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4. Ibid.
5. Vavrus,"Putting Ally on Trial," 425.
6. Jane Arthurs, "*Sex and the City* and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist Drama," *Feminist Media Studies* 3, no. 1 (2003): 87–88.
7. Jonathan Van Meter, "Body Beautiful," *Vogue*, April 2002, 251.
8. *Taking Lives* even echoes *Blue Steel*'s scene of the heroine caught in the crossfire of a sexist joke between two male colleagues—except that in the later film, the Jolie character gets to turn the joke around on the men with a resounding slap to their egos. But this is before she is *actually* slapped in the face by one of them when her involvement with the killer allows him to escape.
9. Adrienne Rich, "The Anti-feminist Woman," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), 82.
10. Vavrus, "Putting Ally on Trial," 413.
11. The sexual/racial secret of the narrative in *Twisted* exemplifies Linda Williams's argument that American cinema remains fixated on the specter of the black rapist and threatened white womanhood, "the hyperexpressive body of the black man, in melodramatic configuration with the body of the white woman, and the white man." Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from "Uncle Tom's Cabin" to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 300.

Postfeminism in the British Frame

by Justine Ashby

In the penultimate episode of *Sex and the City*, Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) stumbles upon a Parisian bookstore where her book is being promoted. She is greeted excitedly by a young sales assistant who exclaims in broken English, "I love *Sex and the City*. I *am* the single girl!" while a young male colleague (who is clearly encoded as gay) exclaims, "I have the *Sex*, she has the *Sex*, we all have the *Sex*!" This is obviously a highly self-conscious moment, one intended to celebrate the fan culture surrounding the series as it draws to a close. But, whether intentionally or otherwise, the moment also acutely evidences the assumption that the themes, pleasures, values, and lifestyles commonly associated with postfeminism are somehow universally shared and, perhaps more significantly, universally accessible.

Of course, since postfeminist culture is primarily produced by and experienced through the contemporary media's heightened address to women, our sense of what constitutes postfeminism is inevitably drawn from an eclectic array of textual encounters that cut across and often blur national specificities. But such a (false) impression of a "globalized postfeminism" poses a number of problems and questions for those of us who experience and attempt to make sense of postfeminist culture beyond the realms of an American social context.

Within Britain, a burgeoning American canon (the raft of consistently successful television series, the proliferation of new Hollywood romantic comedies, and the

"chick lit" and self-help publications that cram the shelves of British bookstores) has certainly become a staple of any notion of a "postfeminist culture" in recent years. What is far less clear is that its resonance, and the ways in which these texts are consumed, remains the same on both sides of the Atlantic. Moreover, films such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2000), *High Heels and Low Lifes* (Mel Smith, 2001), and *Bend It like Beckham* (Gurinder Chadha, 2002) and television series such as *Linda Green* (BBC, 2002), *Single* (ITV, 2003), and *Footballers' Wives* (ITV, 2002), to name but a few, demonstrate the regularity with which British popular culture engages with postfeminist themes, although their antecedents and emphases may be different from those of their American counterparts.

It is possible to trace the development of a postfeminist idiom that is distinctive to, and indeed only really makes sense within, the specific climate of contemporary Britain. This is not to suggest that British gender politics and the media have not been profoundly influenced by American postfeminist popular culture. Nor do I wish to undervalue the ability of key critical work produced by American feminists to pose constructive, wide-ranging questions about gender politics in a postfeminist era.[1] Nonetheless, these debates are forged within the context of, and respond to, what are principally American concerns and we should not assume that they can simply be grafted onto the rather different contours of British political and popular culture; the diversity of postfeminism in all its ephemeral forms means that there can be no "one-size-fits-all" framework for thinking through its cultural and political currency.

In what follows, I want to consider how we might move toward a more detailed discussion of postfeminism in a British context. Space does not permit me to provide an extensive account of the numerous manifestations and intricacies of postfeminism in British culture; to do so would require an exploration of a broad variety of recent homegrown cinematic, televisual, literary, advertising, and musical texts, as well the profoundly complex and changeable political landscape in Britain during the past decade or so. I will restrict my discussion to some of the ways in which a postfeminist idiom, and specifically its most potent and pervasive slogan of the late 1990s and early 2000s, "girl power," has often dovetailed with, and been reinflected by, the rhetoric of Prime Minister Tony Blair's "New Britain."

With the benefit of hindsight, the sense that a different, or at least a differently refracted, version of postfeminism was emerging in Britain was significantly heightened in the wake of the landslide election victory for New Labour in 1997. The fit between postfeminism and New Labour was certainly a potentially snug one; both were couched in the language of modernization and renewed self-confidence and have often been understood as a repudiation of a stuffier, more politicized past. Thus, it is all too easy to see why one of the first publicity gestures of the incoming government was to parade 120 newly elected female MPs—an unprecedented number—alongside a jubilant Tony Blair at a press photo op.[2]

As the newspapers dubbed them "Blair's Babes," the overall message was loud and clear: Blairism would usher in a new, more democratic era in which opportunities for women would be there for the taking. This was skillful political spin: what could have (quite justifiably) been recognized as a landmark for women's

political representation was spun as another achievement for Blair (who was photographed flanked by his new army of women MPs, as though paternalistically presiding over them). Even more to the point perhaps, tagging these female politicians as "babes" (a distinctly "laddish" word) clearly—albeit somewhat incongruously—dissociated their political inroad from feminism, recasting it instead as a "lighter," more playful postfeminist moment.[3]

Beyond the realms of Westminster, New Labour continued to orchestrate a careful alliance with the popular culture surrounding "Cool Britannia"[4] and, amid the (decidedly laddish) Britpop stars, fashion designers, artists, television celebrities, and actors associated with Cool Britannia,[5] the members of the British girl band the Spice Girls rapidly emerged as the most conspicuous and commercially successful stars of the moment. By 1996, the band was being marketed to their growing legion of young female fans primarily as icons of "girl power," a term the group variously defined as "when you reply to wolf whistles by shouting 'Get your arse out,'"[6] or, rather more cryptically, "kicking it with the girls."[7] Thus, the language of "girl power," as it was popularized by the Spice Girls, promoted a boisterous, even aggressive, attitude toward gender politics. In some respects, it might be seen as a British variant of what Sarah Projansky describes, in an American context, as "(hetero)sex-positive postfeminism"—a paradigm that rejects the supposedly antisex attitudes of a previous generation in favor of "a feminism focused on individuality and independence."[8] When the Spice Girls proclaimed in *Spice World* (Bob Spiers, 1997) that all girls needed were "strength and courage and a Wonderbra," and numerous feisty celebrity laddettes shed their clothes for "Lad Mags," such as *Loaded* and *FHM*, the "girl power" logic somehow managed to link being sexy with being ballsy, to celebrate female camaraderie while privileging individualism. In short, the very logic of "girl power" confounded any real attempt to politicize it.

If it is difficult to untangle the political ambiguities of "girl power," its proximity to British party politics is often even harder to pin down. In the run-up to the general election in 1997, the Spice Girls had regularly been critical of New Labour and, indeed, the group had repeatedly claimed that the Conservative ex-prime minister, Margaret Thatcher—an avowedly problematic, even antagonistic, figure for many feminists—was an inspirational postfeminist icon; she was, in their much-touted view, "the first Spice Girl." This attitude was further complicated when, at the British Record Industry Trust (BRIT) Awards in 1997, Ginger Spice (Geri Halliwell) performed the postfeminist anthem "Who Do You Think You Are?" in a micro-mini Union Jack dress, appropriating the central motif of Cool Britannia and thus, implicitly at least, ensuring that "girl power" would become iconically associated with a "rebranded," Blairite Britain. Whatever the meaning of this moment, by 2001, Halliwell (by then departed from the Spice Girls) had shifted her position enough to be featured in New Labour's political broadcast for the general election of that year.[9]

It seems safe to argue, then, that the relationship between "girl power," Cool Britannia, and New Labour fostered a climate in which a coalition between postfeminist culture and Blairite politics could be tentatively sustained. But to think this through in more concrete terms, I want to consider how this convergence

provides a context in which to read a specific text, Gurinder Chadha's critically and commercially successful film, *Bend It like Beckham*. By Chadha's own admission, *Bend It like Beckham* was intended as "a girl power movie."[10] With its rite-of-passage narrative about two teenage girls (one Asian British, one white) who struggle with and triumph over the various prejudices that stand in the way of their ambitions to become professional soccer players, the film frames questions of racial and sexual identity within an upbeat, postfeminist idiom. For the prime minister at least, the film exemplified the spirit of Blairite Britain; in a congratulatory letter to Chadha, Blair is reported to have written, "We loved it, loved it, because this is my Britain."[11]

At the outset of the film, both Jess (Parminder K. Nagra) and Jules (Keira Knightley) face obstacles in their respective families. Jess's Sikh family considers her sports activities inappropriate and disrespectful, while Jules needs to convince her parents that playing football (soccer) does not mean she is gay. As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that their situations are in fact comparable: it is not so much social and sexual discrimination as *their mothers* who are the problem. When Jess's mother insists that her daughter learn how to cook a full Indian meal and Jules's mother begs her to wear an inflatable bra and find a nice boyfriend, their limited ambitions for their daughters are coded as trivial and laughably *pre*feminist. Rendered comic, their misgivings can be swept aside with relative ease, especially since it is ultimately their fathers who more readily accept and foster the girls' fledgling sports careers. As such, not only are the mothers figured as more sexist than their husbands, but when each father finally puts his foot down and insists that their wives support their daughters' ambitions, the fathers strike a blow for "girl power," on the one hand, while reasserting their more traditional power as head of the family, on the other.

In what is perhaps the most explicitly political moment of the film, Jess's father (Anupam Kher) finally realizes that his daughter should not be held back by the old specters of sexism and racism. When he tells his family, "I don't want her to make the mistakes her father made: I want her to fight. I want her to win," those specters are effectively elided and laid to rest. Having been excluded from the local cricket club on his arrival in Britain, Jess's father is at last able to reforge his relationship with British culture, a reconciliation that somehow seems possible within the terms of the film only by recourse to the problem-solving function of his daughter's politically affirmative, postfeminist narrative. Thus, as the girls finally depart for the United States where (significantly perhaps) the infrastructure—and freedom—exist for them to realize their dreams of receiving soccer scholarships, the film's upbeat, postfeminist message is stretched to assuage more fraught social issues.

In a final emblematic scene, Jess's father and her Irish boyfriend, Joe (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers), play cricket on the suburban green outside the family home. The imagery here is, of course, redolent with traditional notions of Englishness; that the players are a once-excluded Sikh and an Irish boy assert a version of contemporary Britain as a modernized—though evocatively nostalgic—space of inclusion

and equality where the pain of the past has been worked through and healed. Given that *Bend It like Beckham* was released in the context of racially motivated public disorders in northern English towns and cities in 2001, the election successes of the explicitly racist British National Party in July 2002, and the widespread victimization of British Muslims following 9/11, it is difficult not to conclude that this choice of an ending provides a highly selective, even utopian view of Blair's Britain. Of course, Chadha (quite justifiably) intended *Bend It like Beckham* to be a mainstream "feel-good" movie, and it would be unfair to expect it to tackle heavy political realities adequately. Yet, to sustain such an upbeat tone, "girl power"—with its insistence that to enjoy equality, one merely has to claim it assertively enough—really has to undertake some heavy ideological spadework to deliver the vision that Blair seemed to have for "his Britain."

To recall another of the paradigms Projansky identifies, the closure of *Bend It like Beckham* might well be understood as an example of how "equality and choice postfeminism" can be put to use within a specific national context. According to Projansky, this version of postfeminism offers us "narratives about feminism's 'success' in achieving gender equity and having given women choice."[12] By the end of the film, it is clear that the girls have a greater range of choices available to them than their mothers did and that Jess and Jules can exercise those choices within the traditionally male realm of football must surely demonstrate how well the battle for gender equality is being fought and won. Since "choice" and "equality" have been the vaunted ideals of New Labour's "Third Way,"[13] it is easy to see why Blair would be eager to identify with—indeed, to claim some political ownership over—this particular postfeminist movie.

While arguing that a distinctly British postfeminist idiom has developed during the Blair years, I am aware that the "traffic" in postfeminist culture is often a two-way exchange. Indeed, *Bend It like Beckham* went on to enjoy considerable success in the United States, where it was primarily marketed as a quirky "chick flick" along the lines of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick, 2002). But, while what seems to be a peculiarly British representation of postfeminism clearly possesses a broader—and no less significant—resonance within an international context, that the rhetoric of Blairism and "girl power" both pervades and surrounds a film such as *Bend It like Beckham* indicates the ways in which postfeminist culture operates both in localized and more generalized ways. To understand how national specificities can mobilize and absorb postfeminist themes and values differently, to mark and make sense of their various inflections, is surely also a step toward repoliticizing postfeminist culture.

Notes

1. See, for example, Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (London: Routledge, 1991); Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2001); or the more populist accounts, such as Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991).

2. The total number of Labour MPs elected in 1997 was 418, out of a total of 658. Clearly, women were still underrepresented in Parliament, but New Labour's selection policy for that election had, to be fair, gone some way to begin to redress the balance.
3. "Blair's Babes" included more mature MPs, such as Mo Mowlam and Clare Short, both of whom forged political careers in keeping with a more traditional feminism.
4. Not only did Blair meet with various "Britpop" celebrities, but he also made presentations at both the Q and Brit music awards in 1996. For a detailed discussion of New Labour's relationship with Britpop, see John Harris, *The Last Party: Britpop, Blair, and the Demise of English Rock* (London: Harper Perennial, 2003).
5. "Cool Britannia" became something of a buzz term following *Newsweek*'s November 4, 1996, cover story, "London Rules," which declared that "London is the coolest capital on the planet."
6. Spice Girls, *Girlpower* (London: Zone, 1997), 6.
7. Interview, *The Spice Girls* (Warner Video, 1997).
8. Projansky, *Watching Rape*, 67. Projansky identifies three other principal paradigms: "linear postfeminism," "backlash postfeminism," and "equality and choice postfeminism."
9. In the run up to the 2001 election, New Labour enlisted the support of another postfeminist icon, Britney Spears. Despite being an American citizen, according to a BBC report on May 16, 2001, she publicly endorsed the New Labour Party.
10. See, for example, Chadha's interview on PlanetOut.com.
11. Chadha commented on Blair's letter in a number of interviews. See, for example, www.planetout.com or www.campuscircle.net.
12. Projansky, *Watching Rape*, 67.
13. Many of New Labour's policies have eschewed the traditional polarization between Right and Left and have continued to pursue the Thatcherite value of "choice" in education and healthcare, for example.

Contributors

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