This chapter could aptly be subtitled “Whose Life Is It Anyway? Fatal Retractions in the Backlash 1980s.” Or, one is Presumed Innocent until a Pretty Woman causes a Fatal Attraction that makes a Working Girl into a Ghost. If this is postfeminism, then June Cleaver is Gloria Steinem; postmodern simulation notwithstanding, I don’t think she is.

This chapter explores the images of the backlash, a term made famous by Susan Faludi’s 1991 bestselling book of the same name. Faludi brilliantly charts the backlash against feminism and, while spending several chapters on the cultural images of this backlash, is far more eloquent in her denunciation of the larger social forces that shaped antifeminism in the 1980s. Here I focus more explicitly on those media representations that were and still are so much a part of this backlash and, in doing so, “model” a certain kind of feminist cultural analysis that I have been implying since the opening incursion into the territory of Madonna, Thelma and Louise, and Murphy Brown.

This chapter traces the development of a cultural
“moment”—a convergence of various discourses (film, television, advertisements, popular journalism, public policies, academic trends) that produce a particular sensibility or ethos. This approach is not meant to imply that the backlash is all-encompassing or without contradictions, or that it affects all people in the same way or with equal force. No cultural period is ever singular in its expression of ideologies, and I hint at some of those contradictions in this chapter. Nevertheless, the 1980s and early 1990s did exhibit what we might call “dominant ideologies” about women, women’s lives, women’s options, women’s choices. I choose to link these discourses under the banner term postfeminism because I believe this word encompasses the backlash sentiment already mentioned as well as a more complex phenomenon of a recent form of antifeminism.

This chapter is not, however, intended as the “final statement” either on this historical period or on feminist cultural methodology. Rather it is intended to present a loose case study in order to make specific and substantive points about a cultural moment or epoch, as well as to demonstrate a way of undertaking feminist cultural studies that is contextual, intertextual, historical, and motivated by explicit feminist questions and concerns.

Currently two strands of what we could call “postfeminist” discourse exist. In recent years, postfeminism has emerged both as a descriptive popular category and as a tentative theoretical movement loosely associated with the postmodern and poststructuralist challenge to “identity politics.” These two versions of postfeminism (the popular, mainstream backlash one and the one associated with academic poststructuralism and postmodernism) have serious points of overlap that equally, albeit with different intentions, contribute to the dissolution of feminism as theory and practice. The term postfeminism was probably first
used in public discourse in an October 1982 New York Times Magazine cover article titled “Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation” written by Susan Bolotin, a feminist bemoaning the state of regressive womanhood and feeling all too anachronistic in this postfeminist world. In her interviews with young women, one characteristic stands out clearly—the way these women view feminists: “Look around and you’ll see some happy women, and then you’ll see these bitter, bitter women. The unhappy women are all feminists. You’ll find very few happy, enthusiastic relaxed people who are ardent supporters of feminism. Feminists are really tortured people.”

Time magazine declared on its cover of December 1989 that “in the 80s they tried to have it all. Now they’ve just plain had it. Is there a future for feminism?” The answer is pretty grim, because “hairy legs haunt the feminist movement, as do images of being strident and lesbian. Feminine clothing is back; breasts are back; motherhood is back.” One would think that in the sinister 1970s, we all wore Hefty bags, cut our breasts off, and had our tubes summarily tied. The linking of feminism with cultural signifiers of “difference” (lesbianism), which then become conflated with fashion (hairy legs), is an ideological sleight of hand that plays into the worst sort of egregiously sexist stereotyping. Counterposed to this imaginary vision of mean and hairy lesbians is the “new woman” of the late 1980s and the 1990s: a woman whose essence is neatly encapsulated by reference to fashion (feminine clothing), body parts (breasts), and reproductive institutions (motherhood). Claudia Wallis, author of the Time story, tellingly characterizes feminism via the media-concocted mythology of the Superwoman: “What happened to the superwoman in the tailored suit and floppy bow tie who brought home all that bacon? What happened to breakfast with the
national sales manager and racing for the 8:05? What happened to aspiring to the executive suite, to beating men at their own game?"4 Not only does this description falsely circumscribe feminism as solely concerned with equality on the job, but its classism boils over and glibly permeates the entire article. The false dichotomies are rigidly presented: Superwoman versus mother, strident lesbian versus mellow and "feminine" heterosexual; unattractive bra-burner versus smartly attired accessorizer. Of course, neither side of the dichotomy rings true; each is, in its own way, fully ideological.

Popular postfeminism is therefore predictably located within the generalized antifeminist backlash that has been given free rein in the past ten years. Sources as diverse as the New York Times, the film Baby Boom, bestsellers about "career women gone wrong," and television series about troubled single women (such as the brief recent series The Trials of Rosie O'Neill) present a somewhat contradictory image of a movement devoid of currency and at the same time responsible for the sad plight of millions of unhappy and unsatisfied women who, thinking they could have it all, have clearly "gone too far" and jeopardized their chances at achieving the much valorized American Dream. This discourse, like so many others before it, has declared the movement (predictably if illogically) dead, victorious, and ultimately failed. In so doing, this popular view of feminism has rewritten the history of the women's movement to shift it from the terrain of well-intentioned and earnest docudrama to that of smarmy tabloid-style television reenactments on A Current Affair.

In this time of backlash and revisionism, the popular narrative of the history of the contemporary women's movement unfolds like this: In the beginning... our newly awakened anger and astonishment at the realities of our
own oppression caused us to take positions that were extreme. We went too far, either becoming "like men" in our quest for acceptance or finding ourselves doing double duty at home and work. One of these "extreme" positions was the radical rethinking of motherhood as the sole fulfilling role for the adult woman. But as the popular historians would have it now, we have emerged from the dark, angry nights of early women's liberation into the bright dawn of a postfeminist era. The personal history of feminist pioneer Betty Friedan is instructive. In her first, groundbreaking book, *The Feminine Mystique,* Friedan bemoaned the state of the American woman, overeducated for the menial and unfulfilling role of housewife/mother that was forced on her with vigor since the end of World War II. Friedan urged women into the workforce and careers as the only way to develop fully and liberate themselves. Her words spoke to a generation of women who felt some vague malaise, sensed a grave injustice, but were unable to find a voice for it, a name for it: sexism. By the early 1980s, however, Friedan was singing another tune, wondering aloud if we had not, perhaps, gone a bit too far, bemoaning now not the state of imprisoned womanhood, but the sorry lack of family life. After all, she seemed to ask, isn't motherhood (and its associated ideological baggage—heterosexuality, couplehood, the nuclear family) what women really want? In *The Second Stage* Friedan fully recanted and railed against those feminists who still thought that the family was a central site of women's oppression. In her most recent backtracking, Friedan continues to blame the women's movement for "excesses" that resulted in an unfortunate "war" with men.

For Friedan and others (such as 1993 cover-girl antifeminist Katie Roiphe), we may have come a long way (baby) but we still have a long way to go (back). This era, we are
told, has its own set of problems. We are being punished for wanting it all: the Superwoman syndrome and the Cinderella complex are the watchwords that construct a female identity in crisis, a subjectivity at war with its own history, a woman bereft. As popular wisdom would have it, contemporary women are now caught in the binds their foremothers unwittingly made for them: in renouncing traditional values of Mom and apple pie (especially Mom), today’s woman is a lost soul, an ambitious career woman who has lost touch with that essential part of her femaleness—motherhood.

Feminism, that tired relic of the turbulent 1960s and early 1970s, like a high-budget miniseries, promised more than it put out. We thought we wanted liberation, but we found out that we really love too much. We thought we wanted equality, but realize instead that we cannot have it all. We thought we could finally be the prince in our own fantasies of power and pleasure, but discover our Cinderella complex weighs on us all too mightily. We envisioned cooperation, commitment, even community, but are told we are codependent after all. If this is postfeminism, then Barbara Bush is Alice Walker.

More pointed attacks on the perils of a feminist identity can be seen in many television specials, particularly those that focus on family relations. One program, Supermom’s Daughter, stands out dramatically because it seems, on first viewing, to resonate with many ideas of the feminist movement. This program borrows from feminism selectively, however, and in doing so presents an ideological orientation that is infinitely more subtle in its sexism than, say, Father Knows Best. In this Home Box Office special, star television news reporter Mom is horrified to learn that her teenage daughter has swerved off the academic fast track and is instead intent on achieving an early
marriage, producing lots of children, and working in early childhood education. The worst nightmare of every feminist mother comes true: her daughter wants nothing of the life she has struggled to make available to her.

Significantly, a television show like this locates itself firmly in the ideological framework of the 1980s (and the 1990s as well), which presents an image of troubled womanhood, of striving career women suddenly faced with the deep truth of their bottomless need for hearth and home, husband and children. In this age of *Fatal Attraction* and *Baby Boom*, feminist struggles and gains are reduced to personal choices, choices that, we are now informed, have created a no-win situation: we cannot have it all.

The intention of numerous 1980s films, television shows, and other forms of popular culture is precisely this: to further dichotomize mother and woman, with an additional postfeminist gloss by identifying “woman” not only as sexual, but as ambitious Superwoman. The “you can’t have it all” issue emerges specifically as a response to real and substantive feminist changes in the workplace and in social and personal life. The Supermom of the television show confides to her housewife friend (and idol of her daughter) that she often envies her friend’s domestic life, and the friend appropriately returns the compliment, thus reinforcing the work/family dichotomy that has come to be defined as the crucial postfeminist issue.

The major postfeminist paradigm has precisely been this work/family duality, which condemns feminism for helping to create the double-day/second-shift syndrome, yet completely overlooks a more radical critique of either work or family. The much vaunted “juggling” of work and family has become the subject of endless talk shows, sitcoms, films, popular articles, and glossy advertisements. A recent piece on an *NBC Nightly News* show depicted the creative
solution of a “working mother” (a redundant term, to be sure) who had negotiated the rigors of family and work conflicts by working part time at her Wall Street firm. The entire segment never made any mention of this work/family dilemma as a problem for men, but presented it rather as a problem that women could now work out with the paternalistic help of benign and benevolent corporate America.

Geneva Overholser, in a *New York Times* editorial of September 1986, notes that “among most people who use the term ‘post-feminism’ there seem to be two schools of thought. The first holds that women went rampaging off to work only to discover that they were cheating home and family. The second holds that women went rampaging off to work only to discover that work wasn’t so great after all.”

Overholser convincingly argues that the term *post-feminism* is simply sexism by a subtler name.

Several popular films of the late 1980s speak to this new dialogue of female angst. In *Fatal Attraction* (Figure 12), the bad woman is the childless, single, professional woman who seduces the innocent family man and tellingly attempts to blackmail him with a fantasized pregnancy. The good woman is, like in old times, the good *mother*, who significantly is a sophisticated housewife. The figure of evil here is a single woman, living in the hell-like neighborhood of Manhattan’s meat district, who smokes, has wild blonde hair, and whose “biological clock” is ticking rather like a timebomb. She is a homewrecker: she kidnap a young girl, boils her pet bunny, and looks in on the couple’s domestic bliss and throws up. She is clearly the “working woman from hell,” beloved of recent popular culture, who gets her comeuppance when she is finally “put away” (to cheers from audiences throughout the country) by the dutiful wife and mother.
Figure 12. Things go from bad to worse in Fatal Attraction, the misogynist emblem of 1980s antifeminism. (Paramount, 1987; photos courtesy of Photofest)
Diane Keaton in *Baby Boom* (Figure 13) lets us all know the deep dissatisfaction of women at work and lays bare the budding mama lurking behind every gleaming corporate desk. Keaton’s enactment of a corporate executive whose nascent maternal instinct is aroused, leading her to the country and marriage, is only one, lighthearted example of the consequences meted out to women who fail to fit into their appropriately gendered positions.

In *Working Girl* (Figure 14), an example of what I call the “executive in a G-string theme,” Tess, the striving working-class woman, tells us in perfect postfeminist prose that she has “a mind for business and a bod for sin.” The good merger man Jack Trainer saves her from the evils of a female (masculinized and corrupt) boss, and the Pyrrhic feminist victory is reduced to Tess’s commitment
to get her own coffee when she is rewarded with a management position and a female secretary. The bad woman here is the woman executive who has lost her "true" womanly ways in her climb up the corporate ladder.

The immensely popular film *Pretty Woman* (Figure 15) is emblematic of the postfeminist genre. A glitzy reworking of the classic Cinderella tale, *Pretty Woman* offers yet another backlash dystopia: a world where women are whores with warm hearts of gold and men are rich corporate raiders with organs in need of thawing by those selfsame hearts. Among commentators it even became a point of pride to admit, as did *Hers* columnist Daphne Merkin in the *New York Times*, the "illicit affection for a glossy cinematic fairy tale about a prostitute and a high-rolling businessman." To be critical of such a regressive film is to be, in Merkin's words, "inheritors of the feminist
mystique” who “felt compelled to protest the choice of Barbara Bush as a commencement speaker.” Merkin reiterates the reconstructed narrative of feminist history by arguing that we have, indeed, gone too far and now need to realize that, instead of the vision of liberated singledom in An Unmarried Woman, women adore the fantasy of the male savior, of the knight in shining armor. In this reading, women’s fantasies (and men’s too, for that matter) are intractable and, try as we might, we are misguided souls if we think we can escape these universal models of domination and submission, transformation and surrender: “It appears that in the post-modernist, post-feminist, closing decade of the 20th century, we still need our myths, our amatory fictions; they help us endure. We are ready again for the mad, implausible embrace.”

Once we were highly critical of the delusive fictions that
helped us "endure" the pains of patriarchy. It used to be we constructed alternative fantasies of pleasure and passion, which deconstructed that endurance and helped to develop a changing social body. But in this postfeminist backlash, passion is the province of prefeminist, timeless yearnings that were only slightly derailed by that irksome challenge to patriarchal business as usual: "By deliberately announcing itself as fairy tale, Pretty Woman succeeds in bridging the contradiction faced by the spectator who is no longer able to believe in romance (especially in a film so beset with implausibility and inconsistency), yet at the same time wishes to do so."¹¹

Why is Pretty Woman such a bad film for women? Isn't it just a harmless tale of a poor working girl saved from a life of drudgery by a rich and aristocratic man? In this Pygmalion tale man remakes woman and, in doing so, remakes himself. It is in this conceit—that a poor hooker can "save" a rich but soulless businessman—that the postfeminist emphasis surfaces: "He asks what happens to the prince after he saves Viv's bacon. 'She rescues him right back!' chirps the happy ex-hooker brightly. Viv's rejoinder is the summary example of how Pretty Woman veils its exploitative agenda with fashionably feminist leftistoid blather."¹² This assumed mutuality between the rich man and the prostitute undercuts and avoids the power relations inherent in the situation of prostitute and john, implicitly equating corporate coldness with prostitution: "Pretty Woman's recommendations on mutual 'rescue' are crucial to its devious work of disavowal. Despite Viv's pretty concluding speech, the film implies that Edward needs little rescue from his circumstances—certainly not from his megabucks—only to become a trifle humanized by Viv's bawdy vitality and the 'special' qualities he discerns in her but never fully articulates."¹³
The class politics of this film are also thoroughly degrading, as the rich man watches the woman perform her working-class ways. The simple but knowing native woman eats with her hands; she is like an animal. But, of course, she is a diamond in the rough, ready to be revealed as such by her knight in shining armor.

*Pretty Woman* presents an ideology that encourages women to humanize basically good but unfeeling men, men whose emotional coldness is itself a result of their own neglectful fathers. Again, this presents a retro version of feminism, reducing real changes in social relations to the need to teach men to feel and to cry.

In Julia Roberts's next film, *Sleeping with the Enemy*, the answer to wife battering is to pretend you have died, retreat to a gorgeous old mansion in a perfect small town, find the new and sensitive man of your dreams, and live happily ever after. Instances of battering are constructed as the sick acts of lunatic and obsessive men, rather than the everyday practice of everyday men. Jane Caputi argues that *Pretty Woman* and *Sleeping with the Enemy* are not the diametrically opposed films they seem to be, but actually appear "as representing two phases of one relationship." The rich rescuer and the abusive husband share many of the same traits, and their control over the women remains based on male power: "In short, these are men defined by their power in the world, epitomized by their power over their lovers."  

*Presumed Innocent* (Figure 16) takes the postfeminist genre to its natural conclusion: "This is yet another plot, like *Fatal Attraction*, about disturbed, sexy ladies who drive decent men crazy. Here another (sterile) blond barges in on a happy family and bewitches a heretofore devoted, responsible husband/father." No longer satisfied with the standard virgin/whore dichotomy played out to such effect
Figure 16. A bad working woman and an even worse wife plague innocent family man Rusty Sabich in *Presumed Innocent*. (Warner Brothers, 1990; photos courtesy of Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)
in *Fatal Attraction*, no longer appeased by the good woman/bad woman dualism, popular culture now constructs a world where there are no good women, only good men. In a twist on the *Fatal Attraction* theme, *Presumed Innocent* not only makes the sexual, working woman evil incarnate, but constructs the frustrated housewife as warped killer, driven by jealousy to murder her husband's lover: hardworking, white-collar dolts become the fall guys for ambitious, demanding women.

The popularity of David Lynch among the young and restless generation should not be overlooked in a discussion of postfeminism. Lynch has the uniquely postmodern knack of taking that which is, after all, an old story (the virgin/whore; women's pleasure at their own brutalization; the violence at the heart of maternal love) and presenting it as radical new fare for the hip and cynical girl-about-town. Laura Palmer's smitten psychiatrist suggests to the befuddled sheriff in the television series *Twin Peaks* that prom-queen-cum-porn-pervert Laura really wanted to be killed.

*The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (Figure 17) presents us with the newest killer woman: the killer nanny as the logical backlash extension of *Fatal Attraction*. Like *Presumed Innocent*, this film involves two errant women. The bad woman here is not the typical working woman, and she is not even in any explicit sense "bad." Rather, the bad woman is the woman who does not take care of her children full time. The message here is twofold: for the nanny it is that thwarted motherhood drives women to madness and evil (evil as in barrenness); for the mom it is that she should take care of her own children and not attempt to work at all (remember, she wanted to build a greenhouse and that is why she needed a nanny). The symbolism here is striking: the mother's fecundity must be channeled
toward her family, not toward the external world (the greenhouse). Significantly, the greenhouse itself becomes a site of violence, the place where a friend is killed and where the retarded man is set up by the bad nanny as the fall guy for her nefarious deeds.

Strong women of 1980s and 1990s films are shown as legitimately strong through their maternal identification. In *Aliens* tough-lady Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) saves the day, but only after her maternal feelings are awakened and she moves to protect her pseudodoughter Newt from the bad and evil mother monster; the battle of liberation becomes a battle between two mothers. In *Terminator 2*, the muscular mother-warrior must be saved by Arnold the Terminator not because of her own worth but because she carries the savior of the future in her womb: she is literally the mother of the future, rather than the future itself (Figure 18).
The list goes on: In the hit *Basic Instinct*, killer lesbians and bisexuals torment weak cops who are brought under their spell and as a result commit rape and murder; women are killers and seductresses, ruining decent but vulnerable men and fathers. In *Poison Ivy*, a young girl’s desire for home and family leads her to become a seductress/killer, preying on a weak father and desirous daughter alike until her own death saves the remnants of the nuclear family. The psychotic nurse of Stephen King’s *Misery* presents even the classical nurturing woman as a sex-starved psycho, literally holding a man hostage to her tormented fantasies.

Television participates in the backlash as well, although the range of options presented on mainstream television is often greater than that of mainstream film. For all the revisionism and conservatism of contemporary television, we have witnessed several major “women’s” programs...
in the 1980s and early 1990s: Cagney and Lacey, Murphy Brown, Kate and Allie, Designing Women, Roseanne. In addition, substantive women characters have emerged on shows such as Cheers, LA Law, and the nighttime soaps Dynasty and Dallas. In fact, given the argument in chapter 3 about gender and genre, it is possible that the growth of prime-time shows following the episodic, inconclusive, multiple-story format of daytime soap operas could provide increased opportunities for a “female gaze” to emerge.

Nevertheless, we do find a trend in television programs similar to that in films of the period—representations that have the veneer of feminism but are actually encoding reactionary ideas about women and women’s lives. For example, one of the zeitgeist series of the late 1980s, thirtysomething, presented itself as a sophisticated show about today’s families and modern life. But once this surface liberalism was scratched, a traditional rendering of women emerged. The “good” woman was, once again, the stay-at-home mother. The career women were stereotypically portrayed as desperate for a man, lonely, often bitter. The men were “relational” new men, yet the social relations of gendered life were little altered; the women, more often than not, were the ones who wrestled with the work/family dilemmas.

The sexual flirtation and banter of popular shows such as Cheers, Moonlighting, and Who’s the Boss seem innocent enough, but in many ways they create narratives in which educated, accomplished women get their comeuppance and are “put in their place” by their working-class counterparts. Who’s the Boss and Moonlighting are programs that offer opportunities for progressive social commentary on the changing nature of work and gender relations. Both shows depict women as bosses and, in one (Who’s the Boss)
the man performs typical “female” labor. Yet more often than not, these working women—like the female executive in *Working Girl*—are uptight, rigid, and repressed, and therefore in need of “thawing” by these more “earthy” men.

In addition, portrayals of women in television seem to be getting worse over these years. We have moved from the woman-centered narratives of female attachment in *Cagney and Lacey* to the embarrassing portrayal of the recently divorced public defender Rosie O’Neill, who is alone, lonely, without a community, eating pizza and drinking champagne by herself, and talking aimlessly to her psychiatrist. Elsewhere we meet insipid male teenagers waiting to score sexually with the nubile teenage girls of suburbia, or the valiant fireman father trying to take care of the kids after the mother has precipitously been killed off. *Uncle Buck, Who’s the Boss, Major Dad, Coach, Hunter, Matlock, Wonder Years, Dear John, The Fanelli Boys, Jake and the Fatman, The Young Riders*—it becomes obvious: fathers have returned with a vengeance (witness the amazing popularity of *The Cosby Show*) but “mothers, in case you hadn’t noticed, are biting the dust in prime-time comedies. Lately, there has been a weird sort of postfeminist backlash in television’s depiction of the American family, and the message is hardly subliminal: if Mom’s not going to stick around in the kitchen, then—poof—let’s dump her.”

We have shifted from the golden days of the 1970s (*Mary Tyler Moore, Rhoda, Maude*) to what I call the paradigm of the Great Disappearing Mother. Of prime-time shows in the 1991–92 season, only twelve or so include central female characters, and most of these are in half-hour sitcom formats. Although most single parents are women, if one only watched television one would think that lots of men are bravely raising their kids alone. This strange
phenomenon makes Quayle's attack on *Murphy Brown* even more troubling.

Advertisements were no exception to this backlash mood, as images of New Traditionalists (the *Good Housekeeping* advertising campaign) and the "little girl" waif model à la Kate Moss vied for public attention. Women were depicted as pouting blonde bombshells 1950s-style for Guess brand jeans, or as corporate executives who wore sexy lingerie and became "real women" after five o'clock.

The intersection between this backlash postfeminism and academic adoption of continental theory is located in one particular characteristic: both varieties of postfeminism share a distorted and revisionist (in the worst sense) history of feminism, signaling the end of a trend even though we have hardly achieved its aims in the first place. The premature declaration of a social movement's demise is no news to anyone familiar with the always shifting sentiments of American popular wisdom (as mediated by popular culture). However, like the declaration that the end of the 1960s signaled the end of social activism, this claim is both wrong and ideologically suspect.

Tellingly, both versions of postfeminism put into question the possibility for any sense of a unity of women, of sisterhood. By claiming a generational dislocation, popular postfeminism distances us forever from "those women" of the 1960s and proclaims the irrelevance of feminism for the hip but overwrought generation of late capitalist yuppies. Academic poststructuralist postfeminism similarly denies the possibility of sisterhood, not through a generational schism but rather through a denial of the category of "woman" altogether. For postmodern postfeminists, feminism was doomed from the start by its allegiance to master narratives (for example, patriarchy) and by its reputed denial of difference in favor of a naive and utopian
vision of empowered sisterhood. Luckily postmodernism has come in the nick of time to rescue wayward women from the perils of identification and self-recognition.

Granted, as feminist culture and theory have flourished and developed, they have undergone significant intellectual shifts from the early 1970s to the late 1980s that could allow us to speak of a generation of writers and thinkers who have moved past the basic tenets of feminist thought and integrated these with a highly sophisticated understanding of the intellectual currents of postmodernity. Yet my suspicions remain. Judith Stacey’s essay “Sexism by a Subtler Name? Postindustrial Conditions and Postfeminist Consciousness in Silicon Valley” claims to “view the term [postfeminist] as analogous to ‘postrevolutionary’ . . . not to indicate the death of the women’s movement but to describe the simultaneous incorporation, revision, and depoliticization of many of the central goals of ‘second-wave’ feminism.”17 For Stacey, postfeminism is not the same as antifeminism; instead postfeminism entails an often unconscious internalization of certain basic feminist goals, with an accompanying depoliticization and individualization of them. Postfeminism is understood as a series of strategies to negotiate the treacherous waters of postindustrial society and its concomitant challenges to traditional family structures, themselves altered fundamentally by second-wave feminism.

Responding to Stacey’s essay, Rayna Rapp asks, “Is the legacy of second-wave feminism postfeminism?” First, she develops Stacey’s argument by maintaining that the “depoliticization often takes the form of the reduction of feminist social goals to individual ‘lifestyles.’”18 She notes as well, quite rightly, that the debates surrounding the term feminism were also carried out by first-wave feminists, in the 1920s, who also proclaimed their movement both over
and victorious. Finally, in shifting her attention away from Silicon Valley and toward union women in New York City, Rapp argues that the term itself must be located more specifically—that for many women, too busy still struggling over what feminism can bring to them, the designation "post" has no salience whatsoever.

Questions inevitably arise: Is postfeminism really any different from simple backlash? Is it only a trendy codeword for speaking of that which we know to exist: an attack on feminism and women's rights that has been supported and bolstered by eight years of Ronald Reagan and four of George Bush? It seems to me that postfeminism is more problematic than simple backlash, although it clearly includes that. It is more dangerous precisely because it contains elements of clear and explicit antifeminism (for example, the New Right, the Moral Majority, antichoice activism, antigay referenda and initiatives) as well as elements seemingly cognizant and respectful of feminism yet undercutting it with a rewriting of its history and a declaration of its obsolescence for contemporary society. The use of the term postfeminism by social theorists such as Stacey feeds into this occlusion.

We also need to place this backlash in a historical context. The backlash of the late 1980s and early 1990s is similar in many ways to the backlash of the late 1940s and 1950s, but differs from it in important aspects. Both eras were responding to serious social transformations. The 1940s experienced a huge influx of women into the labor market during World War II and their desire to stay in that labor force after the war had ended. Many 1940s films were filled with tough working women, independent women, and women who were self-defined. After the war—really during the tail end of it—backlash images began to emerge and working women were vilified, made into monsters who
destroyed their children and caused their husbands to run off with other women, and summarily punished for their deviant ways. Newly invigorated images of motherhood filled the screens, women's magazines, and the television images of the 1950s (*Father Knows Best, Donna Reed Show, Leave It to Beaver, and so on*). *I Love Lucy* is significant as an ongoing narrative of a homebound woman always struggling to escape. Most of the show's humor derives from Lucy's desire to move out of the four walls of her apartment and into the world that Ricky inhabits. This attempt is always thwarted by Ricky, who takes Lucy's already doomed efforts in stride as he securely puts her back in her place.

The recent backlash is somewhat different, however. Whereas the backlash in the late 1940s and 1950s carried an explicit message—get out of the workforce and into the kitchen—this time the backlash is couched in the language of liberation, made to seem trendy, even mildly feminist, as in the film *Working Girl*. In addition, this backlash is more clearly antifeminist: it responds directly to the women's movement and often pits one woman against another (*Fatal Attraction, Working Girl, The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*). This backlash is different because it has to push motherhood; it must sell motherhood and domesticity after those ideologies have already been so soundly critiqued by feminists (unlike in the late 1940s). Furthermore, this backlash contains real violence, as evidenced by the vehemence with which film audiences urge the deaths of femme fatales.

The current period is thus not one of simple backlash (such as that of the late 1940s and 1950s) but is characterized by a rewriting of the women's movement to define our era as postfeminist, creating an image of a movement both victorious (the myth that we have achieved equality)
and failed (look what feminism got you: double duty, burn-out, and the explosion of your biological clock).

These media images did not, of course, arise in a vacuum. They emerged in a historical period marked by the rise of the New Right and by the governments of Reagan and Bush. These years have seen a growth in antichoice activism (to the point of terrorism and murder), cutbacks on civil rights and equal opportunity legislation of all kinds, and an epidemic of violence against women. The backlash was supported and perpetuated by a government and presidency that spoke to the assembled throngs at the annual Right-to-Life demonstration in Washington, D.C., but maintained a stony silence toward the millions of women who are battered, raped, denied accessible and affordable child care, and paid consistently less than are men. It is disturbing that we see numerous films in which women are depicted as crazed killers when women are more likely to be terrorized by men: the sad irony of Fatal Attraction, and the rash of news stories that emerged confirming the “reality” of killer ex-girlfriends, is that it is women not men who are most likely to be hurt at the hands of an ex-lover or ex-spouse.

It is in this climate that we witness the popularity of both Fatal Attraction and Pretty Woman. These movies are indeed two sides of the same coin: the coin of male control over women’s lives, the equation of work for women with death and prostitution. One of the classic ways Hollywood tells a woman to get back in the kitchen and obey her master is by punishing her for wayward behavior. Hollywood films include countless examples of single women, working women, women who are not fulfilled as wives and mothers, sexually active women, and just plain feisty women being summarily killed, humiliated, or simply beaten down. Hollywood has always maintained its sup-
port of oppressive social roles for women by refusing to acknowledge that women are both sexual beings and potential parents at the same time.

It is important to recognize that the backlash sentiment has never been so strong. For those of us who teach feminism as a living, breathing, very much alive theory and practice, we experience ourselves as both anachronistic (once again “those shrill women”) and frustrated by the reluctance of our female students to “declare” themselves. If identifying oneself as a feminist carried a certain daring and rebellious cachet in the early 1970s, in the early 1990s it is looked on with either a nasty suspicion or (worse, I think) a blasé and tired indifference. As feminism increasingly finds its home in the relative safety of the academy, it becomes somewhat acceptable to be a feminist scholar, but not to be a feminist (as in activist).

Is it not premature to declare a social movement/social theory over when it has yet to achieve even a modicum of egalitarian goals? How can we possibly speak of “postfeminism” when a woman is still raped or beaten every twenty seconds? When women earn roughly half of what men do? When decisions about our bodies are decided by courts and legislatures that are filled with male voices? When the inclusion of women into the academic curriculum is still a piecemeal and embattled process? When fetal rights (really male rights) still assert themselves over the rights of women? When feminist is still a dirty word, designed to deny self-determination, power, and legitimacy?

This is not to say that backlash images are the only images—bold shows like Roseanne and the growth of alternative feminist film give hope in these trying times. But the thematic and structural overlaps in these various discourses do produce “commonsense” thinking that proves hard to contest. For example, how often do we all speak
of the need to "juggle" work and family? How often do we hear a news show that laments the "costs" of feminism and the loneliness of the single woman? These ideologies have seeped into our collective consciousness and have come to appear as truth to many of us. They have emerged not only in the utterances of the popular pundits, but in the narratives of familial life in *thirtysomething* and the cautionary stories of angry and violent women betrayed by their biological clocks and, most dangerously, betrayed by a feminism that "promised it all." What is betrayed, in these backlash discourses, is both the gains women have made in changing our social world and the struggles we must continue to wage.