminism. I am unfortunately left, as a reader, without a larger explanation detailing how marriage has changed. However, when read alongside the author’s earlier contention—that she aspires to be a stay-at-home mother and that she adheres to traditional family values—it’s possible to deduce that the author fears her future goals of traditional motherhood may be at risk due to changing marital roles (caused by feminism, in her mind). Taken to the extreme, this author is predicting that feminism will lead to the complete elimination of stay-at-home mothers; thus, stay-at-home mothers should fear feminism.

The WAF participant mentioned above is not alone in fearing feminisms’ impact on marriage. On August 8th, another placard read that feminism “defiles my dream to become a loyal loving stay at home wife. I also don’t need feminism because it destroys families.” The evidence that feminism does, in fact, stand in opposition to stay-at-home wives is again absent. The belief that all feminists destroy families becomes an assumed statement of truth; as a declarative statement, the August 8th placard is clear: “[feminism] destroys families.” Why do these women believe that feminists stand so staunchly in opposition to family? Goothuis offers a clarifying argument by contending, “Many feminists do not despise but highly value both childhood and motherhood. They simply maintain that motherhood need not always be a full-time vocation” (165). Despite feminist support of children, marriage, and stay-at-home mothers, Goothuis finds that anti-feminist traditionalists don’t think that’s enough. Instead, these
viewpoints suggest that feminist ideologies are threatening to traditional beliefs that marriage and motherhood are full-time jobs. In other words, any support for women to work outside of the home is an attack on motherhood (165).

WAF placards reveal anti-feminist beliefs that feminism threatens motherhood. For example, “Contemporary feminism fosters enmity, selfishness, and fear. It devalues the unrelenting responsibilities and incredible joys of motherhood” (Aug. 16). The placard positions motherhood as the central focus for issues of gender, an issue that is “joyful,” placing motherhood at odds with a feminism embedded in fear. The author assumes motherhood is central to womanhood and thus, denying a focus on mothers is a selfish act, propagated by feminism. The use of “selfishness” is telling by contending that feminism devalues motherhood because feminist women are self-serving, only interested in their own future. By expanding the purview of women’s interests and the possibility for expanded engagement, feminism creates selfish women because a selfless woman would be focused on childbearing. In U.S. American culture, for example, collective narratives have intimately connected womanhood with motherhood, where childbearing and childrearing are central to the worth of a woman. Kim Akass describes how narratives connecting motherhood with womanhood partially function by creating “mommy wars,” “a discourse originating in the American media that pitted stay-at-home mothers against working ones in an alleged battle between two opposing styles of mothering” (par. 2). Akass argues that these narratives re-center motherhood and the home as preferable spaces and preferable cultural roles for women in a U.S. American context. And, despite a cultural shift surrounding the “ideal family,” traditionalism and the mythic stay-at-home mother with a breadwinning husband are still privileged as the superior familial structure. WAF placards demonstrate not only nostalgia for a traditional family structure where
motherhood is privileged, but they also demonstrate how feminism is blamed for changes in familiar normative structures.

While many explanations may emerge as evidence that feminism has destroyed traditional marriage, a closer read of WAF placards locates misandry as one root cause for the deterioration of the 1950s woman. Misandry is the inverse of misogyny and is defined as a hatred for men. As one placard reads, “Feminists want to destroy families and relationships by turning women and men against each other!” (Aug 5). A second placard clarifies, “It’s full of lies. It is hypocritical. It causes misandry. It has weakened marriage. The building block of civilization. Young college age women are brainwashed to hate men” (Aug. 8). These two examples demonstrate the communicative connection created between feminism, eroding traditionalism, and misandry. Women hating men precludes the possibility of a heterosexual relationship and marriage, followed by children. If women hate men, they won’t marry them. Misandry accounts for the deterioration of family values, functioning as a believable story to discredit feminism. Misandry thus threatens the nostalgic re-centering of the 1950s ideal central to multiple WAF fantasies.

Thematically, these connections were rampant in the WAF placards. In my coding of the texts, hatred of men arose as a core assumption about feminism. The texts ranged from accusing feminism of overt hatred and discrimination of men to placards generally exclaiming their personal support of men, noting how “a world without men would suck” (Aug. 3). Many WAF participants located support for men in their own family members: husbands, sons, brothers, and friends. For example, one placard reads, “I am more fearful for my son’s treatment as he grows up then [sic] my daughters” (Aug. 9). Collectively, these texts paint a vivid picture of feminism as so embedded in a hatred of men that men may be eradicated from civilization. In fact, as the
latter placard notes, young men are now at a higher risk to suffer discrimination than young women. So much so that the author fears for her son’s future.

An August 7th placard extends criticisms of feminist discrimination against men. It reads, “Men are not our enemy. They are our fathers, sons, and brothers. Belittling them helps no one” (See fig. 3.2) Here, the declarative statement that begins the placard, “men are not our enemy,” acts as an implied response to an unknown claim, presumably that men are, in fact, our enemy. Although, as a reader, we are not privy to the author’s intention, the emphasis on humanizing men reveals the assumption that feminists deem them enemies. In a second example, the author argues that she is anti-feminist because feminism is hateful, noting, “I’m an anti-feminist because I believe feminism to be a hypocritical hate group that doesn’t recognize men’s issues. I want real equality, not privileged bullshit” (Aug. 9). These two examples purport that men are feminists’ enemies and feminists themselves have become perpetrators of inequality. The latter placard goes so far as to accuse feminism of being a hypocritical hate group, completely unaware
of men’s issues. “Real” equality as a characteristic of feminism becomes de-lodged and instead placed at odds with feminists, where feminists are invested in a non-real equality that does not interrogate men’s issues or how patriarchy may affect men, as well.

In addition to overt accusations of misandry, a textual undertone and assumption of misandry was also present. For example, an August 3rd placard reads, “I love my husband and all men are NOT the same! I believe in equality, not women superiority,” demonstrating how superiority and man-hating become common devices to disavow feminism. In the example above, the author frames women’s superiority as a goal of feminism, placing feminism at odds with equality. Implicitly, her statements support a value of fairness; she views feminists as unfair because they treat men as less than the presumed superior feminist woman. Her declaration of love for her husband supports her view of fairness. “I love my husband” functions as evidence of her departure from feminist ideology. Feminists are unfair misandrists, preaching superiority for women while she and her husband live an equitable marriage based in fairness. Although she does not overtly accuse feminists of misandry, her implicit characterizations of feminism as supporting women’s superiority make the connection more clear.

I want to explore a deeper reading of the text mentioned above. Interestingly, by noting that not all men are the same after clearly stating that she loves her husband, I read this author as implicitly agreeing that some men may contribute to women’s inequality. The author seems to be placing her husband—a man she loves, for whatever reasons—at odds with men who feminists may not love. In other words, rhetorically, the author is constructing a narrative of her husband as unlike other men, men whom feminists want to feel superior over and blame for women's inequality. Her husband shares her belief that equality should be valued over superiority. Thus, this woman is not a feminist because she believes that feminists want women’s superiority.
Here, I will pinpoint two implications for describing misandry as central to feminism and framing the hatred of men as central to WAF's presentation of a feminist ethic. First, the placards continually individualize men, claiming that feminists hate individual men rather than criticizing patriarchy and systems of oppression as a whole. While yes, as a feminist, I have criticized the actions of individual men, those criticisms are not based in hatred but in a consciousness that patriarchy and institutional sexism emerges within individual contexts. I never blame an individual man for the historical repetition of sexism and oppression that have disproportionately affected women. Individualizing men oftentimes occurred through participants highlighting men in close interpersonal proximity. For example, “men are not our enemy. They are our fathers, sons, and brothers. Belittling them helps no one” (Aug. 7). By pointing to “our fathers, sons, and brothers” as examples of men, the placard responds with individual narratives, using individual men as evidence that hating men is irrational. It invites the reader to imagine their own father, son, or brother and ask, are those men capable of treating women unfairly? By imagining someone you know, the ability to understand the privileged position of men may become more difficult for some.

The second implication of assuming that feminism hates and blames men for patriarchy disallows theories that patriarchy harms men, too. Feminism becomes culturally defined as exclusively interested in women’s bodies when, in fact, patriarchy negatively affects men as well. By creating rigid gender categories, men also suffer, dealing with cultural norms that define manhood.

As these implications and examples have demonstrated, misandry narratives create a cultural assumption that feminism blames and hates men, as seen in statements like “[feminism] has turned into a movement of hatred towards men” (Nov. 19). Deploying misandry as a
backlash strategy is successful by sustaining fears that feminists erode nuclear family values. In fact, the misandry claim goes so far as to suggest that feminists wish for the demise of men altogether, a world without men. A large assumption about feminism, it also communicates an assumption about men: there are good ones, we shouldn’t hate them all, and feminists are too hard on them.

An additional assumption reliant on traditionalism is that feminists rely on victimhood narratives as evidence of patriarchal control. A July 30\textsuperscript{th} post reads, “I am not a victim and I am not a misandrist.” This statement is explicit in its two assumptions about feminism: feminism requires that you must be a victim and that you hate men. Victimhood litters WAF placards as evidence of feminism’s drive for superiority and misandry. “Feminism isn’t about women’s rights anymore. It’s about protecting women no matter what, and making men appear to victimize us, and that isn’t right” (July 31), one placard notes, marking victimhood as a justification for feminist misandry. Similarly, the July 31\textsuperscript{st} post reveals an additional assumption: that feminists use victimhood as a tool to manipulate cultural perceptions, “making men appear to victimize” the placard contends, leading to narrative skepticism of women who have, in fact, been victims of violence. In this post, women are framed as non-victims; instead, feminists create the illusion of victimhood.

Anne McLeer notes that the category of victim mutually informs the category of criminal; identifying the victim of a crime insinuates the presence of a criminal (42). The WAF texts I have explored here thus implicitly contend that the reliance on women as victim means identifying men as the criminal, a categorical relationship they reject. I’ll draw on one example to demonstrate. On August 28\textsuperscript{th}, one WAF participant wrote, “I refuse to portray myself as a victim. I am the forger of my present and future. I am responsible for my mistakes and failures. I
love men, respect them and see them as equals.” When women are identified as victims, men become implicitly identified as always already the potential criminal, an identification that leads to WAF authors disavowing victimhood for themselves. The above quotation demonstrates how the author denies the label victim through affirming her love of men. Thus, if women (within WAF) perceive victimhood to be a central ideological component of feminism, and if victimhood requires a criminal counterpart, then men become understood as the criminal responsible for women’s oppression.

Similar to the misandry claims that I examined above, the anti-victimhood posts regularly work to re-center men’s narratives as stories where oppressive behavior toward women is impossible. For example, an August 8th author posted, “Myself and my 3 daughters are not victims. We are strong… not helpless. My 4 sons respect women and girls because their dad is an excellent teacher.” In this text, the author both declares herself (and her daughters) to be “strong”—presumably a subject position that a victim cannot hold—and notes that her sons respect women by their father’s example. The author, perceiving her husband and children’s father as an excellent teacher, eliminates the possibility that her sons may ever be contributors to the larger patriarchal structure. Again, individual interpersonal relationships with men, positive in nature, are situated as counter-evidence to assumptions that feminists require victimhood. Women cannot be victims if men are not perpetrators and the men they know aren’t perpetrators.

A theme common in anti-victimhood ideology situates women as agential, powerful, and in control. In the example above, the author and her daughters are described as strong, a personality trait placed at odds with victimhood. “I take responsibility for myself and my decisions. I don’t feel like a victim. The feminist movement is full of shit” (Aug. 13), a second example reads. The August 13th placard further demonstrates how agency is situated as
oppositional—or highly contentious—with victimhood. Rhetorically, victimhood becomes mutually exclusive from individual actions and decisions, where taking responsibility for oneself means not “feel[ing] like a victim.” Thus, women who are in control and are responsible—anti-feminists—are less likely to feel victimized.

Interestingly, some feminist groups have also been wary of utilizing discourses of victimhood. Criticisms of victimhood by feminists reject how victim has been articulated within rape cases. The label “victim” was found to be a constraining category for survivors of sexual assault (McLeer 44). Feminist Naomi Wolf also launched criticisms of what she calls “victim feminism.” For Wolf, victimhood forbids women from becoming powerful, leading women to feel resentful (qtd. in Cole 75). Women should be focused on their power and agency, feminist critics of victimhood claim, not performing weakness.

While feminists’ criticisms of victimhood partially arose to grant women more options in self-description—particularly when sexual assault occurred—WAF placards take their criticisms one step further, denouncing reports of sexual assault overall. “I don’t want to associate myself with insane women who spend their time disrespecting others to defend what they think is right by throwing the world ‘rape’ in the air,” one author exclaims (Aug. 9). A second, claiming, “Catcalling isn’t even close to the same as rape. You weren’t assaulted because a guy whistled” (Sep. 6), and a third notes, “Drunk sex doesn’t equal rape!” (July 30). These examples, while difficult for me to consume as a reader, all take the criticism of victimhood a dangerous step further by casting doubt on any future narrative of rape. By claiming that feminists throw the word rape around, the author implies that feminists are uninterested in the material truths of rape. Similarly, labeling feminists as “insane” also works to diminish the credibility of feminist women, narrating feminists as somehow delusional, using rape as a weapon rather than a valid
issue and daily reality for millions of women. The latter example denies the truth of rape-based narratives, first by claiming that the circumstances that may have enabled sexual assault are false and second by eliminating the possibility for women to claim that they experienced sexual assault when alcohol was involved, despite staggering statistics that half of all sexual assaults involve alcohol (Abbey et al., par. 5).

When theorized as a communicative act, these texts carry the authority of first-person narratives, making the authors appear as reliable narrators and, in turn, casting doubts on the credibility of feminism. For example, consider this WAF placard: “Just because a man ‘cat calls’ at you does not equal rape or harassment! I wear revealing clothes. And I take full responsibility if people decide to stare! Because I am a woman does not equal me being a victim!” (Sept. 13).

This author, by claiming that cat calling isn’t rape, diminishes the implications of cat calling, making it excusable given its status as a more minor infraction to rape. In addition, by using her own experience and her decision to wear certain clothes as evidence that cat calling isn’t rape, she offers a counter narrative to feminist criticisms of cat calling, criticisms that claim the male gaze is part of larger patriarchal structures. She locates responsibility in her own body, noting that she takes “full responsibility if people decide to stare.” This line of reasoning, taken to the extreme, makes any feminist criticisms of patriarchy impossible. Women become responsible for every outcome of interpersonal interactions. If women are completely responsible for their own actions, then patriarchy as an ideology of institutional and structural inequality looses traction and victimhood as a category vanishes. Patriarchy becomes an unfounded explanation for the prevalence of cat calling and, instead, women become situated as the sole variable that dictates circumstances. Personal narrative explains cat calling as a consequence of the clothing worn by the woman rather than systemic patriarchy and sexism.
Denouncing feminism through individualism reveals how anti-victimhood rhetoric is partially steeped in fear. Victimhood as a category and sexual assault as an experience diminishes the illusion of an individual actor being able to control their own space and his or her own body. I must admit, as a woman and a feminist, I feel the risk of sexual assault constantly because I believe in patriarchy. I know many women who have felt the reality of sexual assault. To be, in some ways, freed of that obligation of consciousness would be revelatory for me. Thus, as a protective shield, the rejection of victimhood affirms an individual’s sense of self-worth and self-control. As the introductory section on fear demonstrated, women partially fear feminism because it requires the conscious confrontation and acceptance of oppression.

The rejection of victimhood also upholds a nostalgic notion of innocence, linking anti-victimhood back to the larger traditionalist theme of this section. Victimhood implies that an experience has tainted a good woman, a traditional woman with virtue and innocence. The implication of victimhood is categorical; it makes the good woman a dirty woman. Traditionalist narratives propagate that a “good” woman would never put herself in an environment that might lead to sexual assault and women who have sex—out of choice or not—become undesirable. Robert Scruton’s work assists me in making this claim. In his book entitled *Sexual Desire*, Scruton argues that traditional marriage between a man and a woman is culturally privileged because it complements feminine and masculine needs where sex is inherently nuptial and monogamous (qtd. in Barnhill 114-5). Scruton also argues that traditional heterosexual marriage allows men to fulfill their necessary role as provider and protector over the wife. Victimhood threatens traditionalism because it verifies that an individual other than the husband—the provider and protector—could influence a woman. The rhetoric of victimhood, the rhetoric
present in WAF, acknowledges that sexual assault is a valid risk for women, a risk that disrupts the monogamous and nuptial nature of traditional marriage.

In this section, I have continued my investigation of WAF’s rhetorical reliance on fear, deployed through misandry accusations, the crisis of traditional marriage, and anti-victimhood. Feminism should be feared because it disrupts a nostalgic preference for traditional family structures and femininity. These disruptions occur because feminists are man-hating women who believe that equality is reached through oppressive tactics. As backlash, feminism becomes narrated through disruptive and oppressive tactics that should be feared. Although I may take issue with those assumptions, WAF placards make one thing clear for me: fear is a powerful rhetorical tool.

**Implications**

Thus far in this chapter, I have investigated the resonant fear within WAF placards deployed through the angry feminist trope and nostalgic traditionalist rhetoric. In this section, I extend my analytic exploration by pondering the question, what does backlash based in fear mean for feminism? How does fear construct larger cultural understandings of a feminist woman? To answer this question, I examine the implications of fear-based rhetoric and the potential ontological and epistemological pitfalls for feminists and for feminism. What I mean is that the backlash strategies I have outlined here—the angry feminist trope and the traditionalist nostalgia—function by questioning and making assertions about the very nature of who feminists are and what truths feminists rely on. In order to communicate a clear response to anti-feminists, feminists must confront these assertions by responding to arguments that they’ve never had, defend political ideas that they have never supported, and resist personality traits that they might never exert. Without a response, perceptions of feminists as mean, angry, and anti-family, for
example, continue to circulate as truth. Below, I outline implications for feminists—what I have labeled pitfalls—of anti-feminist rhetoric entrenched in fear. Namely, I note how feminists become responsible for all feminisms, all perceived feminist truths, and defenders of all feminists individually.

The first pitfall is an epistemological implication for feminists. Epistemologically, feminist truth claims become suspect because WAF placards assert that feminists are all crazy, all angry, and all man-hating non-traditionalists. As a pitfall, feminists are forced to defend epistemological bases that are not always accurate. For example, I had a male-identified student reveal that he would never take a women’s studies class because he assumed the instructor would be harsh and yell. The assumption of harshness from the student was a pre-cursor to my feminist response. It was an assumed truth. Anti-feminists delegitimize feminist truths before a feminist, in some cases, has ever made a claim. Feminist arguments become pre-defined, pre-determined, and pre-judged. For example, an August 11th placard reads, “Feminists have become the very thing they once sought to eradicate—tyrannical, oppressive ‘fear mongers.’” The statement, lacking in context and evidence, makes hasty generalizations about all feminists, conjoining feminism to the stereotype of feminists as fear mongers. Tomlinson explains that these inherently illogical arguments become a believable foundation for anti-feminist arguments because they repetitiously describe feminists as inappropriate citizens and outside an economy of reason (7). In order to counter such arguments, feminists are forced to respond based on the logic—or lack thereof—of the anti-feminist’s original claim.

Epistemologically, these warrants uphold a notion of universal truth by assuming that feminism is singular rather than plural and contradictory. As I demonstrated in the introduction to feminism in Chapter 1, feminism houses various types of feminist ideology and, of course, all
feminists are individuals with a variety of overlapping and disparate identity categories. The WAF placards minimize the distinctions and differences inherent to feminism, at times erasing those differences by collectively claiming feminism can be described in, at best, a few sentences. Feminism becomes an epistemological acorn: something small, contained, definable, and universal. Unfortunately, this means that feminists must say, at times, “that’s not the feminism I believe,” trapped in a race to the next caveat.

I was recently confronted with a lived example of this epistemological pitfall. When facilitating a discussion on feminism as a guest lecturer, I asked students to discuss the reasons that they did not identify as feminists. Astonished, I was bombarded with similar dissatisfied stories found within the WAF placard narratives, ranging from bad interactions with self-proclaimed feminists to stereotypes of man-hating. In that moment, I became the vessel of feminist epistemological truth; it was my job to answer and to clarify, all while attempting not to exhibit the very stereotypical traits of a feminist that they had identified. It was insufficient for me to inform these students that, in fact, most of their stories did not represent a majority of feminist truths. After all, I had no right to discount their experiences. How could I, instead, re-frame feminism when so much of the knowledge, so much of the communication attached to the idea made these students’ shiver in fear? Although I cannot resolve this question, Chapter 6 will more specifically outline strategies for ethical engagement with anti-feminists.

The second pitfall is an ontological implication. While the first pitfall was based around questions of epistemology and truth, the ontological worth of feminists—who feminists are—becomes highlighted here. The descriptive rhetoric I have examined in this chapter, particularly rhetoric aimed at diminishing the character of feminists, creates an ontological assumption: feminism not only means you represent a hateful and misandrist agenda, being a feminist means
you are hateful. Hating men and being a victim are etched into your being, into who you are. All feminists become the collective same. Their physical bodies are irrelevant given the same negative traits occupy the body of every feminist.

Take the following two examples. On August 11th, an author wrote that “Some of the kindest, gentlest people I have known have been men, and most of the judgmental and selfish people I have known have been feminists.” A second example reads, “I’m not a bitter and ugly person inside and out who needs to bring others down just to feel good” (Aug. 8). These two examples are not about feminism as an idea or an ideology; they are about feminists as people. The first example, couched in personal experience, goes a step further, placing the judgmental and selfish feminism at odds with men (a group who, in the WAF world, presumably cannot be feminist). This move to the ontological, to who a person is, makes the costs highly personal because it makes an assumption about what kind of people choose feminism. For a reader, then, it becomes an easy self-fulfilling internalization by answering: am I any of those things? The items become a pre-qualification list, an assumption about who an individual needs to be in order to choose feminism.

Unfortunately, this ontological constraint oftentimes affects individual feminists’ ability to be agential. Take the example I described above about lecturing to a class on feminism. Like I stated, I was so worried about not embodying the qualities that the students and the WAF placards identified as negative—angry, crazy, irrational—that I was forced to constrain my emotion, unable to fully embody the passion I feel about feminism and about teaching. I felt responsible to disprove what I knew to be a stereotype; however, it becomes difficult to disprove a theory without embodying the difference. Rather than describe the beautiful array of
The epistemological and ontological pitfalls that I have described here demonstrate the partial implications that the fear-based rhetoric present within WAF may pose. Barbara Tomlinson nicely summarizes this phenomenon and, when discussing the angry feminist trope, argues that the trope “is designed to delegitimize feminist argument even before the argument begins, to undermine feminist politics by making its costs personal, and to foreclose feminist futures by making feminism seem repulsive to young women” (1). Feminists become responsible for all truth, good and bad, associated with feminism, regardless of the logical bases. Similarly, the ontological basis for who feminists are becomes questioned. As communicative frameworks, feminists must confront these argumentative pitfalls to move forward.

**Conclusion**

In his article entitled “The News Media, the Problem Frame, and the Production of Fear,” David L. Altheide argues that media outlets ingrain fear through everyday communication (648-9). People become more fearful for their safety because of constant and consistent news and media reports that utilize fear, crime, and chaos as a main-stage reporting tactic, highlighting communication and representation as a core contributor to knowledge about the world. WAF’s online forum, through its repetitious circulation of assumptions and stereotypes, similarly establishes a cultural worldview informed by a fear of feminism.

The women who post placards to WAF primarily utilize personal testimony and experience, demonstrating the tendency to incorporate common cultural rhetorics of fear in a personalized message of backlash. In conjunction with, at times, a personal photograph, the personal messages of anti-feminism become difficult to dispute; the criticisms become connected...
to a specific woman that readers can view, making feminist responses to WAF doubly difficult (see fig. 3.3). In many ways, women’s deployment of fear is impossible to dispute because it may be an affect or emotional response they had to a feminist encounter.

As a feminist, I cannot deny that some feminist ideas are scary and, as I highlighted earlier in this chapter, feminists speculate why; feminism requires change and change is often feared. In this chapter, I have analyzed the emergence of that fear as a rhetorically efficacious backlash strategy against feminism, asking, how does fear function within WAF? What are the implications of utilizing fear of feminism? In my findings, I located two examples of fear.

First, the angry feminist trope emerged, where women argue they don’t need feminism because feminists are angry, ugly, unattractive, hysterical, and irrational. The angry feminist
trope draws on a series of long-standing historical assumptions and stereotypes about feminists and about emotions, whereby anger is disciplined and rationality becomes a privileged method for communication. Thus, fear becomes a subtle strategy; readers are situated as already assuming that an unpredictable woman is scary, a reading supported by WAF as placards condemn feminists’ hysterical and chaotic nature.

Second, placards regularly utilize a common backlash strategy where feminists are held responsible for chaotic changes in familial structures, posing a threat to nostalgic values that privilege traditionalism. I have argued that claims of misandry and anti-victimhood function within a larger narrative of traditionalism. If women believe feminism mandates man-hating—however inaccurate—that belief threatens traditionalism where women love and respect their husbands. If feminism mandates victimhood or relies on victimhood narratives, those narratives trouble the illusion of the pure and perfect woman. Feminism becomes a scary ideological disruption to long-standing institutions like marriage.

These rhetorical strategies of backlash are powerful. For me, fear that others will view my input as too emotional, too angry, or too irrational constantly curbs me from providing viewpoints or feminist feedback. I am continually labeled the “bitch” for being too assertive, a term that has haunted me through my academic career. I am similarly haunted by traditionalism, constantly asked when I will get married and when I will begin having children, all actions I have no desire to take. Thus, women post narratives that support assumptions about feminism I find damaging and, can stifle my ability to engage.

My engagement also becomes difficult when anti-feminist messages are contradictory. As this chapter has demonstrated, deploying rhetorics of fear may also include contradictory messages and assumptions of feminism being posted alongside each other. WAF women argue
that feminists should be feared because feminism eliminates traditional familial values, destroying stay-at-home mothers, while also arguing that it should be feared because equality is good and feminism equals man-hating. Thus, equality may not be a central factor in the first explanation while it’s central to the latter statement. I am left with knowing that I should fear feminism, even if that fear is described through contradictory statements and experiences.

One thing, though, remains clear: women who post on WAF are themselves hurt and angry, many describing deeply disturbing interpersonal interactions that involve feminism, many believing deeply disheartening stereotypes about feminism. It is not my intention to deny the reality of women who post on WAF. The fear they feel is real. I believe that. Lisa Marie Hogeland assists me in making sense of their fear:

Women have real reasons to fear feminism, and we do young women no service if we suggest to them that feminism itself is safe. It is not. To stand opposed to your culture, to be critical of institutions, behaviors, discourses—when it is so clearly not in your immediate interest to do so—asks a lot of a young person, of any person. . . . Of course young women are afraid of feminism—shouldn't they be?

(par. 16)

Given this chapter and Hogeland’s insights, I wonder, how can feminists engage with criticisms from anti-feminist groups who utilize backlash strategies embedded in fear? How can we ease their fears while being supportive peers and acknowledge their feelings? I engage with these questions and others in Chapter 6, discussing techniques for engaging across difference and across spatial divides. In Chapter 4, I continue my analysis by discussing how WAF situates love as a rhetorical device to resist feminism.
CHAPTER 4
POSTFEMINISM, LOVE, AND THE NEW BACKLASH

Renowned feminist bell hooks wrote, "When I was a child, it was clear to me that life was not worth living if we did not know love" (ix). In the opening lines of her book entitled All About Love: New Visions, hooks warns that, culturally, we have begun turning away from love, a turn she finds disheartening and potentially dangerous. "When we love, we can let our hearts speak," she proclaims (xi). In many ways, I respect and agree with hooks’ sentiments. I find love a powerful motivating affect, a mechanism for decision making, and a method of seeking collectivity. Love is a core emotive influence in my feminism. Love is also highly contextual; I have experienced moments of love that are equally fraught with danger and highly saturated power relations. Love is more than a feeling; it is a cultural trope and a communicative phenomenon deployed regularly in popular culture, religious texts, political platforms, interpersonal relationships, and social media forums.

When used as a rhetorical weapon, a closer examination of love becomes paramount. I take up such a task in the following pages of this chapter. Participants in “Women Against Feminism” regularly draw on experiences of love to disavow feminism. Love itself becomes a subtle backlash strategy, a mechanism to motivate an anti-feminist following and a difficult tactic for feminists to resist. As one placard reads:

I don’t need modern feminism because . . . I already feel empowered to make my own decisions and be my own woman. I have a loving and respectful partner who deserves the reciprocation of my love and respect as my equal. Not all men are rapists, just as not all women are child killers . . . I refuse to be oppressed by women who tell me that cooking is for victims. I <3 food!” (Sept. 1, see fig. 4.1)
Here, self-love, empowerment, and relational love function as a rhetorical tactic, distancing this woman from modern feminism by 1) claiming that she has already achieved self-empowerment and 2) noting her loving relationship and respectful partner as evidence that not all men are bad and are capable of having respectful relations. Love becomes an evidentiary mechanism to demonstrate that feminism is no longer needed, it's outdated, and that equality has been reached.

Figure 4.1 “Women Against Feminism.” Facebook. 1 Sept. 2014. Web. 3 Dec. 2015.

These rhetorics are part of Sherryl Vint's argument that a new backlash has arisen, an argument Chapter 2 detailed in full. Vint argues that postfeminism – texts that argue feminism is no longer needed—accompany discourses of love, whereby healthy heterosexual relationships become proof that feminism is outdated. Vint summarizes:
The old backlash attempted to frighten women into accepting traditional gender roles and identifying with such roles as their only authentic source of personal happiness. The new backlash realizes that it is unlikely that women en masse will be forced back into the home and exclusively domestic roles, yet still tries to distance women from feminism and convince them that their lives should revolve around the heterosexual family. (162)

This quotation connects love as a communicative strategy with anti-feminist backlash, demonstrating how postfeminism and fantasies of heterosexual happiness are integral to this larger backlash narrative. Love becomes a compelling backlash strategy by creating intertwined narratives that women should accept heterosexual love from a partner and that that love is evidence of equality. WAF posts utilize love as a backlash strategy by discussing how feminism is outdated, pointing to their empowerment, self-love, and heterosexual love as evidence that feminism is dead.

Chapter 3 focused on the thematic presence of fear, and this chapter looks to rhetorics of love and their relationship to WAF. I utilize Vint's findings and extend her backlash arguments to explore how the presence of rhetorics of self-love and heterosexual love function within WAF. Vint summarizes how texts like these "do not vilify feminism as did an earlier generation but rather try to make the concerns of feminism seem comedic by positing that we live in a postfeminist gender utopia" (161). Methodologically, rhetorics of love emerged alongside postfeminist ideas that feminism is over. During coding, I found that claims of love by WAF participants were used to justify the end of feminism. Thus, I begin my analysis by describing how WAF placards situate the current state of feminism, entrenched in a postfeminist ethic. Below, I detail the relationship between WAF and postfeminist sensibilities and describe how
postfeminism intimately connects with rhetorics of love. I work to describe the connections between each and demonstrate how the themes below are connected. I conclude this chapter by teasing out the implications of love-based backlash strategies.

**Postfeminist Love or "We Don't Need You Anymore"**

Postfeminism constitutes an epistemological perspective on the status or nature of women and feminism. Emergent through media sources in the 1980s, postfeminism has been theorized as a linearly-reached end to feminism, a backlash toward feminist practices, and a more sex-positive approach to feminism (J. Butler 42-3). Called by a variety of names, postfeminism has been tied to the rhetoric of anti-feminism, third-wave feminism, retrosexism, neo-feminism, and others (J. Butler; Press). However, Jess Butler defines postfeminism as a “range of discourses” (41), entangling feminist and anti-feminist discursive practices (43). Rather than a movement or distinct theoretical lens, I approach postfeminism as a sensibility or a set of discursive practices that comment on the state of feminism, either in support or opposition. Vint connects postfeminism with a new backlash, noting how postfeminism emerges from claims that feminism is over and that equality has been reached because women can find loving relationships in the status quo. I title this section “Postfeminist Love” to outline how declarations that feminism is over become explained by claims that love has emerged supreme. I begin my larger analysis by engaging with these discursive practices, couching WAF’s discourses in on-going dialogues surrounding postfeminism while also analyzing how WAF situates feminism within the current cultural tide. I continue by focusing on two examples of postfeminist utopianism, self-love and heterosexual love.

*The End of Feminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility*
A central tenet of postfeminist utopianism relies on framing feminism as outdated and unnecessary. Dubrofsky and Wood define postfeminism as the idea that “gender equality has been reached; there is no need for feminist activism” (282). WAF as an organizational mechanism that rejects feminism whole-heartedly may hint towards the use of such discourses; however, individual placards are explicit in arguing that equality has been reached in the status quo, propagating the illusion of utopianism for women. One woman contends, “I don’t need feminism to perpetuate the myth that twenty-first century women are oppressed” (July 21). The placard’s use of 21st century creates a distinction between women who are currently alive and women who lived in previous historical periods. Women today have reached equality, and women who lived before this century may have experienced oppression. Similarly, this placard claims that feminism is based on myth, purporting that in the status quo, women are not oppressed.

The postfeminist era has been marked by what Susan Faludi sees as media declarations that “feminism was the flavor of the seventies and that 'postfeminism' [is] the new story—complete with a younger generation who supposedly [revile] the women's movement” (qtd. in Xinari 11). One placard reads, “I haven’t needed feminism since 1920. Thank you Miss Anthony” (July 20), simultaneously arguing that feminism is over while unabashedly disavowing status quo feminism. Her reference of the 1920s hints at what this woman understands feminism's purpose to be: the solidification of voting rights for women. It seems, then, that the author looks back on unequal voting rights as unfair and is thankful for suffragettes’ efforts to grant such rights. In fact, she indicates that feminists were needed in the 1920's and that feminists fulfilled an important social good. Currently, though, this placard exemplifies
postfeminist utopianism that women have no current needs that feminists can assist in fulfilling or fighting for.

Both placards I have mentioned above demonstrate a central component of postfeminist discourse by partially taking feminism into account only to disavow its legitimacy, highlighting the complexity of postfeminism. Without erasing the history of feminism, postfeminism acknowledges feminisms' existence and even, at times, the successful battles that feminism has fought in the past. However, staunch opposition to status quo feminism frequently follows recognition of such historical successes. Angela McRobbie summarizes this tendency, noting how "post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasizes that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force" ("Post-Feminism" 255). One placard highlights McRobbie's claim that postfeminist discourses describe feminism as a spent force and outdated: "This isn't the 1920's. You're not suffragettes, you’re not martyrs, you’re not fighting for any real thing" (Sept. 27). Feminists, the presumable "you" in the quotation, are framed as irrelevant in status quo politics. Again, this placard highlights voting rights as a necessary concern for feminism; however, it is a goal that has been reached and no additional "real thing" exists for feminist to fight for or against.

The distinction between a useful and an unnecessary feminism is evident in placards that identify dissonance with "modern feminism." I will tease out two examples to demonstrate the use of "modern" as a postfeminist rhetorical move present in WAF. Each example implicitly identifies modern components of feminism that each author either 1) takes issue with and/or 2) makes feminism currently irrelevant. The first placard reads: "Feminists have changed the definition, and I don’t want to be, in any way, associated with modern, third wave feminism"
(Aug. 6). In this example, the definitional shift within feminism is disputed and marked as evidence that modern feminist practices have changed. The definitional change is attributed to a modern and radical feminism, qualifiers presumably applied to status quo feminist politics. The marking of modern, radical feminism as responsible for an unpopular definitional shift, for this author, also implies a time period when feminism was accepted. Put differently, the evidence utilized presumes that status quo feminism (radical and modern) is distinct from a non-modern feminism.

A second example assists me in demonstrating the role that "modern" plays within a postfeminist frame, reading, "I don’t need modern, radical feminism. Women need only one [feminism] who gave us the same basic opportunities that men have" (July 30). In this latter placard, the author acknowledges that feminism "gave [women] the same basic opportunities that men have." The presence of the past tense "gave" communicates that a fight for equality is not presently needed and is certainly not the goal of modern, radical feminism. In some ways, this woman seems thankful that feminists have fought for equality between genders; however, she firmly marks modern feminism as the motivating factor for her anti-feminist placard. Women were given equal rights, making feminism unnecessary.

The two examples mentioned above highlight how modern feminism becomes the culprit as to why women dis-identify with feminism. It's not that, in all cases, women in WAF wholeheartedly reject all feminism; rather, modern practices—understood as third wave and radical—are viewed as excessive and no longer necessary, a tendency of postfeminist backlash texts. Danielle Stern explains, "Postfeminist ideology supposes that second-wave feminist gains in the workplace and other realms have eliminated the need for an organized political movement
against sexism" (168). Part of anti-feminist repudiation of feminism is through acknowledging gains while simultaneously arguing that those issues have been resolved.

Rhetorically situating patriarchy as non-existent and claims of inequality as mythic or factually untrue are central to postfeminist backlash. Consider the following: "I don’t need 'modern feminism' because . . . I respect the strength and struggle of the individual. I am not oppressed!" (Aug. 7). Here, modern feminism is marked as unnecessary because women, or at least this woman, are no longer subject to oppressive systems. A second post overtly argues, “I don’t base my opinions on biased, outdated ‘facts’” (July 28). Generally, WAF is littered with language like “there is no patriarchy!” (July 20), framing patriarchy as “imaginary” (July 21), and assertions that “I am not oppressed” (June 15). An Australian woman boldly states, “oppression doesn’t exist in my country” (July 20). Strategically, these posts attack the epistemological basis of feminism by rejecting theories that purport patriarchy as the cause of gender inequality. If patriarchy is a myth, feminism becomes debunked.

In this discussion, I have detailed the relationship between postfeminism, an ideology that partially relies on proving that feminism is outdated, and WAF placards. Angela McRobbie describes how postfeminism has become "this new kind of sophisticated anti-feminism" (Beyond Post" 172) and used as a tool for modern culture to create dis-identification between feminism and younger women (173). If equality has already been reached and if patriarchy is a myth, feminism becomes difficult for women to relate to.

My goal is not just to describe the presence of postfeminist discourses and WAF’s attempt to narrate feminism as outdated. Instead, I provide a landscape of this discourse to describe how postfeminism becomes part of larger backlash strategies embedded in the deployment of love. New backlash texts use postfeminist utopianism to describe how women can
have it all: women can love themselves and they can experience heterosexual love because there exists equality between genders. Above, I have detailed the texts from WAF that attempt to describe status quo power relations, most propagating how equality has been reached. Below, I go one step further by asking, how do WAF placards communicate that equality has been reached? In other words, I invite the reader to view the presence of postfeminist sensibilities that feminism is over as a claim made within WAF. Below, I look for the evidence. Why do women within WAF believe feminism is over? I focus on two examples where rhetorics of love emerge: rhetoric of empowerment and self-love and rhetoric that situates romantic heterosexual love as preferable and now possible for women. In each of these cases, love is proof of postfeminist claims.

_Self-Love, Empowerment, and Choice_

Women's empowerment reads like a key component of feminism. In fact, empowerment remains a central goal of my own feminist practices and a justification I use for why women should adopt feminism. I believe in feminism because I believe that women should be empowered and that patriarchy precludes self-choice in certain contexts. Early and mid 20th century feminist struggles worked to extend sexual, political, and social rights to increase empowerment. However, when analyzed more closely, empowerment may also function as a strategy to justify anti-feminism. Gill warns that empowerment rhetoric functions through beliefs that oppression is merely based on interpersonal exchange, amplified by postfeminist cultures that rely heavily on consumptive behavior to market to women (153). For example, “I am not oppressed by my womanhood, I am empowered” (Dec. 4). Empowerment emerges in a plethora of cultural locations and is utilized by a multitude of organizations and corporations as a marketing strategy, a kind of “faux” empowerment (Gill, “Empowerment/Sexism” 37). There is
a difference between individual empowerment and women's empowerment, where the latter becomes concerned with larger systems and institutions that may interfere with empowerment practices and the former, as seen within WAF, instead uses personal experience absent systemic context as evidence that equality has been reached. A need for deeper feminist analyses of empowerment and self-love continues.

In this section, I analyze the rhetoric of self-love and individual empowerment present within WAF. Specifically, I uncover how these rhetorics are used as justification that feminism is no longer needed and function as additions to larger postfeminist tendencies. While Faludi, Vint, McRobbie, and others have spent ample time and pages discussing how regularly circulating media and advertising texts create postfeminist narratives, Anderson reminds me “[that] postfeminist choice and empowerment rhetoric is found not only in pop culture and politics but also in individual women’s thinking about their own lives” (4). WAF is not a site where advertisers tell women how their product can facilitate empowerment; rather, women in WAF describe how they each feel individually empowered and express self-love. Below, I analyze WAF placards that utilize self-love through empowerment, individualism, and choice.

Rhetorically, WAF uses self-love and empowerment as proof of their anti-feminism. For example, many placards express love of being a woman. One placard reads, "I am female, I love it" (July 29), a second reading "I don’t need a label defining me. It’s the 21st century in America and being female is seriously the best" (July 30). The use of "I" in each placard is telling, as each woman uses her own love of womanhood and being a female to detach from the label of feminism in the 21st century. By using “female” as the qualifier to their love, these women create an exclusionary understanding of feminism and self-love, making these factors falsely mutually exclusive. The need for feminism becomes contingent on an individual's feeling about her
identity as a woman. If you love being a woman, these texts communicate that you do not need feminism.

Self-love becomes an acceptable anti-feminist justification, continuing connotations that feminists are unhappy and depressed. As I have detailed earlier in this dissertation, a common backlash strategy during the 1980s circulated beliefs that feminism caused depressed women by encouraging women to enter the workforce, blaming feminism for seemingly unhappy women and mothers. Faludi contends that backlashers accused the women’s movement of creating a new generation of single, childless, and unhappy women (14). WAF exemplifies this strategy through intense subtlety. While early backlash strategies relied on overt vilification of feminists, WAF placards in this theme instead center their own lives, describing their happiness as women rather than making feminists the explicit subject.

A specific component of this self-love propagated in WAF relies on celebrating femininity as a consumptive practice (J. Butler 44). WAF participants love being a woman and love themselves because of particular feminine traits or characteristics they have. For example, feminine performances—especially traditional in nature—are supported and applauded. “I don’t need feminism because I enjoy being feminine,” a December 3rd placard states. One woman also states how “I like men looking at me when I look good. That’s why I do this” (July 16). Rather than view the male gaze as resulting from patriarchal practices that situate women as objects, this woman celebrates such a gaze, reading it as rewarding. She demonstrates the postfeminist shift from sexual objectification to subjectification. Sexual subjectification troubles feminist tendencies to frame the sexual woman as always objectified and without agency. Thus, WAF placards allow space for women to love the gaze, to appreciate the practice of ones physical demeanor being consumed.
Makeup and other cosmetic practices emerged regularly in WAF as positive practices for femininity. One example reads: “I like makeup & feeling pretty & being complimented” (Dec. 3). Concurring, a second example states, "I make my own decisions without being pressured! I enjoy makeup and like feeling pretty! Also I don’t need to be superior to men!" (Sept. 24). By marking her choice and love of consumer practices, particularly makeup and the enjoyment of feeling pretty, she both assumes that feminism denies the ability to wear makeup while criticizing that assumption. The December 3rd placard above describes men as the external motivating force for her to wear makeup to feel pretty and be complimented. The September 24th woman diverges, instead uses her own enjoyment as justification for its use, describing herself as autonomous and making it clear that makeup is a decision she chooses for her own enjoyment by stating that "I make my own decisions."

When women who contribute to WAF rely on narratives that affirm particular consumptive practices, it relies on assumptions regarding what qualifies as masculine and feminine behaviors. Utilizing makeup, as in the above example, ties femininity to the practice of wearing makeup, a practice applauded by the women mentioned. Consider a second example: "…girls in my family did the work same as boys were expected to. I can run a chainsaw and outwork 90% of the men on my crew and still wear makeup and feel feminine" (Sept. 27). In this case makeup is again connected with femininity. Equality becomes defined as successfully reached when a woman can master tasks traditionally understood as masculine and perform external femininity. This woman doesn't need feminism because she can both be feminine through makeup use and conquer masculine practices such as working a chainsaw and outworking men.
She similarly uses her upbringing to demonstrate the evolution of culture, where women and girls can now be, at times, masculine. "Girls in my family did the work same as boys were expected to," she notes. Her proclamation may appear like an example of progressive familial relationships where girls are encouraged to perform outside of masculine and feminine categories. However, the onus to disrupt gender performances is placed on the girls in her family to learn the work boys did. There is no mention that the men and boys in her family were encouraged to also learn stereotypically feminine tasks. Finally, in her own admission, she can outwork 90% of the men on her crew, a percentage marker that still subtly creates a 10% category of men who can run a chainsaw more effectively, communicating that even if women can do most of what men can do, there is still a percentage of men that can accomplish the task better.

In addition to defining feminine and masculine roles in the name of self-love, this placard and others listed above are couched in a strategic rhetoric of individualism. Jess Butler discusses that this discourse “draws on a vocabulary of individual choice and empowerment, offering these to young women as substitutes for more radical feminist political activity” (43). The September 24th placard described earlier in this section demonstrates this individualism by claiming that "I make my own decisions." Women are not encouraged to look beyond their individual social surroundings to larger cultural contexts and potential injustices that affect a diversity of women. Instead, women are only encouraged to determine their individual happiness in relation to being a woman. Feminism becomes radical, as Jess Butler points out, when women are asked to understand those individual choices in relationship to larger systems. Love becomes only an individual concern rather than an affect that all women should have access to.
Beyond love of being a woman and feminine practices, rhetoric of individualism emerges elsewhere in WAF. Interested in their individual voices, one WAF photo reads, “I can fight my own battles” (July 20), a second arguing “I take responsibility for my own actions” (Nov. 5). For these women, the notion of an individual identity outweighs a collective movement toward equality. In other words, I read WAF as implicitly critical of collective and community building tactics, instead interested in individual celebrations of success and/or hard work. The above examples reject an imposed notion of oppression or patriarchy and situate success solely in individual choices.

WAF builds on the individualism of success by discussing how women can have it all and love themselves for it. One placard reads, “I’m proof that I can have a successful career and be a loving and supporting wife and mother” (July 21). Using her own success as evidence, this placard assumes that because she reached success (or her definition of it), everyone can do it. She also addresses her familial relationships, noting that she has not sacrificed her home life because of her career; rather, she continues to be a "loving and supportive wife and mother." This concession creates a narrative where women can have both a career they love and a home life they love, writing feminism out of the story line. In this narrative, why would feminism be needed if you can do it all and love yourself in the process?

This have-it-all narrative emerges in a second example. It reads, "I don’t need feminism seeing how I’m an ambitious, hard working, confident person living in the 21st century America. Why fight for rights I already have?" (Sept. 14). By asking, "why fight for rights I already have?" this author adopts a belief that equity between genders exists in the status quo. The individual qualities that she lists—ambitious, hard working, and confident—are listed as evidence of status quo rights that women can access or, at the very least, are listed as traits that
women now can express. Also, these qualities are upheld as markers of a good 21st century woman, placing women in a double bind. Either 1) women are now ambitious and confident, making feminism obsolete, or 2) if an individual woman does not possess those qualities, it's their own fault because all women have access to the same rights.

Empowerment and self-love become validated narratives through individualism. Women utilize the WAF online forum to reject feminism by pointing noting that "I wear what I want . . . I do what I want! It's my life" (Aug. 6). Womanhood and self-love function to stifle feminism by framing status quo gender relations as equal or, at the very least, as better than previous generations. Because women can perform masculine tasks, have a career, and confidently wear makeup, other feminist concerns are placed by the wayside.

This section has highlighted the presence of postfeminist sensibilities entrenched in discourses of self-love. WAF frames feminism as over and equality reached, arguing that femininity as a bodily practice must be respected, deploying choice and individualist rhetoric, all thematically central to rhetorics of self-love that sustain subtle backlash ideologies against feminism. In the following section, I extend this conversation to analyze the presence of discourses that rely on heterosexual love as proof that feminism is outdated.

**Heterosexual Happiness**

Backlash strategies emerge in complex and contradictory ways. Thus far in this chapter, I have discussed the role that rhetorics of self-love, embedded in a postfeminist sensibility, work to resist feminism by telling women that they are now free to love themselves, making feminism meaningless. In this section, I examine how discourses of love function as a mechanism of anti-feminism by creating a narrative based on heterosexual utopianism and happiness. In other words, this section analyzes trends in WAF that communicate to women that men now treat them
equitably in relationships and to trust that heterosexual love is genuine and authentic. At its core, these discourses cast doubt on feminist arguments that structural and institutional power dynamics exist that affect heterosexual dynamics. They tell the reader, "Your man would never hurt you. I know he loves you, and feminists just don't get it."

On face, the presence of discourses that purport a loving, dependent, heterosexual relationship may seem at odds with the individualization and self-love that I have discussed above. However, WAF placards demonstrate evidence to the contrary. While some WAF placards rely on postfeminist narrations of their own self-love, many also incorporate heterosexual love-based discourse, implying that women can have it all, including a man. WAF placards describe men as an evolved species, able to respect women's need for independence and empowerment. I examine these discourses in more depth below, focusing on the implications for backlash ideology.

Narratives that rely on romantic love have long defined cultural perceptions of gender. Julia Wood reminds us that within U.S. American cultures, stories that conclude with a man rescuing the damsel in distress and riding off into the sunset are continuous (242). And, indeed, feminists have criticized the structure of such narratives and its continuation of sexist practices (see Gilligan 1982; Wood 2001). The idea that men save women solidifies power dynamics and gender stereotypes that, oftentimes, impede women's successes and reduce equality. WAF, though, relies on narrations of heterosexual love that are more subtle, re-writing sexist fairytales to disprove the need for continued feminist critique, using their own experiences as evidence that men have changed.

General declarations of love for husbands and partners regularly arose in WAF. For example, "I love my man, he gives me happiness and love. I don't need feminism" (Aug. 28). A
second states, "He rocks socks and I’m pretty sure he is not the only 'he' who does" (Aug. 6). The former placard uses happiness and love as the author’s value markers. If she has love and happiness, she has no need for feminism. Sherryl Vint argues that these discourses of love imply "that even in the past feminism must have been mistaken or exaggerated problems because love is real, natural, and unchanging, preventing us from ever imagining a world in which most men treated women badly" (163). Evidence of Vint's quotation is seen in the above placards when women identify their husbands as the location of happiness and as someone who "rocks socks."

Relying on love presumes that such affection precludes the possibility for unhealthy or patriarchal dynamics. It assumes that the women authors should not only be trusted in their declarations of love, but that declarations were reached under neutral and natural circumstances. Love and happiness are communicated as mutually exclusive from patriarchy or sexism: if you are in a loving relationship with a great man, no sexism exists in that relationship. Or, at the very least, these declarations communicate that if you're a woman in a heterosexual relationship that lacks love and happiness, it is your own fault and you should find a different man. Feminism becomes collapsed into interpersonal heterosexual relationship dynamics thereby ignoring larger historical and systemic concerns about gender.

Role-reversal emerges as one specific area where love emerges as justification for anti-feminism. Consider an example. "My husband is my equal. I may cook, but he cleans. We’re both breadwinners, but fight about who will be the lucky one to stay home and raise our kids. We take each other’s dreams and work as a team to realize them AND because, to me, no one else in the world is a better person than my husband" (Aug 3, see fig. 4.2). Because her husband will clean and stay home to raise their children, acting as a team member, the author of this placard contends that they have reached equality in their relationship. Her husband is used as positive
proof that men have evolved because he, in a few instances listed, refuses to draw on cultural privileges afforded to him. Put differently, he is used as evidence that true equality in relationships can be reached because he cleans, a stereotypically feminine task assumed by a wife and/or mother. She goes so far as to assert that no better person exists because of these behaviors.

Men are not alone in reversing roles; women as breadwinners are noted throughout WAF. An August placard reads, "I don't need feminism because my husband and I respect each other and I'm the BREADWINNER." Such narrations assume that proof of equality lies in men's behavior, in allowing women to do tasks otherwise precluded. The woman who authored the above placard uses her status as breadwinner as evidence of why she deserves respect within her relationship.

Drawing on examples that rely on role reversal communicates that achieving equality between genders only requires women doing men things and men doing women things. It
upholds a binaristic view of gender and lacks a nuanced view of masculine and feminine behaviors and criticisms that point out the socially constructed nature of gender in and of itself. In addition, these placards communicate to readers that 1) love requires you to perform some degree of role reversal, and 2) loving relationships require an acceptance of such performance.

While the presence of role reversal is one example, heterosexual relationships are deployed in a second yet disparate fashion, whereby women love their partners for respecting their choice to be more traditional wives and mothers. One placard reads:

I love my partner and we respect each other. I am not a victim. I believe in men’s rights. I enjoy being a woman who gets a man to do “manly” jobs for me. I have never been discriminated against just because I am female you have to earn things not expect things to happen for you. I am responsible for the choices I make. I love my man so much I will do anything for him including all the cooking, cleaning, and looking after the kids because I want to and he appreciates all that I do as I appreciate all he does for me. (Aug. 5)

In this example, love becomes defined by what this woman will do for her partner, namely the cooking, cleaning, and childcare. She finds enjoyment in being a woman when she has men do "manly" jobs for her. A partial re-suturing of traditional femininity to mothering, she begins her statement with "I love my partner and we respect each other," working to re-define traditional roles in a 21st century context, communicating that, despite her more traditional role, respect is still present.

A deeper analysis is needed regarding the role that traditional femininity plays in a loving heterosexual relationship. By stating that she loves her man so much that she would do anything for him, she communicates that women base love on self-sacrifice and, notably, women’s
sacrifices. Performing tasks—in this case, more traditionally defined feminine tasks—become the markers and proof that love exists within the relationship. There are strings attached to love and those strings are labor in the form of cleaning and cooking.

A second placard also draws on traditional femininity to define a loving relationship. It reads: "I willingly quit my job and put my dreams of becoming a mechanic on hold to be a housewife/stay at home mom. *gasp* My husband loves and respects me. I serve him and our children!" (July 30). The *gasp* is an important rhetorical move. By predicting that people would gasp after she discloses her shift from a working woman to being a stay-at-home mom, the woman reveals her own assumptions that feminists would not approve of this shift. She is responding to a claim that she understands is central to feminism: women are not fulfilled being stay-at-home mothers and wives. Absent the truth of this claim, she subtly works to re-define her own role as a mother and wife, one she claims her husband respects and loves.

These narrations of heterosexual love and happiness may differ from traditional fairytales where men save the women, but these placards still communicate that heterosexual happiness was or should be the ultimate outcome of feminist concerns. By using a heterosexual relationship as proof that women no longer need feminism, these placards name love as the benchmark, the method to determine the validity of feminism in the status quo. If women are in loving heterosexual relationships, there remains no perceived reason for feminism to continue.

In addition, the placards privilege heterosexual relationships. Using heterosexual love to dismiss concerns about patriarchy, sexism, and the treatment of women erases gender relationships that are not based on men and women. It functionally invalidates feminists’ concerns beyond sex and pro-creation, re-centering the heterosexual experience as the most valid and trusted. The emergence of different kinds of feminism—particularly those interested in
structural, economic, and institutional concerns—become void because individual women's happiness and love trump larger power dynamics.

Finally, these narratives imply that men have done what feminists have asked; men now respect women and give women choices to decide if working in or out of the home is in their best interest. These evolved men should no longer be burdened with feminism. And, even if they haven't evolved, these individual experiences written in the WAF placards prove that love and happiness can still be reached, making feminism doubly unnecessary. Vint summarizes, noting how these rhetorics "make the solution to women’s problems finding the 'right' man, one who will refuse to act on the ways culture privileges his gender, rather than changing societal gender roles or other systemic discriminations" (162). Thus, women are placed in a double bind, either 1) you have found love and respect in a heterosexual relationship, or 2) WAF participants prove its possible, making your absent love life your own choice.

In this section, I have analyzed the rhetorics of heterosexual love. Relying on heterosexual love to measure successes of feminism functions as part of new backlash strategies by making partnerships the primary concern for equality. Individual women's narratives that describe love based in heterosexual fantasies and romance locate power and agency within heterosexual norms, repetitively connecting women's equality with a limited view of pleasure. Below, I provide a more in-depth discussion of the implications that rhetorics of postfeminist love have for feminists.

**Implications**

Love as a mechanism of backlash has several implications. I, in no way, want to imply a singular understanding of feminism's relation to love or purport one view of relationships. Rather, this section works to tease out the potential epistemological and ontological implications
for future feminist work, extending the analysis above to re-think the relationship between rhetorics of love—both self and interpersonal—and feminism, particularly given the use of postfeminist sensibilities that create backlash. To accomplish this task, I begin with epistemological pitfalls and implications for feminism.

**Epistemological Pitfalls**

As I detailed in Chapter 3, backlash strategies have larger epistemological and ontological pitfalls. The communicative acts and narrations created by WAF placards—as a new and repetitious continuation of larger cultural backlash—question who feminists are and what they stand for. In this short section, I detail two epistemological pitfalls created through rhetorics of love and postfeminism.

First, backlash strategies entrenched in love create caricatures of feminism, imaged versions of feminism that are absurd and promptly ridiculed, undercutting the believability of feminists truth claims and criticisms (Groothuis 207). The caricatured feminist becomes the cartoon in the Sunday newspaper, just absurd enough to be funny through its lightly veiled narrative of believability. Groothuis summarizes how “Feminists are frequently caricatured by conservatives as angry-unshaven, loudmouthed, elitist, man-hating, and militant—fearsome and despicable creatures, to be sure. Rather than debating actual feminist ideas, traditionalists often set up a straw woman—loosely based on impressions from the media” (207-8). As Groothuis’ quotation demonstrates, caricatures draw on cultural exaggerations of feminist ideals, highly embedded in stereotypes, using those exaggerations to mock feminism generally.

Groothuis only notes caricatures that utilize exaggerated fear tactics to describe feminism. Postfeminist love also relies on caricatures. Consider the following example: "I don’t need naked women to protest against my ‘oppression’! I am happily and perfectly free” (Aug.
25). Feminists become absurd through their perceived presentation, being naked. This caricature becomes successful by offering no option for the reader except a rejection of feminism because of its absurd characterization. Feminists’ epistemological concerns are collapsed and erased by a claim that feminists protest oppression without clothing, forcing readers to ask themselves if naked protesting is of interest to them. They are asked if they can identify with such a practice. If not, they are more likely to agree with the anti-feminist placard author who uses the caricature of absurdity to justify the claim of happiness and freedom. In essence, this placard communicates, “Feminists are so absurd that they’ll dress naked to fight for freedoms that we already have!”

Second, feminism becomes placed at odds with individual women speaking from their experiences, from their own epistemic truth; the credibility of a feminist voice becomes diminished. Because WAF participants overwhelmingly utilize their own testimonials as reasons to reject feminism, feminism itself appears to lack any epistemic truth based in real women’s experiences. Love becomes a strategy to demonstrate the absurdity of feminist claims, foreclosing the possibility for status quo criticisms of unequal institutions. The suturing of anti-feminism to self and heterosexual love subtly de-bunks any feminist arguments reliant on systemic oppression as an epistemological truth. Vint notes, “New backlash compromises feminism’s ability to critique economic and other gender divisions that still disadvantage women” (162). These anti-feminists respond to feminist epistemological arguments that oppression is systemic, emerging from and evident in institutions, by claiming that individual women’s happiness proves otherwise. Statistical evidence that demonstrates unequal pay between genders, the prevalence of domestic violence, or the reduction of funds for women’s health are suspect and less credible than the first person narrations in WAF that seemingly disprove such statistical certainty.
Statistical concerns that may assist feminists in proving larger systemic oppressions become secondary concerns to first person narrations, placing feminists in a difficult position: either speak in the first person, drawing on personal experience, or be quiet. When experiential knowledge is privileged—knowledge that I highly value from a feminist standpoint perspective—it has the potential to communicate that only women who have experiences of violence can speak on violence. For example, to retort the rhetorical strategies of love based in lived knowledge partially requires women to speak from experiences of heterosexual unhappiness or even abuse. Women's voices and experiences are important and necessary to participate in the currency of culture; however, there must be close examination of how those experiential narrations affect the credibility of women not comfortable with such declarations.

**Ontological Pitfalls**

Backlash also affects ontological understandings of feminism and ontological truths that feminists must respond to. Not only do claims that women have arrived at self-love and romantic love diminish the epistemological depth of feminism, it also creates ontological assumptions about gender and feminists. In this short section, I discuss how love as a backlash strategy boxes feminism into a movement of anti-love.

First, rhetorics of heterosexual love create an ontological assumption of heterosexuality. For example, one placard reads "Men and women are suppose to be together, not against each other. I love men" (Aug. 16). Women are positioned in relation to heterosexuality and, specifically, in relation to men. This ontological certainty of heterosexuality places feminists in a difficult position, having to criticize the dynamics of heterosexual love by arguing that sexism can emerge within a relationship, reminding women that heterosexual love is not a precursor to love and happiness, exposing the hegemony of heterosexuality, or a combination of these
concerns. When heterosexual love is tied to ontology, concerns about who you are supposed to be as a woman, these criticisms can be easily ignored or dismissed.

Second, feminists are framed as inherently anti-love, refusing to acknowledge the incremental successes of women and the self-love women now exhibit. Feminists fall into an ontological pitfall of false choice: readers are asked to choose between an anti-feminism embedded in loving relationships or a feminism that rejects love. As a September 13th post reads, “Feminism is all negative!” This placard is an overt example of how feminists become communicatively connected with negativity, unable to accept love and loving relationships. From a communication perspective, the continuous repetition that connects anti-feminist women with happiness and love also subtly connects feminists with the opposite, a non-love.

Similarly, the September declaration that feminism is negative shows the relationship between the rhetorics of fear and love. The presumed negativity surrounding feminism is placed at odds with a commitment to individual love from anti-feminists. Love, then, does not replace fear of feminism or negative stereotypes associated to feminism; rather, fear and love function as complementary. Ontologically, feminists are constructed as negative, angry women while anti-feminist women become supplanted through love.

Finally, the love emergent within WAF creates an ontology of singularity where women learn to view themselves and their identities as disparate and disconnected from other women and social groups. I have discussed earlier in this chapter that self-love emerges as examples of stark individualism, tying one’s being to individual acts. Women in WAF use heterosexual love to demonstrate their ability for interpersonal connection, privileging their individual happiness. Love becomes an internal and individual concern tied to a woman's feeling of self-empowerment.
and heterosexuality rather than a larger cultural concern surrounding the state of women in various cultural locales.

I have identified key epistemological and ontological implications for my analysis of love within WAF. These are but a few potential concerns for feminists and cultural workers to consider when deploying, responding to, or reading claims that rhetorically utilize love. I conclude this chapter below with a summary and suggestions for future research.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have investigated the rhetorical themes of self-love and heterosexual happiness. Postfeminism functions as the backdrop to narratives of love; declarations of love are pre-empted with claims that feminism is over and unnecessary. Jess Butler reminds us that postfeminism is categorized by discursive references to the following: that equality has been reached, femininity as a celebrated bodily quality, and individualism and individual choice are central to women’s empowerment (44). WAF houses each of these components in tandem with loving rhetoric. True and authentic women who have found love through their individual choices narrate their celebration of women’s empowerment—a trait unattributed to feminism.

WAF functions as one articulation of Sherryl Vint’s new backlash—a subtle backlash that challenges feminism by recognizing that, despite its historic prominence, feminism has lost usefulness for women today. Through WAF, I have supported Vint’s conclusions that new backlash texts are, in fact, examples of backlash. Put differently, I agree with Vint and others that postfeminism and individual narratives of love have changed cultural scripts of feminism. Women are told that feminism is overrated and, as a narrative, has become too outdated for a modern and sophisticated woman, capable of making her own decisions.
Certainly, postfeminist and new backlash texts complicate cultural comprehension of feminism. I want to reiterate an important aspect of backlash, as I have theorized it: backlash texts are collective in nature, not individual occurrences of anti-feminist communication. As a reader, labeling women’s narratives of self-love as backlash may seem oxymoronic; however, when theorized through Vint’s findings that love has become a mechanism to demonstrate the unoriginality of feminism, the depth and collectivity of these narratives creates regimes of backlash, altering commentary on feminism from a strict anti-feminist standpoint. As a theme, the placards identified in this chapter create a collective postfeminist backlash text.

Interestingly, postfeminism has been contextualized as an explicit component of new media. Dubrofsky and Wood argue, “postfeminism implies that women self-representing online is empowering and gives them agency over their identity-making” (283). The more a woman posts or discloses on surveillances technologies—like Facebook— the more she is seen as real (283). Analyzing women on WAF becomes doubly complicated as they disclose their own orientation(s) toward gender while using a technological medium that defines women as more authentic through such disclosure. How, then, can/should feminists engages with WAF without denying experiences of empowerment granted to women through the very act of posting? Before I engage with this question, in Chapter 5, I conclude my in-depth analysis of WAF by rhetorically criticizing co-option within WAF.
CHAPTER 5
THE SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE DEBATE: A NUANCED VIEW OF ANTI-FEMINIST CO-OPTION

The co-option of feminism remains a heavily theorized topic, both in and out of academic circles. Berit von der Lippe and Tarja Väyrynen contextualize the process of co-option, noting how "Co-optation is a common discursive, rhetorical and linguistic practice that absorbs and neutralizes the meanings of the original concepts to fit into the prevailing political priorities" (20). As backlash, feminism becomes absorbed, re-defined, and deployed beyond its original intention, a subtle dismantling of feminism through repetitively re-defining the terms with slight contextual changes. Using feminism for anti-feminist laws, programs, and policies have increased or, at the very least, have begun altering the cultural discourses and understandings of feminism.

In this chapter, I locate co-option of feminism within WAF. I explore how two historic feminist struggles—the question of sameness and difference—are present in WAF as mechanisms to dismantle feminism. In other words, WAF has adopted historically feminist rhetoric, slightly altering the context to uphold anti-feminist narratives. This chapter is interested, then, in asking: how have these historically feminist struggles been altered to define anti-feminism? How can we understand the deployment of contradictory feminist ideas in anti-feminist circles? Does co-option of feminist rhetoric qualify as backlash?

Co-opting feminism oftentimes occurs by conservative politicians or corporate organizations to gain support for interventionist policies or business practices that may fall out of line with traditional feminisms. Feminism becomes contextualized as solely economic, where feminists have questioned how neoliberal and capitalist policies affect women and men around
the world (Eisenstein 2009; Fraser 2009; Allsopp 2012) asking, how has equality and women’s access to the workforce been used to justify exploitation? Feminists have similarly criticized conservative leaders, commonly women, who restrict women’s access to reproductive health technologies yet may tout women’s equality. For example, Sarah Palin’s and Michelle Bachmann’s use of conservative feminism has been criticized as an oxymoron (Bennett qtd. in Loke et al.). Many of these studies ask: how has the neoliberal order utilized feminist rhetoric? How has feminism aided conservative political agendas?

In many of these conservative narratives, co-option functions through a subtle re-appropriation of feminism without overt anti-feminist statements. Feminism becomes intertwined within corporate agenda items that preach inclusion; conservative political women are applauded as staples of women’s successes, to give two examples. Hester Eisenstein purports that many second-wave feminist struggles have been filtered into a hegemonic feminism through corporate culture’s agreement that women are necessary to economic life and financial success (413-4). Rhetorics of individualization and autonomy structure hegemonic feminism by telling women to participate in the global economic marketplace, creating an identity separate from the traditional wife and mother (Eisenstein 417). For Eisenstein, globalization has extended Western feminisms’ reach, and co-option of economic feminist principles are adapted for unintended purposes. Co-option functions by telling women on a global scale how to act, absorbing women into, for Eisenstein, a corrupt capitalist market. Thus, while access to feminisms may have increased globally, Gill and Scharff contend that globalization has had disproportionality negative effects on women (xiv).

Indeed, “Women Against Feminism” utilizes discourses of hegemonic feminism that Eisenstein outlines—the rhetoric of individualization and autonomy—to disavow current
feminist practices. Chapter 4 highlighted the prevalence of individualizing WAF rhetoric, where women narrated their self-empowerment and success as women who have it all and love life in the process. One post reads, “I don’t need others to fight my battles for me…I believe in earning things for myself…I believe in proving I am worthy of what I want, and not expecting them to be handed to me because I feel entitled” (July 28). This placard demonstrates individualizing rhetoric, where “I believe in earning things for myself” makes women responsible for their own earnings, earnings gained through individual proof and hard work. This woman wants to be handed nothing and wants no one to fight her battles—economic or otherwise. For Eisenstein, privileging individual actions over collective struggles benefits exploitive economic policies by telling women that their success is based on individual economic benchmarks. Past feminist work that pointed to the exclusion of women from the workforce as proof of oppressive structural tendencies becomes co-opted and used to encourage women to participate in the neoliberal order.

In this chapter, I extend Eisenstein’s hegemonic feminism, locating its presence in WAF’s co-option of historic feminist ideologies. Given WAF’s general purpose is to create an online space and forum for women to disavow feminism rather than subtly incorporate feminism for economic gain, a slightly nuanced co-option strategy emerged during coding. In Chapter 2, I operationalized backlash as embedded in perceptive communicative patterns. Those different perceptive standpoints become, for me, the most clear in this chapter as women within WAF struggle to define themselves as the same or different from men, claims that co-opt feminist ideology for anti-feminist means. Although all women who participate may diverge from feminism, this chapter explores a major historically salient ideological struggle for feminists: are all genders the same or are all people different? How might anti-feminists deploying this rhetoric
affect feminism? This chapter proceeds as follows: 1) I provide an overview of the sameness-difference debate within feminism to give readers an idea of what discourses have been co-opted by WAF; 2) I rhetorically analyze the emergence of sameness and difference within WAF, drawing historical feminist parallels; 3) I make explicit connections between WAF’s use of sameness and difference and co-option, contextualizing those findings as backlash; 4) I conclude with final thoughts and future directions for research.

**Sameness and Difference**

Claims of co-option require evidence of originality. In other words, what language or discourse has been adjusted or altered for a different use? What was the original use from which that difference occurred? For example, Eisenstein claims that feminists’ arguments for equal access to the workplace have been co-opted to encourage capitalist regimes and state actors have co-opted feminist claims for equality by arguing that women in Afghanistan are oppressed, justifying U.S. American interventionist policies. I will not claim that feminist philosophical ideas or policy requests are always themselves original or entirely unique; rather, I will contend that many feminists have historically relied on sameness and/or difference. In this section, I map out the historical relationship between feminism and questions of sameness and difference to provide a landscape of what rhetorics have been co-opted by WAF.

Laura Portwood-Stacer, arguing for future directions in feminist new media research, writes, “we can and should relate the questions we are asking now to the foundational ones” (299). Questions of sameness and difference undergird centuries of feminist literature and, political in nature, inform vastly different epistemological and ontological questions of gender. Rosemarie Tong describes the central question in the sameness-difference debate: “is gender equality best achieved by stressing women’s oneness as a gender or their diversity as individuals,
the similarities between women and men or the differences between them?” (ch. 1). If, for example, men and women are understood as the same, women should be given access to the same opportunities as men and women should be treated the same as men. However, respecting the differences between men and women means a woman’s way of knowing is just as important as a man’s. Women don’t need to be elevated to masculine standards, and society should reposition knowledge to respect the different ways women orient to the world.

Equality becomes a central end goal, where sameness and difference become the disputed mechanisms for accomplishment. Used to support equality initiatives, sameness and difference have been intertwined with feminist attempts to dismantle patriarchal control. For sameness feminists—largely identified as liberal feminists in the literature—arguing that women and men are the same was highly strategic. The argument unfolds like this: “Premise 1: If A and B are the same in the relevant respects, then A and B should be treated the same. Premise 2: Women and men are the same in the relevant respects. Conclusion: Women and men should be treated the same” (Curtis, para. 2). In general, understanding men and women as the same guarantees that women should be given equal rights to men, or so sameness feminists contended.

Equality also functions within difference feminism, but difference feminists argue that women and men are different and should be treated as such. Partially motivated by emergent evidence that women in the workforce were exerting extra labor for household upkeep compared to men, difference feminists concluded that women are different and face other structural uncertainties than men (Liff and Wajcman 302). Maternity leave, for example, arose as an agenda based on difference: women with uteruses experience childbirth and should be given reasonable workplace accommodations given that difference. Accommodations and special treatment become necessary to reach equality.
Within difference feminism, biological and social constructionists clash. Rosalind Rosenberg, for example, contends that men and women are different based on psychological make-up, an argument that assumes men and women have inherent biological differences (Liff and Wajcman 303). Claims that women are more nurturing, more connected with nature, and more inherently caring also rely on biological certainty, connecting sex with gender performance. Divergent, social constructionist feminists point to institutions as creating a privileged framework for men and masculine qualities (see Littleton). They argue that biases exist because of social conditioning. Reaching equality by understanding, respecting, and responding to difference are central to difference feminists, despite coming to difference differently.

Thematically, the WAF posts embody this historic debate. Though many feminists have circumvented, ignored, or offered alternatives to perspectives of sameness and difference, WAF has now adopted the ideological contradiction to argue that feminists have not accomplished equality correctly. WAF placards, for example, argue that women and men are the same, targeting feminists as not respecting the similarities and, instead, man hating or resorting to anger. In contrast, other photos demean feminists for working toward sameness, noting that men and women have inherent differences that should be respected. In follow sections, I track this inherent tension—or contradiction—evident in WAF, highlighting the feminist parallels, analyzing the rhetorical emergence of sameness and difference.

Sameness

Sameness feminists were interested in demonstrating that women had the same physical, intellectual, and moral capacities as men (Tong, ch. 6). In WAF, multiple women uphold an ontology of sameness where all people are born equal—regardless of identity markers or
categories—to justify anti-feminist ideology. This line of reasoning argues that all humans are the same and should be treated equal; thus, feminism is not needed because feminism creates an unnecessary reliance on difference, reasoning that mimics second-wave sameness feminist arguments. Put simply, “We are ALL THE SAME inside” (Nov. 26). For example, one post reads, “I don’t need feminism because I recognize we are all first and foremost human beings who deserve respect for what they can do no matter who you claim to be. If you’re a good person, that’s all I care about” (July 20; see fig. 5.1). Identity categories become secondary considerations to the question of humanness. Because everyone is human, everyone should be treated with dignity and respect. While sameness feminists argued that feminism is needed to guide equitable policies, the placards I analyze in this section diverge from that original intended purpose, instead framing feminism as only difference oriented. Below, I investigate sameness rhetoric in WAF, where feminisms’ perceived reliance on difference is framed as anti-men and anti-biology.

Figure 4.2 “Women Against Feminism.” Facebook. 20 July 2014. Web. 5 June 2015.
Sameness emerged through the general category of humanness; “human” becomes marked as the preferable category to evaluate equality. For example, “I believe in unconditional love and respect for all human beings regardless of their: gender, sexual orientation, religion, social status, race, favorite color, etc” (July 21). I will pinpoint three relevant assumptions present within this placard related to its construction of sameness. First, the statement conflates respect and love with equality, assuming that love for all humans denies the possibility for discriminatory actions based on the very identity categories listed. Love and respect do not deny the existence of unequal power dynamics between, for example, different genders. Therefore, a discussion and examination of inequality becomes displaced for a general preference for individual beliefs in respect for all humans.

Second and in turn, feminism becomes implicitly placed at odds with love and respect. Stating a belief in unconditional love and respect to support anti-feminism presupposes that feminists do not support respectful interactions. The statement implies that focusing on the identity categories listed—gender, sexual orientation, religion, social status, race—discourages love and respect between individuals. Difference, in this case, is framed as a barrier to understanding that all humans should be afforded the same respect, whatever respect may mean.

Third, the placard places “favorite color” to conclude the list of identity categories. In my read, this move downplays the cultural, historical, and structural contexts that define gender, sexual orientation, religion, social status, and race by framing identity as a preference. “I like blue” is placed on parallel fields as “I am a woman.” The identity categories are listed as excessive or extra to humanness; any consideration of identity categories is seen as unnecessary, excessive to the category of human. “Favorite color” becomes as important—or as
unimportant—as any other individual characteristic of a person. All identity categories are collapsed in favor of an inherent sameness within all humans.

The general presence of sameness rhetoric—reliant on a universal humanism—constructs feminism as oppositional to universal equality. WAF placards that utilize sameness assume that believing in gender equality privileges womanhood rather than a universal respect for sameness. To be the same, ontologically, means identity markers must be ignored to respect such sameness. Consider the following placard: “I want my boys to grow up knowing what TRUE equality is” (July 28). Here, sameness is supported in a more subtle fashion. Feminism is implicitly framed as not true equality and, given she references her boys, a deeper reading of the statement reveals the assumption that feminism is not interested in equality for boys and men. The feminist goal of equality between genders, with the history of patriarchy and structural norms that disadvantage women, becomes re-framed as disinterested in men. True equality, for the placard, is defined through sameness, where her boys are realized as the same as, presumably, girls.

Sameness becomes co-opted by WAF to frame feminists as anti-men, as seen in the above placard. While feminists utilized sameness rhetoric to place women on equal grounds as men, attempting to gain access to workplaces that were stereotypically inhabited by non-women, WAF alters this context, charging feminists with teaching and preaching inequality by ignoring men’s humanness, a trait that makes men deserving of the same respect feminists want women to receive. Men become the evidentiary proof that WAF placards utilize to argue that the perceived feminist reliance on difference disadvantages a whole population. Women who accuse feminists of treating men poorly deploy feminist rhetorical strategies of sameness, a strategy used to support equality between genders. For example, “I don’t need feminism, because I am not better than anyone. I am equal to any man or woman. I do not need to be placed above” (Nov. 27). By
stating that she is equal to both men and women, not needing to be placed above anyone, she launches a criticism of feminism: it goes beyond equality to make women superior.

In Chapter 3, I discussed how misandry accusations litter WAF, a tactic that is, I argued, embedded in fear. Parallel to this analysis, deploying misandry doubles as evidence to support claims that feminists lack respect for all people. In other words, feminists treat men poorly, and men should not be treated poorly because all humans should be treated with the same respect. An example reads, “Men are people too. I can fight my own battles. Oppressing men in the name of ‘feminism’ makes as much sense as blacks having slaves who are white to end racism. I have compassion for ALL PEOPLE and don’t care if they’re male, female, or a different culture” (July 20). Again, this placard relies on rhetoric of personhood, as seen through her sentiments that “men are people too.” The oppression of men becomes an inherent characteristic of feminism; a characteristic that the author communicates makes no sense by comparing feminists’ oppression of men to people of color having white slaves. This comparison merits a deeper reading.

Oppressing men is an oxymoron for this author, presumably because feminists are supposed to fight for equality. This assumption becomes clear in the comparison drawn, where ending racism to gain equality is taken too far if whites are made slaves. “Oppressing men in the name of ‘feminism’ makes as much sense as blacks having slaves who are white to end racism,” the July 20th placard states. The analogy implies that, similar to imagining black bodies using white bodies as slaves, feminists have taken inverted equality, instead oppressing men; feminists have erased men’s inherent right to personhood. To suggest feminists oppress men is to suggest a politics of difference has failed and, instead, resulted not in equality but disadvantages toward men.
More overt accusations that feminists don’t uphold the equality practices they preach emerged within WAF. A September post reads, “I refuse to stand alongside women who preach about ‘equality,’ but act like certain standards and/or situations don’t apply to men” (Sept. 14). A second placard reads, “There is no patriarchy! My male friends respect me, so I respect them! I don’t want to discourage MALE rape victims from speaking up! I’m pro equality! Men deserve equal rights, too! I accept the fact that people will have opposing opinions, and I don’t insult them for it!” (July 20). Similarly, A November 27th placard contends, “MEN CAN BE VICTIMS TOO from females *shocker*.” I use these placards to highlight how equality becomes defined through sameness, which includes a preference for rights without criticism. Equality is operationalized through the treatment of men; equality means male victims of rape have the same rights as female victims and standards and situations that women have access to are also given to men. These statements posit that feminists have advocated for the different treatment of men and women, leading to rights that privilege women while ignoring the needs of men.

Sameness statements perpetuate perceptions that feminisms’ claim of patriarchy arises from biological differences between men and women. Put differently, the WAF participants who articulate a politics of sameness are hesitant toward a feminist politic that points to difference between men and women, arguing it demonizes men for being born male. Two examples demonstrate this explicit argument with the first reading, “I don’t need feminism because our sons are not inherent rapists and our daughters are not perpetual victims” (July 28), the second reading, “My brother’s are guilty of being born men. They have been expected, since birth, to apologize for everything bad that has ever happened” (July 20). These placards explicitly criticize biological foundations for difference, framing feminist tactics as punishing men since birth. The use of “inherently” in the first example demonstrates how, for the author, feminism
believes men are essentially oppressors while women are born victimized. Also, by using familial relationships—sons and brothers—these placards dislodge patriarchy from its status as a learned cultural and social phenomenon. Instead, the authors point to men in their lives to disprove perceptions that patriarchy arises from the actions of individual men.

WAF placards continue rejecting claims that biology creates differences between men and women through chromosome references. “People in my life see me as a person and equal, not by my xx chromosomes” (Sept. 30), one woman writes. X chromosomes are the chromosomes that define the sex of a person as female. By stating, “People in my life see me as a person,” she frames those people as somehow able to absorb personhood absent gender. Mirroring claims of colorblindness, this statement discounts how persons are inundated with representations about how and why gender matters, conflating gender with sex. She assumes that interpersonal engagement is possible without taking identity into consideration. This conflation connects feminism to biology, communicating that feminists demand equality based on their chromosomal makeup rather than cultural and social systems that privilege men. For WAF, arguments based on sex and biological makeup inhibit equality for all people because it disallows seeing everyone as the same.

Thus far, I have outlined the emergence of sameness in terms of humanness, with criticisms of misandry and biological differences present in WAF. In addition to these examples, special treatment arises as a specific location of dissonance between sameness and difference ideologies. Should women be given special treatment in the workforce? Sameness ideology rejects special treatment because it relies on creating metrics of difference. Disapproving rhetoric of special treatment arose in WAF, mirroring early feminist criticisms. As one woman notes, “I am an entrepreneur, not a female entrepreneur. I am an individual” (July 28). This declaration
rejects recognition based on gender and, instead, wants success based on standards of sameness. She wants to be known for her entrepreneurial skills in the workplace, not for her gender.

Special treatment becomes identified as evidence that feminists are hypocritical and not interested in true quality. For example, “I want equality, not special privilege!” (March 19). “[Feminists] reject femininity but try to feminize men and demand equality but ask for special treatment,” a July 28th placard stated. Here, the author criticizes the different treatment that feminists require between men and women; special treatment is highlighted as evidence of contradictory feminist ideals. How can feminists believe in equality but demand special treatment? “My worth isn’t determined by what’s in my panties…I don’t deserve anything on a silver platter because I was born with a uterus” (July 27), an additional placard states. The silver platter is presumably special treatment, where women are given more because of their biological makeup, a claim resisted by stating that her “worth isn’t determined by what’s in [her] panties.”

Rather than responding to systemic oppression that has excluded women, feminism is collapsed into giving special treatment based on biological sex.

Historically, sameness feminists similarly rejected a focus on special treatment, contending that it relied on difference. For feminist Wendy Williams, a strategy of difference has paramount consequences, creating “a sex-based standard of justice, thereby ignoring a more fundamentally shared humanity” (qtd. in Capps 68). Sameness encourages a universal understanding of humanity where, although differences exist, focusing on such differences between men and women mean laws that must use sex and gender as evidence. In agreement, early radical feminists also argued “not to reform what [radical feminists] regarded as elitist, capitalist, competitive, individualistic system, but to replace it with an egalitarian” system (Tong, ch. 1). Multiple WAF posts push toward a universal ethic with specific popularity surrounding
egalitarianism as a solution. One woman writes, “Egalitarianism is actually an easier and more effective way of achieving universal equality” (July 20). In agreement, two placards explicitly write, “Egalitarianism is better!” (July 15; July 17). For these (and other photo participants), egalitarianism focuses on universal equality and respect rather than identity politics to garner support.

The question remains: if WAF utilizes feminist arguments of sameness, how can WAF participants justify their anti-feminist viewpoints? This is the power of adopting and co-opting sameness and difference arguments from feminists. The rhetoric of sameness emerged within feminist groups who differed from difference feminists on how to reach equality. Now, WAF has co-opted sameness, reducing all feminism to a movement interested in gaining special treatment based on biological sex and treating men poorly. Feminism becomes collapsed into one world: difference and that difference is described as innately wrong. The rhetoric feminists utilized to broaden women’s participation has become the very rhetoric used to tell feminists that they have done equality wrong.

In this section, I have analyzed the emergence of sameness rhetoric within WAF, rhetoric mirroring early sameness feminist arguments. However, the slippery communicative terrain of WAF does not stop there. While the placards in this section criticize feminists for believing that men and women are different, a second group of women within WAF criticize feminism for precisely the opposite: believing that men and women are the same. Below, I investigate the presence of difference rhetoric and its historical roots in feminism.

Difference

Difference feminists have been historically critical toward strategies of sameness. Irene Gedalof argues how “the privileging of sameness over difference results, not in the production of
universal values, but rather in the effective universalizing of the particular interests and
perspectives of dominant groups” (120). Erasure of differences in favor of a universal woman or
individual has been criticized as a standpoint that ignores individual characteristics, usually
along ethnic and racial lines (Mane). Sameness feminists are accused of erasing different
experiences in favor of a universal “I” that, unfortunately, doesn’t exist. For difference feminists,
in contrast, masculinity and femininity should be valued as different (Tong, ch. 1). Women
shouldn’t be expected to do and be everything a man does and is because women have different
methods of knowing that should be equally valued. Feminist Carole Pateman explained that
differences between men and women may not be so superficial and that, in reality, men and
women have a diversity of interests and experiences based on those differences (206).

WAF utilizes difference rhetoric to criticize a perceived feminism of sameness. Focusing
on biological and social differences, WAF participants claim that respect for difference is a
better way to dismantle patriarchy. In this section, I provide a deep reading of difference rhetoric
within WAF, creating historical parallels between WAF and difference feminists. As one woman
writes, “Men and women are inherently different, and that’s great!” (July 30). The assertion of
difference is followed by a declaration of approval. In my analysis, I ask: what are these
differences? What does difference look like for WAF? Specifically, I uncover how men and
women are contextualized as different based on biology and the physical traits and tasks
attributed to each gender.

Differences between men and women are oftentimes constructed as natural, inherent, or
biologically sound. As I noted in the previous section, WAF’s rhetorical use of sameness
supports a universalizing view of humanness—what difference feminists have criticized as
essentialist. Divergent from this perspective, difference emerged as a theme within WAF, utilizing biology and biological determinism as proof of differences, where men and women have certain innate biological predispositions. One placard relies on this foundation, reading, “I recognize that men and women have different biological and psychological predispositions… and that’s ok!” (July 28). From this WAF perspective, feminists rely on sameness, ignoring inherent dissimilarities between men and women that should be praised—differences created through biological and psychological predispositions.

Rhetorical statements that rely on biology assume a level of bodily naturalness, where the sex of an individual naturally determines their demeanor or physical abilities. The July 28th claim that “men and women have different biological and psychological predispositions” relies on an ontological certainty between a biological male and a man and between a biological female and a woman. Consider a second example: “Men and women are not the same and have different needs . . . Feminists are anti-woman because they want to disregard biology” (Aug. 5). This statement links biology to the different needs of men and women; what I need as a woman originates from my biological foundation as a female. From this perspective, feminists are unable to confront the plight of women and are unable to identify what women and men need because feminists disregard biology.

Relying on biological determinism begs the following question: what are those inherent biological differences that presuppose men and women do and need different things? Motherhood as a biological trait of womanhood is one example, a subject highly debated within difference ideological literature. Difference feminists supported special treatment for pregnancy because they believed, Capps argues, “becoming a mother is a normal and fulfilling experience”

8. See Cressida Heyes’ article “Anti-Essentialism in Practice: Carol Gilligan and Feminist Philosophy” for a deeper investigation and criticism of essentialism.
(67). From a biological perspective, Eisenstein views the pregnant body as the clearest difference between female and male bodies, where “There is no escaping the specificity of the female body when we speak of pregnancy or of the unique capacity of woman as biological reproducer and mother” (qtd. in Capp 219). Because the female body can produce a child, women who produce children should be valued based on that difference. From a difference feminist perspective, motherhood should be respected and if a woman chooses to work outside the home, additional legal protections should be implemented.

Difference based on motherhood arose in WAF, mirroring feminist rhetoric. One woman notes how “I love my husband, I respect him as a man, I believe that men and women are different and we both enjoy the difference… I love being a full time wife and mother, living every single moment of the growth of my daughter, Clara” (July 27). She states that men and women are different, marking her difference through her full-time status as a wife and mother. Difference becomes operationalized through these performances of womanhood, repeatedly coded as mothering. A second writer similarly exclaimed, “I value being a stay at home mom, over slaving for a corporation while neglecting my family” (July 16). This placard presumes that feminism fights for sameness, for women’s equal access to corporate work. Critical of this assumption, the WAF woman infuses value into motherhood. Although these women may hold modern feminists to blame for de-privileging the home, historically, valuing motherhood and the home as a key space for women has been an argument for feminist who value difference.

In addition to motherhood, other physical traits and tasks were identified as women’s labor, defining women as different through certain gendered performances such as cooking. I point to a longer example to tease out how physical tasks are separated as evidence of difference. An August 5th post reads, “I believe in men’s rights. I enjoy being a woman who gets a man to do
‘manly’ jobs for me . . . I love my man so much I will do anything for him including all the cooking, cleaning, and looking after the kids because I want to and he appreciates all that I do as I appreciate all he does for me.” Less biologically certain, difference still continues to undergird her statement by first claiming an appreciation for men performing “manly” jobs on her behalf. While she excludes a specific example of what constitutes manly jobs, her list of tasks gives a reasonable narration of what manly jobs are not, including: cooking, cleaning, and looking after the kids. Indeed, gaining respect seems contingent on performing the correct job based on an individual’s gender. This woman cooks, cleans, and looks after kids because “[she] will do anything for [him]” and, because she performs these tasks, “he appreciates all that [she does].” A mutual respect for differences occurs insofar as women and men perform their respected duties.

For many women in WAF, the differences between genders are marked by more than recognizing difference; they are marked by a shared admiration and, at times, enjoyment regarding those differing roles. One woman notes, “We need each other! (I can’t even bring a fridge up a floor) :)” (July 20), highlighting a mutual appreciation of skills. As a woman, she needs a man to assist in tasks that she alone cannot accomplish, tasks that include bringing a fridge up a floor. Her use of “even” when describing the fridge, i.e. “I can’t even bring a fridge up the floor”, implies a range of other duties she needs men to assist her with. Tong explains that second-wave difference feminists also argued women’s ways of knowing and being were just as good as a man’s (ch. 4). Thus, men and women’s differences are applauded as unique in their own right and, at times, complementary. The placard above speaks to this respect and belief that men and women together create harmonious and complementary energies.

There is a fine line, though, between communicating an appreciation of women’s tasks by creating positive valences for traditional women’s work and creating the illusion of authentic
womanhood. Consider a placard from an anonymous woman who writes, “I love being a true women! I love to cook for my men and clean house. #truewomen” (July 19). On the one hand, her statement implies a celebration of cooking and cleaning as valued experiences for women by noting that these are tasks she loves. On the other hand, the use of #truewoman communicates that authentic womanhood means performing—and perhaps enjoying—cooking and cleaning. The womanly tasks that are marked as different are similarly sutured to authenticity.

Unfortunate consequences arise when personal traits are privileged over others, even in the name of difference. Grossberg assists me by arguing, “the struggle over representations of identity here takes the form of offering one fully constituted, separate and distinct identity in place of another” (89). When women write declarative statements about what constitutes a woman and a man, it creates the illusion of singularity that certain characterizations must be present to constitute a real and authentic man or real and authentic woman. Authentic women are placed at odds with a feminist ethic. By using cooking, cleaning, and the presumption of true womanness as evidence of anti-feminism, WAF communicates that feminists are critical of these actions and certainly do not perform them individually. Although WAF houses women who speak from a variety of different locations, #truewoman centralizes the authentic woman as anti-feminist.

While WAF defined womanhood primarily through mothering and household tasks, physical labor emerged as evidence of how men differ from women. Women posted placards that men aid them with physical tasks that, as women, they could not successfully master alone. A July 21st post read, “how the f*%k am I supposed to open jars and lift heavy things without my husband?” A July 25th placard concurs, stating, “I can’t open jars very well.” These examples—and multiple others—point to and celebrate physical differences, again conceding a certain
biological determinism. The inability to open jars may be a familiar household joke, but the reference is far from simplistic, framing men as possessing a primal desire for physical labor and jar-opening abilities. Men open jars and lift heavy things; these are tasks women cannot and should not attempt.

Men’s ability to open jars speaks to a larger physical theme: men are different from women because they are stronger. An August 6th placard explicitly stated this claim: “Men normally are stronger, so more should be hired for heavy lifting jobs.” Differences between men and women are defined by tasks and typical gender performances. In the above example, an inherent strength is attributed to men and, for this author, that strength means men should have access to work where heavy materials need to be lifted. Giving women equal access to these jobs would be illogical since women, normally, lack the same physicality as men. Men as stronger creates an oppositional stance to viewpoints of sameness by stating clearly that different jobs require different skills and men possess a key skill for lifting heavy things, strength.

So far in this section, I have focused on the differences between men and women constructed through WAF placards, but a secondary form of difference is present: the differences between groups of women. Explicit in execution, one woman writes, “We live in a world where, with factors like geographic location, income, family resources, religious beliefs, cultural beliefs, social status, mental capacity, MOTIVATION, women aren’t even equal to women” (July 20). With hints of intersectionality, this woman is implicitly criticizing feminists’ tendency to group women as the same, noting that women themselves are separated based on economics, culture differences, ability, and more. This placard highlights a common criticism of mainstream

feminism, that feminism commonly erases identities that experience material difference. With these factors in mind, it becomes difficult to imagine a feminism that can accurately account for the plethora of difference—be it race, ability, economic status, citizenship status or others—that women are confronted with. In this emergence of difference ideology, women are expanded beyond gender to include additional central factors to consider. If women are not equal to each other, then how can feminists fight for women’s equality to men?

More specific placards contend that other identity categories separate women from each other; women even not equal to other women. A second woman criticizes modern feminism by arguing that modern feminists “care more about…slut shame [sic]…than the beating rape and murder of countless Muslim women every day” (July 20). This second example points to anti-slut shaming campaigns as a privileged site of feminist contestation while, in her opinion, Muslim women are left out of modern feminists discussions of sexual assault. Thus, an approach toward difference disrupts sameness rhetoric that frames men and women as similar while also rejecting discourses that women themselves are born the same.

The endorsement of difference, however, has pitfalls. WAF endorsements of sameness may risk essentialism, however, the opposite endorsement of difference may create power differentials and conflict over resources. Whatever the case, I have given an in-depth analysis to demonstrate parallels between the sameness-difference rhetoric in WAF’s Facebook campaign and the internal historical clashes within feminism surrounding equality strategies to highlight how difference rhetoric becomes co-opted for anti-feminist means. In the following section, I more explicitly connect sameness and difference to co-option and backlash.
Anti-Feminist Co-option: Implications for Sameness and Difference

In *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Susan Faludi outlines major moments in history where backlash forcefully responded to feminist ideology and demands. In one example, Faludi contends that feminist opponents harnessed Carol Gilligan’s popular feminist work on difference to disparage feminism, adapting Gilligan’s arguments to use against feminism overall (337-8). For Faludi, backlash against feminism can easily subsume, absorb—or what I have called co-opt—feminist rhetoric and communication. In the previous sections, I provided a deep reading of sameness and difference rhetoric, reading WAF’s placards alongside historic feminist sameness and difference debates. Below, I work to make more explicit connections between WAF’s rhetoric and co-option and co-option’s potential as backlash.

To begin, I outline four arguments that highlight how the rhetoric investigated in this chapter functions as co-option. Reading WAF as co-option is, of course, one framework to make sense of WAF and is not meant as an exhaustive or exclusive reading of WAF’s rhetoric on sameness and difference. Sameness and difference as ideological guidelines toward equality are tense at best and, at worst, contradictory. This chapter is meant to investigate how the adoption of these historic feminist rhetorics re-structure feminist narratives to justify anti-feminist ideology.

First, WAF placards function as co-option by deploying feminist rhetoric in a context explicitly created to denounce and diminish the credibility of that very feminism. The context by which these placard emerge remains relevant. WAF exists as an online space for women to post explicit messages in opposition to feminism, where many placards begin with “I don’t need feminism because…” In its most basic form, women who post on WAF are drawing on long-
standing feminist arguments—historically in support of equality between genders—to distance themselves from any semblance of feminist practice. Returning to my opening definition of co-option, Berit von der Lippe and Tarja Väyrynen remind us that context remains central when analyzing the potential presence of co-option. They argue that, often, co-opting rhetorics lack correspondence with the original goals (20). The adoption of feminist language in an explicitly anti-feminist context partially constructs my reading of WAF as co-option because WAF has cut ties with the essence of feminist politics.

Second and connected, sameness and difference become glorified in the placards, ignoring power dynamics that are oftentimes central to feminism. Explaining the historic role that difference played in feminism, Faludi explains how “Most of the feminist scholars set out originally to investigate the origins of men’s and women’s differences, not to glorify them” (336). In WAF, differences are glorified, creating a romanticized understanding of those differences. For example, statements like “I love cooking” and “I love having a man to do manly things” all attach an affective enjoyment to the enactment of those differences. The overwhelming positive valence for these categorizations creates an erasure of feminist histories that interrogate how the appropriation and expectation of difference may hurt both men and women. Thus, the premise of difference becomes co-opted without interrogating what those celebrated differences mean for gender performance, interrogations central to many feminist political agendas.

Third, feminism becomes historically displaced and dismantled through erasure. Feminism becomes collapsed into the box of sameness or difference rather than understood as a complicated matrix of knowledge that has been written, re-written, and lived by men and women for decades. Of course, it’s no surprise that WAF placards fail to give feminists credit for
pioneering arguments that motherhood should be valued or any other combination of issues I have explored in this chapter; however, this failure still functions as co-option because it de-centers sameness and difference with their long-standing historical relevance for feminists, for equal rights, and for women.

Fourth and finally, co-option occurs through muddying equality. As I outlined in the opening pages of this chapter, the feminist debate between sameness and difference arose in response to finding pathways to reach equality. Do we argue that women are the same as men or that men and women are different? However, while sameness and difference emerge as arguments within WAF, equality is discontinued as a relevant concern, where WAF placards oftentimes assert equality has been reached (see Chapter 4). When equality is supported as a valid concern within WAF, it is upheld as a non-feminist goal and gender equality is described as unfounded. This shift away from equality de-contextualizes feminists’ epistemological motivation to debate sameness and difference, instead co-opting feminist rhetoric to create ambiguous dissonance.

Co-option within WAF functions as a strategy of backlash. Sameness and difference become dislodged from feminism, each utilized by WAF to disprove feminism. In this way, feminism looses the ability to respond to any and all arguments because sameness and difference become supplanted as inevitable answers, responding to each other’s ideological claim. In other words, difference rhetoric that emerges in WAF responds to potential feminist claims of sameness; sameness rhetoric that emerges in WAF responds to potential feminist claims of difference. Because sameness and difference function(ed) for feminist dialectically or dichotomously, the co-option within WAF is successful as backlash by answering feminism with contradictory parts of itself.
As a strategy of backlash, WAF’s displacement of feminism is similar to post-feminist discourses that pronounce feminism dead. For example, sameness rhetoric functions by saying, “Ok feminists, you were right. We are all the same. We don’t need to focus on gender anymore.” Privileges still afforded more regularly to men are swept under the rug, dubbed individual problems rather than systemic issues. And, even if some inequality may be present, having love and respect toward each other as humans is framed as a better solution than feminism. One woman confirms, writing: “I have and will continue to succeed in life, because I work for it, not use my gender as a ‘get out of jail free’ card” (July 16). Her individual worth ethic has created success, not her gender. Using gender as a “get out of jail free card” to allow special privileges is rejected. If you work hard, you have equal access to success. From a backlash perspective, feminism is perceived as irrelevant.

Finally, feminism relies on identification and creating lasting, resonant connections with individuals to creating an understanding of how and why feminist politics are culturally relevant. WAF participants have subtly re-structured a key dialectic of feminism; sameness and difference functioned as a meaningful strategy for feminists to historically persuade divergent populations that equality is important. The struggle over sameness and difference highlight the general struggle over feminist importance. As a backlash strategy, then, WAF’s co-option of feminist rhetoric collapses a key mechanism for feminist identification, erasing a plethora of feminist literature.

The debate over sameness and difference is a debate over meaning, a debate central to feminist identity. As a mechanism of backlash, WAF placards subtly re-define the feminist ideological underpinning of sameness and difference and, in turn, sustain dissonance against feminism. In some ways, WAF becomes successful in solidifying dissonance through
communicatively re-framing the very terms feminism used to define itself and successes, a nuanced backlash strategy. In the follow section of this chapter, I summarize my findings and conclude.

**Conclusion**

I conclude the analytic pages of this dissertation on co-option purposefully, to gain a better understanding of backlash as the strategies become more complex, more historically intertwined with feminism, and converged in online spaces. In this chapter, I have analyzed the themes of sameness and difference through the lens of co-option, uncovering the historic parallels between WAF’s rhetorical deployment of sameness and difference and feminism. Noting the importance that sameness and difference have played in feminism, Williams argues that the long-term consequences of each strategy are paramount because each have “everything to do with how, in the long run, we want to define women’s and men’s places and roles in our society” (26). Present in WAF, the stakes for sameness and difference have risen precisely because WAF placards have adapted the meaning of sameness and difference for explicit anti-feminist means. The usefulness of feminism is under fire and the very language used to justify its existence has been eliminated and co-opted by opponents.

My goal in this chapter is to contribute to research on the struggle over feminist meaning. Loke et al. note the difficulty in defining feminism and, more importantly, their scholarship highlights the central role that media play in contributing to cultural understandings of feminism. They write, “A struggle to both define and, more importantly, identify feminism is at the core of that discourse” (3, emphasis in original), particularly through mediated communication. In the case of WAF, much of this chapter has uncovered how placards dis-identify with feminism through sameness and difference. From one perspective, feminism fails because it fails to
account for the sameness between individuals; from another perspective, feminism fails to recognize the inherent differences. The struggle over what constitutes feminism is partially occurring through the struggle over sameness and difference and, in this context, feminism looses either way.

A central question remains: what can feminists do? Are feminists doomed to reactionary stances of “that’s not my feminism”? In the final chapter of this dissertation, I lay out a suggestive roadmap for feminist engagement across social media channels. I encourage more research on how ethical feminist engagement can continue, particularly when anonymity is present. I hope the close reading from this chapter can assist in informing feminists that, perhaps, “Women Against Feminism” houses women who have similar ideological beliefs even if major differences are present.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ENGAGEMENT

This dissertation has theorized 21st century backlash through the social media campaign “Women Against Feminism.” I have attempted to complicate what constitutes backlash, theorizing backlash as a communicative phenomenon based on the perception of change. Victoria Browne assists in my theorizing, contending that “though [backlash] is reactive, backlash is also, crucially, preemptive. It is a response not to overwhelming and disorienting changes that have already happened, but rather to signs that such change might be coming” (907). Understanding backlash as preemptive and perceptive creates a contextual understanding of what backlashers are responding to and, presumably, why. From a communication perspective, examining the rhetorical components of anti-feminist groups means uncovering the constitutive elements of backlash.

For “Women Against Feminism,” a rhetorical analysis of the placard texts has been fruitful to explore what participants understand feminism to mean and the subsequent disadvantages to feminism from different perspectives. Though the parameters of my analysis limited the placard texts to January through December of 2014, WAF continues to remain active, even as I write this conclusion in January of 2016. The sheer breadth of content on WAF placards was motivation for me, and I viewed a study into the thematic components of WAF fruitful in grasping oppositional perceptions of feminism.

With these goals in mind, I conclude this dissertation with suggestions for feminist engagement with anti-feminist groups. I ask how feminists can participate pedagogically with WAF across social media as the medium. Before these suggestions, I first provide a summary of this dissertation, highlighting common arguments within each chapter, weaving in larger
theoretical insights about backlash scholarship. I discuss some difficulties that arose during the study and its potential limitations. I also give suggestions for future research on backlash, feminism and social media forums. I conclude by articulating a theory of difference as suggestive of future feminist engagement with WAF and with online feminist skeptics. I contextualize this suggestive theory of difference by mapping current cyberfeminist approaches before introducing Louise Archer’s framework of fr/agility for creating alliances. My goal is to provide practical insights and suggestions for feminists in and outside academic spaces.

**Summarizing WAF as Fear, Love, and Co-Option**

I began this project as a defensive feminist. I have fiercely defended my feminist commitments and, oftentimes, I have resisted interpretations and experiences of feminism that misaligned with my own. As I have worked through this dissertation process, I have investigated the rhetorical themes present within WAF to gain a better grasp of anti-feminist sentiments, challenging my own reactions to anti-feminism. It is my hope that the preceding chapters have given readers a larger grasp and deeper insight into WAF from a feminist rhetorical standpoint to gain perspective on divergent viewpoints. My feminist standpoint asks, at its inception, to consider the larger implications for gender and women within discursive fields. Below, I track and briefly summarize each chapter before outlining some difficulties that arose during the research process.

**Chapter Summaries**

In Chapter 1, I introduced WAF as an anonymous social site that provides space for women to post testimonials about their anti-feminist beliefs. A campaign that emerged in 2013, WAF’s online presence resulted in thousands of posts and pictures by women on Facebook and alternate social media webpages. WAF’s Facebook group sparked responses from feminists and
non-feminists alike. I situated myself as a feminist rhetorical scholar interested in interrogating how anti-feminism has emerged in online spaces. Methodologically, I first transcribed WAF placards before coding the contents of each text, categorizing each text through themes that organically emerged.

I introduced backlash as my larger theoretical frame in Chapter 2. I presented literature on what constitutes backlash, and signs of backlash’s presence that include rhetorics of fear, love, and co-option. I provided a synopsis of Susan Faludi’s argument that backlash is caused by a fear and loathing of feminism. Sherryl Vint has a second backlash perspective, contending that a new form of backlash has arisen that deploys love and a postfeminist ethic to frame feminism as outdated and unnecessary. Co-opting feminist ideology was the third category of backlash. Co-option means a re-appropriation and de-contextualization of feminist ideas in non-feminist environments. These three categories surfaced as communicative patterns utilized by backlashers against feminism. A larger goal of introducing backlash narratives was to introduce the history of anti-feminist backlash and its prevalence in U.S. American culture, specifically. WAF is both informed by and informs these ongoing cultural narratives.

I concluded Chapter 2 by operationalizing backlash as perceptive and emergent through communication. Through the study of backlash rhetoric, scholars can gain 1) a more fruitful understanding of backlash strategies at play and 2) a clearer picture of what backlashers are responding to. Theorizing WAF through a theoretical frame of communicative backlash means investigating what WAF participants understand feminism to mean and the issues participants take with those perceptions. Thus, I used the three frameworks of backlash—fear, love and co-option—as overarching guidelines to analyze how the textual components of WAF communicated these sentiments and mapped potential implications of each.
I rhetorically analyzed WAF throughout Chapters 3, 4, and 5, and each chapter was organized and thematized through the three larger backlash frameworks of fear, love, and co-option. Fear was the overarching guide for Chapter 3, where I analyzed placards that described a fear of feminism or fear of feminists as the justification for an anti-feminist perspective. This fear emerged through the angry feminist trope and traditionalist rhetoric. For the angry feminist trope, feminists were constructed as angry, mean, and irrational women. In many placards, the anti-feminist women would compare themselves to supposed feminists, where the non-feminist was a normal and rational woman and the feminist was man-hating and scary. As Mansbridge and Shames detail, “Women young and old have hesitated to identify themselves as ‘feminists’ because, both at its introduction into the United States in the early twentieth century and in the second wave of the early 1970s, the word came to connote not only extremism, as many ‘isms’ will do, but also man-hating” (629). In addition to the angry feminist trope, WAF placards also constructed a nostalgic preference for an imagined pre-feminism world. Feminism, the traditionalist rhetoric contends, has ruined familial structures and led to a cultural crisis that devalues marriage and the heterosexual union. The perception of feminists as angry and anti-traditionalists becomes solidified through these backlash texts.

Chapter 4 continues the analysis of WAF from the new backlash perspective by Sherryl Vint. Vint argues that backlash has evolved, where proof of self-love and happy heterosexual relationships becomes deployed as proof that feminism is outdated and no longer needed. Women within WAF use their self-empowerment to subtly dismantle feminist ideology, arguing that they have agential control over situations and relationships. Here, “‘Traditional’ female positions and pastimes are therefore repackaged and reframed as examples of a timeless ‘true’ womanhood and as empowering” (Browne 907). A postfeminist ethic is imbued within these
posts. Feminism is contextualized as irrelevant and unnecessary in the status quo. The rhetoric of love—unlike overt tactics of fear—subtly re-writes feminism as useless to women’s lives in the status quo.

Chapter 5 concludes the rhetorical analysis of WAF by focusing on co-option. I contextualize past feminist debates on sameness and difference before situating that rhetoric as emergent within WAF. Chapter 5 demonstrates the complexity of backlash, where WAF women use feminist rhetoric to support an anti-feminist Facebook group. Categorically, placards were inconsistent, partially reliant on an ideology of sameness to demonstrate how feminism focuses too much on difference. Divergent, a second category uses difference rhetoric to demonstrate how feminism focuses too much on sameness. These debates happened internally for feminists to decide how equality should be reached, and anti-feminists now co-opt this language to disprove feminism altogether.

Ultimately, I found in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 illuminating backlash content that has explanatory potential. Oftentimes, the rhetoric investigated connects and inform other chapter themes. Put differently, fear, love, and co-option do not exist disparately and it was common for overlap between categories to occur. For example, Mansbridge and Shame contend that “intimate relations between men and women, combined with mutual love and mutual desires to live in concord” create conditions where “withdrawal of approval and affection” were “potent weapon in the hands of men” (629). Men can withhold affection to backlash against women’s reliance on feminism. Women may fear that their heterosexual love will diminish if feminist beliefs are exerted because men have a fear of feminism. Feminism as bad for men informs the threat of male backlash, which, in turn, affects women’s beliefs about feminism. It may be better to maintain a loving relationship than identify as a feminist.
The above example highlights backlash as a matrix of rhetorical insights and reiterations of what feminism is and means for women. While at times complicated and contradictory, the analytic chapters led to a few broader conclusions when comparing how fear, love, and co-option emerged as backlash. For example, despite Sherryl Vint’s observation that backlash has evolved beyond an old backlash reliant on fear, rhetoric that frames feminism as a movement to be feared still arose within WAF (162). It is also true that, in addition to a fear of feminism, a postfeminist sensibility focused on loving interpersonal relationships functions to disavow feminism.

One area of difference between previous backlash arguments and WAF is form and medium. The dispersal of backlash has become more diffuse, and women heavily relied on interpersonal insights in my findings. Chapters 3 and 4—chapters investigating fear and love—drew on interpersonal proof most prominently. For example, women in WAF commonly pointed to experiences with self-proclaimed feminists to justify their views of feminists as angry, hysterical, and irrational. In addition, women also used marital narratives as evidentiary support that their husbands are loving partners. These narrative deployments, for Vint, are a function of backlash because they deny structural inequalities that still disproportionately affect women (162). It appears, then, that backlash has become more diffuse, incorporated into online spaces by individual women’s contributions.

Co-option differs slightly in its narrative structure than rhetorics of fear and love. While interpersonal narratives were not excluded from the co-option theme, participants more regularly made statements on the state of humanity and how humans should or should not treat each other, based on a politics of sameness or difference. In addition, co-option as a theme highlights how resonant feminist literature remains for women. After all, many WAF placards used arguments similar to those deployed by feminists. However, the content of feminist writing does not extend
to the name “feminist.” Indeed, despite the vast argumentative differences between the placards within WAF, anti-feminism remains central. The only connective tissue between all women participating is the decision to name themselves women who are against feminism. Backlash no longer emerges strictly from men in conservative positions of power; indeed, the everyday woman is now taking to social media spaces to discuss her beliefs on feminist ideology.

Limitations and Reflections for Future Research

In the above summary, I briefly detailed the contents of each chapter. In this short section, I address difficulties and limitations of this study more generally and I provide suggestions for future research. My goal is to describe the process from my perspective as a feminist researcher and give insights into my general approach. Specifically, I focus on the difficulties surrounding WAF as a site of study, including coding, thematizing, and the social media context.

I will pinpoint four difficulties that arose during the research process. First, WAF as a site of study meant adjusting the research protocol. Certainly, many researchers have and continue to locate artifacts online to analyze; however, WAF’s anonymous contributions meant feedback was lacking. Each individual placard was authored by a different woman; WAF had hundreds of disparate authors contributing anywhere from one sentence to paragraphs of anti-feminist information. I was unable to contact the participants and unable to learn any information about them except what they voluntarily posted on the contributed placards. In addition to the absence of information about the women, I was also unable to gain more contextual information about narratives placed on the placards. For example, if a negative experience between the woman and a feminist was referenced, I was only privy to the context that was disclosed on the placard.
WAF itself as the organizing medium for information limited the information I could garner about the participants and context around their stories.

Second, the placards themselves were, at times, difficult to decipher. Because any woman, in theory, could contribute, there lacked uniformity or grammatical consistency. Punctuation was present on some placards and other times, punctuation was absent. I often had to infer the meaning or punctuation based on best practices or choose to omit the placard from examples because the meaning was too difficult to decipher. One explanation for this difficulty might be language barriers. While English was nowhere announced as the preferred language, an overwhelming amount of participants deferred to English given the WAF site itself is written in English.

A third difficulty arose in organizing the texts. During coding, I categorized sentences and statements based on the rhetorical content. Commonly, one placard would be categorized as one theme only. However, placards would often provide long bullet lists of multiple reasons why that woman was anti-feminist, making singular coding and organizing difficult. One placard, then, might contain rhetorics of fear and love or love and co-option. In theory, I would have preferred to analyze the placards as a whole, but the amount of contributors and anonymous posting means that I often had to separate bullet points from the entire text of the placard.

Fourth and finally, my analysis is limited to the text present on the placards from the perspective of backlash and did not include comments on each picture or additional social media sites that adopted “Women Against Feminism.” I encourage future researchers to consider including dialogues happening throughout the WAF site, including feminist comments on the placards. In addition, the themes that I have identified are just the beginning of potential perspectives to explore within WAF. This dissertation has theorized WAF from a backlash
perspective; a plethora of additional frameworks, methods, and approaches may add new insights for feminist and non-feminist researchers alike.

In addition, I recommend more feminist research into new media scholarship and feminist outreach into nonacademic spaces. As globalization increases, so does new media and social media’s reach. Feminisms’ online presence has the potential to create interconnected narratives that educate men and women globally. Creating and engaging online with a set of best practices can aid younger generations of feminists in understanding what feminism means and what different forms of feminism may mean for them. Ultimately, research into the depths of online communication may be a necessary next step for 21st century feminists—academic and otherwise.

My goal has been to highlight the complexity of rhetorical narratives interwoven under the framework of WAF. Given its explicit anti-feminist purpose and overt anti-feminist naming device, it may be easy at first glance to dismiss the content as irrelevant for feminists or too obvious. As I detailed in Chapter 1, much feminist criticism of WAF has focused on how wrong WAF women are and how ignorant participants must be. Admittedly, that response was my gut reaction, too. However, theorizing WAF as backlash and conducting an in-depth, three chapter analysis reveals the communicative gap between what feminists mean by feminism and what audiences understand feminism to mean. This gap in understanding is, from my perspective, a ripe area for feminists to consider new engagement mechanisms. I wonder, what can we learn from WAF as a social commentary on feminism? How can we learn with and through WAF to encourage dialogic and culturally specific definitions of feminism? I detail how such engagement can occur below.
Alliances Across Difference: Toward a Politics of Fr/agility and Responsibility

Thus far, I have focused on analyzing WAF through a framework of backlash. In this section, I work to answer the question, given this backlash context, what can feminists do to engage with dissonant opinions? This question is central for feminism; Louise Archer argues that “the means by which we might achieve solidarity across difference(s) thus remains a key imperative for feminism” (460). Online activism and web-based political engagement has been added to the feminist repertoire, making social media an important avenue when considering how feminists can achieve solidarity across difference. However, increased web-based access also means access to divergent differences because globalization has led to a more interconnected world. To conclude this dissertation, I map strategies for ethical feminist engagements with WAF, drawing on Louise Archer’s suggestive strategies of fr/agility and responsibility to frame online engagement as a pedagogical opportunity. To accomplish this task, I describe current cyberfeminist practices and conflict resolution strategies before articulating Archer’s suggestions for feminist engagement across difference. I conclude by focusing on a praxis-oriented approach.

Cyberfeminism and Trashing: Feminist Online Engagement Strategies

Feminists have begun taking advantage of online social media sites and networks, recognizing that online media allow individuals to participate in a globalized arena where gender issues can be addressed. Regularly coined “cyberfeminism,” online feminist activism continues to grow. Barnett articulates the historical role of cyberfeminism, outlining that “the term ‘cyberfeminism’ surfaced in the early 1990’s and became associated with feminist online activist work that “was characterized by ideas for changing society, its structures, and perhaps even the human itself in ways that would bolster prospects for women’s equality, relationships to new
technologies and the movements and practices they inspired” (par. 1). Generally, cyberfeminism refers to practices and discourses that explore power relations through information technologies and the non-oppressive possibilities that new media may house (Beller). As a cyberfeminist, I not only use information technologies, social media, and blogs as a mechanism to communicate my feminist sensibilities, I also work to theorize and work through how information technologies affect gender. For me, what is at stake is both the content of WAF and how feminists set a standard and example for future engagement with new media. Unfortunately, feminists do not have a great history when engaging across difference and accepting dissonance online.

Before the increase rise of the Internet, second-wave feminists received criticism for “trashing” other feminists for their viewpoints. Michelle Goldberg describes how “many second-wave feminist groups tore themselves apart by denouncing and ostracizing members who demonstrated too much ambition or presumed to act as leaders” (14). Noting a difference between challenging and trashing, Freeman articulates how trashing criticizes the person while challenging an idea is merely disagreeing with a statement (qtd. in Goldberg 14). Because WAF participants—despite content in support of equality—identify as anti-feminists, feminists themselves have overwhelmingly refused engagement with WAF. As Chapter 1 highlighted, a majority of current feminist engagements with WAF falls in line with trashing, attacking the intelligence of participants rather than acknowledging the complexity of the arguments present. One clear example of this feminist response reads as follow: “Without feminism you wouldn't have any choices to be judged on. You would have no choice at all” (Muffitt, July 20). Writer Amanda Marcotte agrees, stating, “The Women Against Feminism silliness continues to get media coverage, despite the fact that it proves nothing—except that the women on it have no idea what feminism is” (par. 1). Despite Shire’s warning that “mocking Women Against
Feminism validates their argument that they don’t belong in the movement and affirms their belief that feminism has no space for them” (qtd. in B. Butler, par. 7), critics continue to argue that women who participate in WAF just need to Google feminism.

Unfortunately, trashing has begun dictating feminist online activism today, too. In her article entitled “Feminism’s Toxic Twitter Wars,” Michelle Goldberg articulates that even well known cyberfeminists have left online spaces because of harsh engagement by their feminist peers. She writes, “even as online feminism has proved itself a real force for change, many of the most avid digital feminists will tell you that it’s become toxic. Indeed, there’s a nascent genre of essays by people who feel emotionally savaged by their involvement in it—not because of sexist trolls, but because of the slashing righteousness of other feminists” (13). Goldberg’s quotation demonstrates two claims central to my argument. First, the Internet has the potential to function as a necessary and important medium for feminist changes. Second, although change is possible, current feminist engagement with dissonance prohibits such change by shutting down dialogue, leading to gate keeping.

The former argument, that social media have potential for change, demonstrates the pedagogical potential for feminists’ use of new media. Attentive to context (Portwood-Stacer 298), feminists acknowledge that social media exist materially. Marina Levina argues that although virtual, social media uses are still a real experience, outlining how “participation, first and foremost, is a form of materiality” (279). Understanding that new media participation has material consequences means acknowledging that feminist pedagogical possibilities exist through online dialogue. Below, I engage with Goldberg’s stifling claim: feminist engagement across difference has led to trashing, dismissing dissonance altogether.
Fr/agility: Engaging Across Difference

As previously suggested, solidarity and alliance building have been a central component of much feminist ideology. Archer describes how, “during the 1980s, feminist debate and attention shifted on to the power differences and inequalities that exist between women” (459). However, despite difference being central, feminist online activism and engagement has seemingly failed to account for nuanced differences women have in the global arena of new media spaces. From my perspective, difference as a category to explore has lacked progression in feminist scholarship, making engagement, for me, difficult. Acknowledging this difficulty, I want to shift the question to the following: how do oppression and gender influence women differently? WAF participants are no less women because they have experienced dissonance about feminism. To continually re-center the debate around what feminism is, definitionally, and what kind of women are “good” or “bad” forecloses the possibility to ask more nuanced questions about these women’s experiences and what they have to offer toward feminist advancement and social justice movements. Instead, I propose a feminist engagement based on relationality and intersubjective recognition, drawing on Louise Archer’s fr/agility and responsibility as grounding theories to demonstrate the pedagogical potential of engagement with WAF.

A politics of relationality, committed to building alliances across difference, begins with intersubjectivity. As Pensoneau-Conway and Toyosaki assert, “we are constituted through our embodiment, which is a response to others with whom we are intersubjective coemergents. We come to know one another through those embodied relationships” (384). Intersubjectivity suggests that individuals are continuously and constantly situated in relation to others, affecting and being affected by others within communicative contexts. For Schrag, “discourse is for
someone. It is also discourse by someone” (2). Discourse does not exist in a vacuum and instead inflects intersubjective existence. From this perspective—acknowledging the centrality of discourse to intersubjectivity—alliances across differences means reflecting on discursive practices. For example, acknowledging a high volume of WAF posts that foreground previous experiences with feminists as being particularly harsh or negative—what Schrag might call emplottments—may mean feminists need to reflect on how we create dialogue about issues of gender inequality. Such a task would recognize the influence said feminist had on the WAF individual, taking seriously that such an action inflicted harm without blaming the feminist. For a large majority of WAF participants, they have had a truly horrific experience with a feminist and they are, online, narrating those difficulties. As feminists, we should allow those stories to also shape us, taking seriously the culturally diverse circumstances that women have experienced and respond openly and genuinely.

In addition, a shift toward a more relational and intersubjective approach shifts identity away from a stable and fixed idea—surrounding what woman or feminist is, for example—to an understanding that identities are always in process and, at times, contradictory. Rather than approach placards as ontological markers of WAF participants, grounding and defining their identities and being based on one statement, intersubjectivity acknowledges at the forefront that each placard is an incomplete snapshot of a complex woman. This forecloses trashing as an engagement strategy by eliminating the possibility to judge an individual’s intelligence or worth based solely on one proclamation.

With a general orientation of relationality and intersubjectivity in mind, I specifically advocate an adoption of Louise Archer’s fr/agility and responsibility as useful terminology for
feminist engagement across difference and, specifically, for feminist engagement with WAF. Archer describes fr/agility as the following:

I suggest that differences might usefully be conceptualized as ‘fragile’, because the notion of fragility carries within it the inter-related themes of power, risk and care. However, as it stands, the term ‘fragility’ also carries within it problematic notions of weakness and/or passivity. I consequently propose a conceptualization of ‘fr/agility’, which attempts to build in notions of agency and action (conveyed via ‘agility’) — and thus reminds us of both the enduring power (and constant reinvention) of inequalities across difference and of resistances and resiliences.

(462)

Fr/agility conceptualizes identity as simultaneously fragile and agential. For feminist critics of WAF, an adoption of a fr/agility perspective means approaching engagement with the understanding that the identities expressed through WAF are fragile but important, carrying the potential for agency and, in agency, change.

Similarly, an ethic of care is foregrounded when identities are conceptualized as fragile. A focus on care has historical roots in feminist teaching practices (Richards 8). Fr/agility humanizes WAF participants by asking feminist critics to grapple with the following question: if identities or differences are understood not only as unstable but fragile, what pedagogical responsibility do feminists have in caring for those differences? For Archer, fr/agility places responsibility on actors to engage with care and, for me, recognizing new media as a pedagogical space places responsibility on cyberfeminists toward caring engagement.

Because care carries the potential for passivity, Archer introduces responsibility to balance fr/agility. Archer argues that feminists have a responsibility, particularly feminists in the
academy—a privileged location to speak from and about—to create space for different viewpoints, even if that space-making is not popular amongst academic peers (468-9). For me, responsibility includes creating spaces for dissenting opinions about and surrounding feminism. Similarly, this responsibility is bound both in our theoretical commitments to feminism and our lived, everyday, practical interactions. Archer warns that, “it is so often so much easier to engage with differences and injustices in our theoretical work rather than our own personal and professional lives” (468). It’s not enough to care for and toward identities but it’s also the responsibility of feminists to create space for those viewpoints in the academy and in our lived experiences. Responsibility does not mean purely writing about but writing with and an enactment of explicit dialogue.

Responsibility also presupposes action (Archer 469). To argue that feminists have a responsibility to ethically engage across difference is to argue that feminists must continue to act toward such an accomplishment. And, as I will add, social media networks expand the scope of responsibility into online activist spaces. To expand responsibility into online spaces is to assume social media networks are also pedagogical spaces where, despite anonymity, engagement must rely on an ethic of care.

With fr/agility and responsibility in mind, a feminist intersubjective engagement with WAF would mandate the following:

- Acknowledging that WAF participants have valid and useful contributions not only to feminism writ large but also to feminists’ individual understandings of self.
- Feminists have a responsibility for ethical engagement with dissonance.
- Responsibility mandates care for and toward WAF participants, despite spatial and temporal distance across media networks.
- Online spaces are pedagogical spaces where WAF participants are expressing both the fragile and agency-driven components of their identities.
- An unethical engagement—such as trashing—disrupts and disturbs larger feminist movements’ commitment to gender equality and minimizing oppression.

The above list functions as the beginning suggestive layout of feminist intersubjective sensibilities when engaging online. However, to fully demonstrate what these principles could look like, I briefly outline some praxiological commitments below.

*Engagement in Practice: A Brief Suggestion toward Praxis*

My invitation for engagement across difference becomes complicated in the specific context of WAF’s online presence. I invite future and more in-depth research surrounding what, in praxis, engagement may look like. However, as Archer argues, “it is important that the language and terminology that we develop also need to be able to ‘travel’ between theoretical and applied contexts if it is to maximize its potential” (463). With this in mind, in this short section, I suggest a route of indirect engagement—as opposed to direct engagement—for future feminist pedagogical missions.

By direct engagement I mean directly commenting on the Facebook pages, responding to WAF pictures themselves, and/or attempting to communicate with participants. This may read as the most overt method of engagement, but direct comments may lead to hostility, rejection, and belittlement. In fact, my initial strategy of coping with WAF was to comment directly onto the Facebook placards that I was drawn to; however, even when I found my tone and language use supportive, identifying myself as a feminist meant my claims were ignored in favor of outright rejection of my feminist identity. I understand this response. Because the women who participate have been overtly or generally called ignorant and uneducated, I am not surprised responses are
partially defensive. Given my experience both commenting and reading comments, I hesitate to see pedagogical worth in direct engagement without high risk of devolvement, for now.

Instead, I propose indirect engagement as a mechanism of feminist pedagogical practice. I propose three routes of indirect engagement: 1) cite WAF as a legitimate criticism of feminism in scholarly work both online and off, 2) respond to attacks on WAF when heard interpersonally or in more mundane, everyday settings, and 3) indirect online activist blogging. Taking Archer’s call for fr/agency seriously, the first suggestion includes WAF criticisms of feminists as legitimate, creating space for these global participants, voices, and experiences to be incorporated.

Here, I draw on one example of how incorporation can aid in feminist scholarship. Historically, Anglo-American feminism has been criticized for whitewashing and exclusive tendencies. Specifically, women of color critiqued white, middle class feminism for erasing difference and ignoring racial, ethnic, migration, and religious differences. Looking closely, these same criticisms are echoed through WAF. Two examples follow: “Feminism does not fight for the rights of ALL genders/races” (Sept. 14) and “The feminist movement originated using black women and stepping on the black community. ENOUGH!” (July 20). Not only are these valid criticisms toward a continued white feminism, to include these specific criticisms from WAF in academic circles also points to WAF participants as women with real and legitimate experiences with a failing feminism.

Second, feminists should, in everyday spaces, engage with individuals who belittle WAF or similar sensibilities. In the year and a half that I have studied WAF, I have encountered an unfortunate amount of whole-hearted dismissal toward WAF. Such belittlement erases WAF participants as women in process and in doubt, ignoring the implications of new media on
cultural interpretations and meanings. Thus, I ask, how can we embody an ethics of care toward WAF participants when dialoging with staunch feminists? How can an ethic of care extend beyond an online interaction with a participant? WAF participants need not be present to embody Archer’s fr/agility strategy.

Finally, I recommend that cyberfeminists interrogate their own online blogging and activist tendencies. Emily Sire, an online feminist blogger, assists me by noting, “just as we need to continue to advocate for equality between [genders], we also need to remind women and men what feminism entails” (par. 15). Clearly feminism has been lost in translation. As a practical tool, cyberfeminists need to clarify their terminology, not in condescending manners by calling non-feminists ignorant, but through invitational and dialogic rhetoric.

I have planted seeds to suggest praxis-based and pedagogical strategies toward feminist engagement across difference. I situated fr/agility and responsibility as ethical instruments toward dialogue. In doing so, I have not suggested that these tools will resolve tensions between WAF and feminism, nor is that my goal. Rather, I suggest these tools because I believe in feminism and its continued role in a global world riddled with conflict, oppression, and prejudice.

As a feminist academic and a woman in the world, critically interrogating my own feminist practices is a mundane yet meaningful tactic toward engagement. For me, ignoring WAF is not an answer. Gender oppression is a social justice issue and experienced materially every day. Because of the materiality of gender oppression, feminism cannot afford to continue our demeaning and arrogant response to WAF. I stand in solidarity with Emily Shire who articulates the following:
Mocking Women Against Feminism isn’t the solution. Its campaign is an easy target, but painting these women as a bunch of ignorant, outrageous, self-hating women proves their point . . . We—and by “we,” I mean feminists—need to be the bigger person in this battle. We need to make every effort to promote feminism as a big-tent movement, and we need to admit that it doesn’t always appear so welcoming. (par. 14-15)

It is time, recognizing the fragile yet agile potential of identity, to take responsibility as feminists and social justice workers to admit we are not always right. This work toward fr/agility is particularly important when confronted with backlash rhetoric and backlashers individually. I hope future feminists will continue this work, balancing a rigorous analysis to understand what backlash is and suggest best practices for feminist engagement in contentious climates.
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