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Masked Victims: Examining the Violence of Femme Fatales in Contemporary Film Noir Cinema

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Masked Victims:  
Examining the Violence of Femme Fatales in Contemporary Film Noir Cinema

by

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Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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in

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Dedication

To Peter for
Inspiring My Motivation Daily
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I would like to thank my family and friends for inspiring me to research a topic I was passionate about and for their willingness to listen to me talk about it relentlessly for months. Without their love and support I would not have felt compelled to challenge myself beyond what I thought I was capable of.

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June 2, 2015
Abstract

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By
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DePaul University, 2015

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This thesis examines how depictions of femininity in both neo-noir and contemporary noir cinema challenge feminist activism, conform to post-feminist ideology and perpetuate problematic depictions of sex and violence in the figure of the femme fatale. In order to understand the textual and ideological function of sex, violence, and victims characterized by women in contemporary noir cinema, this research draws on existing discourse in film and cultural studies and analyzes depictions of violent and sexualized women across genres of film and throughout popular culture. The post-modern culture represented in Hollywood films emphasizes post-feminist notions of female empowerment through individualism, subjectivity, and new ideas of sexual difference. This research is concerned with how women’s rights are depicted through post-feminist characters masquerading as victims and subverting feminist efforts to eradicate social injustice.
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Introduction

In 2011, Rolling Stones highlighted the Amanda Knox story in the culture section of the magazine, illustrating the ongoing turmoil for a young American girl accused of murder but more importantly of being a sex crazed woman. Amanda Knox, an American student studying in Perugia, Italy, was arrested in 2007 for taking part in the murder of her British roommate, Meredith Kercher. Whether there was damning evidence against Knox or not, when the press got word of the crime, they immediately sensationalized a narrative of the murder as a sexually related incident, with Knox starring as the crazed ‘femme fatale.’ In addition to the many damning accusations against Knox’s character, her femininity and sexual relationships would contribute to her assumed guilt. Actual headlines like ‘Orgy of death; Amanda was a Drugged-up Tart,’ were the images of this young American girl presented to the public, by which her innocence or guilt would be judged.¹ After her sentencing of twenty-seven years in an Italian prison, many media outlets emphasized this as an international crisis by challenging the culture of young women in America.

With multiple appeals and a never-ending nightmare, one question prevails, is she a victim or a victimizer? The cultural relevance of the Knox/Kercher case reveals the heightened representation of female violence at the center of public discourse, overstates the complexities of female relationships, and highlights the importance of observing gender roles, particularly the role of femininity. Is femininity a shield for women or has femininity in a contemporary era evolved into a sign of sexual deviance and social guilt? This thesis will seek to answer the ways in which representations of female violence in the media both perpetuate and challenge gender ideology. While the story of Amanda Knox and Meredith Kercher is of a true nature, a crime
such as this one makes for entertaining drama in the film and television industries where it easily adapts into genres including horror, thrillers, and noir.

This study will primarily concentrate on current representations of female violence and supplement the existing research of cultural studies approaches to women in film. Particularly, this fateful ‘femme fatale’ character continues to manifest in contemporary film noir dramas. Over the last two decades, the femme fatale went from representing a spirited shift in social and economic independence to a seemingly more financially and socially subjected women. These altering depictions have been further demonstrated through the character’s varying use of violence and reliance on femininity and sexuality. Erotic thrillers/neo-noirs of the nineties depicted aggressive and threatening career women exemplified in films like Basic Instinct (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), The Temp (Tom Holland, 1993), Disclosure (Barry Levinson, 1994), and The Last Seduction (John Dahl, 1994). The women of contemporary noir from the early two-thousands appear to vary in stages of emotional helplessness and physical aggression; however their outward sexuality remains the primary device for attention and manipulation. Femmes in films like Kiss Kiss Bang Bang (Shane Black, 2005), Derailed (Mikael Hafström, 2005), and The Lookout (Scott Frank, 2007) portray women whose sexual demeanor significantly outweigh their involvement with violence, while noirs from the late two-thousands like Black Swan (Darren Aronofsky, 2010), Columbus Circle (George Gallo, 2012), and Side Effects (Steven Soderbergh, 2013) echo the ferocity of femme fatales from the classical and neo-noir eras. From these transitioning representations of women in film, have stemmed the following questions: What contributing socio-cultural factors are reflected in the violence of femme fatales in contemporary film noir? How do representations of feminine sexuality expose and challenge dominant ideological conceptions of gender? I will argue that in both past and present noir, the
representation of manipulative women who masquerade as victims symbolize the complex relationship of fear and empowerment of feminist activism.

**The Conventions and Characters of Noir**

Discussion of film noir among scholars usually brings up the issue surrounding how it should be categorized. Is film noir a style or a genre? Film scholars like Paul Schrader extend the belief that film noir is not a genre because its defining qualities are ones of tone and mood rather than more distinct conventions of setting or conflict. Additionally, Hilary Neroni has noted that “unlike genres (such as Westerns or the gangster film), noir does not have as fixed a set of patterns or criteria… noir’s styles and themes often run across genres.” However, Neroni asserts the importance of understanding the aesthetic ideologies present in film noir, especially as they are manifested in the character of the femme fatale. I acknowledge the conflicting perceptions of film noir, because I plan to categorize it as a genre following the guiding film theory of Rick Altman.

Rick Altman extends his original semantic/syntactic approach to genre in the appendix to *Film/Genre* titled, “A Semantic/Syntactic/Pragmatic Approach to Genre.” The original essay stressed the need for a dual understanding of the patterns of film genre in combination with the ideologies represented within the text. This added pragmatic approach further widens the scope of understanding generic representations. Altman notes the misgivings of established genre studies by arguing that,

> “Treating genres as neutral constructs, semioticians of the sixties and early seventies blinded us to the discursive power of generic formations… they were unable to perceive the important role of genres in exercising influence on the interpretive communities.”

A semantic examination simply demonstrates the common traits such as characters, settings, attitudes, etc. In film noir, semantics would equate to characters such as the hard-boiled
detective and the femme fatale, dark, urban cityscapes as the setting, and corruption and greed being common attitudes. The syntactic approach supplements these recognizable elements of the genre by establishing the structure in which they are arranged and their relationship to the socio-political aspects of the culture in which they were produced. Furthermore, in order to not simply reduce all films to a formula, pragmatic analysis extends the possibility for divergent interpretations. For the purpose of this study, it is essential to understand how historically specific socio-political attitudes relate to the violent and/or sexual manifestations of femme fatales in more contemporary noir. In regards to the lack of attention paid towards evolving genres, Altman has proposed that “this new model for understanding the genre will provide answers for many of the questions traditional to genre study.” Therefore, the semantics of the noir genre will be useful in situating contemporary femme fatales within films that suit the genre, while the syntactic approach will reveal the ideology present in more contemporary noir. Moreover, pragmatic analysis will incorporate multiple views of the femme fatale that may differ from my own as well as the scholars I base my research on with the intent to acknowledge the possibility of conflicting audiences.

While I plan to focus this thesis on the contemporary moment in noir cinema, there will be reference to past decades of film noir in order to illuminate the historical presence of gender ideology within a cultural context. When French film critics viewing American cinema of the forties and fifties observed common stylistic aesthetics, corrupted characters, and dark attitudes, they ascribed the term film noir and established the generic conventions of noir. This era is referred to as ‘classical noir.’ While the reemergence of noir influenced films occurring towards the late sixties prompted the term ‘neo-noir,’ I will be referring to ‘neo-noir’ films exclusively from the late eighties and early nineties, as they continued to represent nihilistic
characters and female angst alongside social and political criticism of second-wave feminist agendas.

In the book *Neo-Noir: Contemporary Film Noir from Chinatown to the Dark Knight*, Douglas Keesey acknowledges the challenges of defining neo-noir and contemporary noir as the classical era of noir presents similar issues of uncertainty about generalizations. He claims that more modern noir is not only self-conscious of its relation to past noirs, but that films are often characterized by blurred boundaries, hybrid genres, social change, and technological advances in filmmaking. As it relates to this research, his categorization of noirs influenced by social contemporary change will be useful in examining the femme fatale alongside the progress of women’s social issues. Keesey notes that, “the women’s movement and the male backlash against it have deepened audience ambivalence to the femme fatale.”

Likewise, in *Women in Film Noir*, E. Anne Kaplan introduces a compilation of essays which explain the tumultuous representations of gender and genre that are manifested in the femme fatale character specifically in noir cinema. In an expanded edition of the text, Kaplan reflects upon the revival of the femme fatale in noir films of the nineties. Noting the proliferation of neo-noir films during this time often marked by a fall from wealth to poverty, she argues, “what links the 40s to the 90s is the political and social sense of something amiss in American culture.” With a strong focus on the multiple meanings the femme fatale carries from classical film noir to neo-noir, one of the key factors addresses the increase in sexual imagery. Kaplan argues that femmes lusted more so after money in classical noir in contrast to the added sexual gratification sought out by femmes in neo-noir films of the 90s. The chapter, “The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the Femme Fatale in 90s Cinema,” specifically informs this research since the author (Kate Stables) examines the post-modern U.S culture and the changes
within the film industry which correlate with the portrayal of more explicit female sexuality and sadomasochist practices.\textsuperscript{16}

In the article, “Vicious Womanhood” Mark Jancovich reevaluates the femme fatale and the anxieties surrounding her existence in classical film noir. Jancovich argues that while historically the femme fatale is associated as a representation of male fears towards working women during the war years, the character more often appears as a ‘kept woman’\textsuperscript{17} or a woman dependent on a man. Additionally, rather than indulging male fears and sexual fantasies, femme fatales in noir from the late forties were more frequently associated with female audiences and the woman's film because of the cross genre casting of actresses like Olivia De Havilland, Betty Davis and Rita Hayworth, who were trying to revamp their careers.\textsuperscript{18} Through various media reviews of noirs during the forties, Jancovich demonstrates the concept of the ‘kept woman.’ In a review of \textit{Fallen Angel} (Otto Preminger, 1945), a \textit{New York Times} writer explains that:

“this ‘siren’ is motivated by a conventional ‘hankering for the security of marriage,’” so that, while she may work in a diner, he did not regard her as a figure of independence, but rather one that longs to be a kept woman, and sexually manipulates men in her search for the most financially advantageous partnership.”\textsuperscript{19}

The pattern of dependent women, is again noted in a \textit{Times} article about \textit{Scarlett Street} (Fritz Lang, 1945) when the reviewer references the femme fatale as, “not an independent, working woman, but rather ‘a pretty gold-digger,’ a figure of greed, selfishness and idleness.”\textsuperscript{20}

The running themes and attitudes established in classical noir in combination with the recurring characters are essential to evaluating the reemergence of these same patterns in subsequent films of a similar nature. While many scholars view film noir more as a style of filmmaking, I am proposing that the attitudes and specifically the representations of gender anxiety follow the syntactical component of Altman’s genre studies and therefore those contemporary films that reflect similar attitudes and characters should be evaluated in the context
of belonging to the noir genre. Further analysis of noirs from the nineties to the present will demonstrate where both patriarchal and feminist values are confronted in terms of the femme fatale’s sexual and violent nature. Additionally, following this rationality of the ‘kept woman,’ I will be highlighting instances where the femme fatales from this designated time frame signify the characteristics of the classical era ‘kept woman,’ in a more modern context.

**Political Reform and the Women’s Movement**

In *Women’s Rights in the USA: Policy, Debates, and Gender Roles*, Dorothy McBride and Janine A. Parry examine issues relating to women’s rights from both a historical and contemporary context. They note that public debate is frequently a contest to determine the gender role ideologies that will be the basis for policy. They analyze include education, work, family, sexuality, reproductive rights, and economic status. This book is a great resource for the type of cultural research used in this thesis, since it includes a framework for understanding women’s rights, policymaking and feminist activism throughout the history of the United States. Chapter selections used to inform this thesis include issues of work and pay, reproduction, sexuality intimidation, and feminist debates.

In *A History of U.S. Feminism*, the author Rory Dicker addresses feminist activism from the first, second, and third waves in order to establish what feminism is, what feminists believe, and what they have accomplished. She situates first-wave feminism alongside activity during the nineteenth and early twentieth century which focused primarily on women's suffrage and the Nineteenth Amendment. Second-wave feminism is described as occurring between the sixties to the early eighties with an emphasis on the legal victories in terms of women’s access to education, jobs, and reproductive choice. The third-wave of feminism is situated in the early nineties in part as a backlash against the second-wave, but more so because of a revival in
political and social activism interested in furthering the gains of the second-wave in terms of a more collective approach towards gender, racial, economic, and social justice. The ‘wave’ metaphor has been critiqued by Dicker as well as scholars such as Angela McRobbie, because of its separatist attitudes and generational divides that limit new discussions of collective ideas. However, Dicker acknowledges these limitations yet employs the wave model in order to capture the forward and backwards movement of feminism.

In physics, a ‘wave’ is described as a disturbance that travels through a medium from one location to another location. It can also be defined as something that swells and dies away. I find the term to be a useful metaphor for describing the history of feminism, since there are specific periods of heightened social and political activism that disturb the status quo then fade out. Like McRobbie and Dicker, I acknowledge the limitations that the term provides in regards to perpetuating a divide between the different generations of women. However, as this research concerns films from specific time periods, I will be using the terms ‘second-wave’ and ‘third-wave’ feminism throughout this thesis to mark the chronology of corresponding social activism as discussed in both Women’s Rights in the USA: Policy, Debates, and Gender Roles, and A History of U.S. Feminism.

**Contemporary Representations of Women in the Media**

The media, including magazines, radio, television, and film have always been a site for representation of the existing cultural expectations and influences including the socio-political effects of the various feminist movements. The idea of post-feminism has become a topic for critique in contemporary media culture. This is due in part to media outlets predominantly representing younger generations of women who now have more access to employment and education yet cease to question their equality and treat feminism as a thing of the past. Cinema
specifically has been a medium that encourages the existing culture to be reflected in the narrative, style, and technology of its given time, and therefore proves to be a valuable source of examining representations of female characters. Specifically looking at the use of femininity and violent behavior by femme fatale characters in both neo-noir and contemporary noir will help determine what gender ideology they align with and/or challenge as well as how that connects to this post-feminist critique of modern depictions of women in film.

In *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity*, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff explore “the ways in which gender is lived, experienced, and represented,” through femininities seen across sex, race, class, and nationality. Seeking to investigate contemporary notions of ‘hegemonic femininity,’ this book draws from early discourse on psychoanalytical conceptions of womanliness as a masquerade and femininity as a policed set of practices and performances. As it relates to notions of contemporary femininity, the authors specify the ways in which post-feminism has been defined in academia as it can suggest various meanings. Post-feminism is accounted for in four ways with the suggestion that older ways of looking at depictions of gender are limiting new possibilities. They first define post-feminism as an *epistemological break within feminism* that marks ‘the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including post-modernism.’ Second, they refer to post-feminism as *an historical shift after the height of Second Wave feminism* which connotes a ‘pastness’ of feminism and has also been used synonymously with Third-Wave feminism. Third, they note the common reference to *backlash against feminism* which attributes all women’s unhappiness to feminism, and the mentality that ‘all the battles have been won.’ Lastly, and most relevant to this thesis is the approach to *post-feminism as a sensibility* which draws on Angela McRobbie’s argument that post-feminist culture is a double entanglement that
both takes feminism into account and repudiates it. While this thesis primarily employs the fourth definition of post-feminist critique, these varying definitions are worth mentioning because parts of this research are inclusive of the conflicting discourse on post-feminism cited in the first three definitions. Furthermore, the collection of essays in *New Femininities* explores a multitude of topics on femininity. One of the chapters titled, “Pregnant Beauty: Maternal Femininities under Neoliberalism” by Imogen Tyler, interrogates maternal imagery in popular culture from media to politics. The observations made in this chapter significantly inform the second chapter of this thesis in regards to contemporary cinema, representations of body autonomy, and reproductive rights.

In *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, Angela McRobbie highlights the issues and political consequences of post-feminism and its ostensibly antifeminist characterization in consumer culture and the media. McRobbie questions whether capitalism actually gives women more or less of what they want with cheap and available entertainment which now incorporates a seemingly feminist agenda in the plot and story lines. Furthermore, she explores the effects consumer culture has on so called female freedoms as it appears supportive of female success while fueling this notion of post-feminism with irrational habits such as superfluous spending and beauty culture. Additionally, McRobbie looks back on psychoanalytic writing on film and fashion of the eighties which reinstate the importance of identification and desire associated with consuming images. In her review of beauty culture and the contemporary makeover shows, McRobbie recognizes the divided nature of women from different class and status and the antagonisms associated with these disparities when she states, “I am concerned with the way in which the production and reproduction of social divisions are increasingly feminized and with how the social categories of class are now materialized through
reference to the female body.” This recognized shift toward a more competitive neoliberal order amongst women relates to my research on contemporary noir from the late two-thousands found in chapter three; specifically, the competitive nature of women demonstrated by the femme fatale and the violence used on and between women of different class or social status.

Drawing from the works of Angela McRobbie, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra stress the feminist issues of class, race, and the presumed state of ‘pastness’ in Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Culture. Tasker and Negra specifically cite post-feminism as a principle which:

Works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of women as empowered consumer. Thus, postfeminist culture emphasizes educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment.

Fostering these negative connotations that follow post-feminism, the authors also note that “postfeminism is white and middle class by default…also a strategy by which other kinds of social difference are glossed over.” Furthermore, they find post-feminist culture challenging to media studies, since traditionally feminist media studies is read against the grain of popular culture seeking out traces of feminism for female viewers; whereas, post-feminist culture is produced in response to feminism. Therefore, the collection of essays that makes up this book serve to differentiate between feminist politics and post-feminist culture. In the chapter, “Adultery, Boredom, and the ‘Working Girl’ in Twenty-First-Century American Cinema,” the author Suzanne Leonard explores the complications of class and working women in the form of a ‘bored woman worker,’ in contemporary cinema.

Lastly, in Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture, Ariel Levy questions contemporary pop culture that identifies as post-feminist and also embraces raunchy
behaviors associated with sexism and objectifying women. Media portrayals of women associated with sexual gratification from ‘lad mags’ like Maxim to the crime fighting film heroines in *Charlie’s Angels* (McG, 2000/2003) have prompted such critique. For Levy, sex has seemingly become more about a performance for women rather than about pleasure. She stresses the need for a distinction between selling sex and sexual liberation.40 Furthermore, as women adopt the male ways of objectifying themselves and other women in the name of liberation, Levy notes that this phenomenon of raunch culture is nothing more than a lucrative way to perpetuate oppression.41 This book significantly informs the second chapter of this thesis as it is illustrative of popular culture in the early two-thousands.

The comparative analyses available on post-feminist media culture extensively draw on each other from one aspect to another, and are helpful in contextualizing my own hypothesis that cultural influence and ideological depictions of gender exist in noir cinema. In order to incorporate pragmatic analysis of noir in regards to interpreting violence and sexuality, additional scholarship that challenges the arguments of the previously mentioned authors will also be used to demonstrate the varying discourse around the issues of contemporary femininity. While my arguments in this thesis tend to align more with McRobbie, Tasker, Negra, and Levy, I believe acknowledging differing perceptions will strengthen the point of view that post-feminist representations in the media tend to demonstrate this so called ‘double entanglement.’ Moreover, whereas critique of post-feminist culture is substantial to the research done in this study, they are not the only bases for suggesting manifestations of female aggression and sexual manipulation in contemporary noir cinema. Analyses of film narrative techniques as well as the use of generic film patterns used in specific texts also form a foundation to this thesis.
A History of Violence and the Femme Fatale

Representations of violence have been problematic in the media now for decades. Rather than criticizing the media’s use of violence, scholars seek to investigate the purpose of violence and what it says about the present culture. Since the early 20th century, cinema has seen an increase in feminist issues represented across genres of film. The classical era of noir has been a particular site of interrogating gender ideology, since the femme fatale has had a reputation of deriving power through her sexuality and defying her fate through the use of violence.

Specifically as it applies to this research, the femme fatale’s violence has fluctuated from overt in nineties neo-noir to almost non-existent in the early two-thousands, and triggered once again in the late two-thousands. These varying representations of violence alongside sexuality have prompted a cultural examination. Further analysis of female hostility and the lack thereof manifested in more contemporary noir cinema will indicate how gender ideology is presented in the genre, as well as how narrative film methods perpetuate problematic depictions of women in relation to feminist debates.

In Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies, edited by Martha McCaughey and Neal King, essay contributors initiate one of the earliest studies of violent women in movies with less of an emphasis on critique of the current depictions of sexuality and femininity and more on the historical importance. In response to male violence against women, the variety of essays across genres such as Hong Kong, Rape Revenge, and Cop Dramas analyze violent women's respective places in the history of cinema and the context in which their violence arises. Following on the heels of a rise in violent women portrayed in films of the late eighties and early nineties, McCaughey and King argue that, “places and patterns into which women fit in the popular imagination deserve attention, but we need to stop asserting that nothing is what it seems, that all
of women’s attempts at resistance in movies lead to failure.” The compilation of essays primarily looks at films as “texts with social contexts and possible uses in the reconstruction of masculinity and femininity.” One of the key principals noted in this book is that violent women arise in different decades based on issues of race and class, especially as attitudes around gender shift. For instance, the early seventies delivered Blaxploitation films like Coffy (Jack Hill, 1973) and Foxy Brown (Jack Hill, 1974) which focus on the struggles of a vigilante, inner-city, black woman. Included in these essays are the issues of body image and sexual autonomy. The various authors in these essays seek to study film texts of violent women from a more empowered social perspective rather than a critique of media violence. The chapter, “If Looks Could Kill: Power, Revenge, and Stripper Movies,” written by Jeffrey A. Brown specifically addresses the issue of erotized violence and what if any feminist potential it provides. The views expressed in this book primarily serve as alternative perspectives from my own in order to account for diverse interpretations. However, the compilation of work in this book establishes the consistent shifts in culture and a need for constant reevaluation of gender representation as it reflects social anxieties through film narratives, which compares to my own purpose of research.

Drawing from Reel Knockouts, Hilary Neroni explores how violent female characters disrupt the narrative of a film and challenge cultural principals in, The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Culture. She states that, “film violence both produces and resists ideology…violence often appears to erupt when ideology fails.” Furthermore, she argues that the representations of violent women are either ideologically motivated or revolutionary antagonisms. At the core of her investigation, Neroni seeks to establish that violence and femininity are two things that when combined disrupt the social order by stating, “the violence of the woman doesn’t fit into either fantasy and this
prevents the kind of ideological security that fantasy usually encourages.” Neroni approaches violent women mainly through psychoanalysis. While that is one approach to studying films, it is my intention to build from her discussion of ideology presented in narrative and character violence through more cultural studies methods.

As an extension to the discussion of gender representations and female violence, the article “‘Stay Still So We Can See Who You Are’: Anxiety and Bisexual Activity in the Contemporary Femme Fatale Film,” written by Katherine Farrimond examines the behavior of the bisexual femme fatale. Farrimond suggests that representations of bisexualy active woman depicted in erotic noir films of the late eighties and nineties are problematic and evocative of mainstream pornography. Alongside the excess of sex, deceit, and death that the femme fatale figure delivers, the bisexual element of the character speaks to wider anxieties surrounding the nature of sexual orientation, behavior and identity. More importantly, these violent and eroticized femmes signify patriarchal fantasies of women and potentially subversive political implications of sexually powerful women.

The chapter, “A Woman Scorned: The Neo-Noir Erotic Thriller as Revenge Drama,” in the book Neo-Noir also adds to the discussion of violent femme fatales. This chapter focuses primarily on the neo-noir era, and it provides insight to my first chapter on career femme fatales in nineties noir. The author (Linda Ruth Williams) categorizes popular noir films of this time into family noirs, corporate noirs, and teen noirs. The section on corporate noirs directly relates to the first chapter in this thesis as it investigates representations of women in the workplace. This chapter uniquely positions the corporate femme fatale as a revenge-seeking woman, since culturally the workplace is a significant site of inequality. Moreover, it addresses concern over the combination of sex and work.
Lastly, in the chapter, “Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Film Violence,” in *Interrogating Postfeminism*, author Lisa Coultard extends feminist analysis of female heroism and violence beyond celebration of pleasure and consumption. She suggests that there is a new emphasis on ‘postvictim’ feminism in representations of gender and violence in popular cinema. One of the fundamental questions she seeks to investigate is whether or not films featuring women with violence central to their character can be critiqued for offering empty discourse of false liberation through violent yet active women. More importantly, her analysis of representations of violence and victimization as something potentially regressive or even as constructions of dominant ideology particularly resonate with my own analysis of the femme fatale as victim and victimizer.

The first two texts serve as companions to one another as well as a foundation for my own examination of manifestations of female violence. While both *Reel Knockouts* and *The Violent Woman* explore texts across multiple genres, they also spend time specifically on the femme fatale within noir and offer a unique perspective of her depicted vulnerability and violent crimes. Neroni looks at each violent act and examines how it destabilizes traditional femininity. McCaughey and King examine the physical form of the femme fatale’s body through character and actress as it confuses images of the masculine and feminine. The three chapter selections, “Stay Still So We Can See Who You Are’: Anxiety and Bisexual Activity in the Contemporary Femme Fatale Film,” “A Woman Scorned: The Neo-Noir Erotic Thriller as Revenge Drama,” and “Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Film Violence,” contribute to more current scholarly discourse surrounding female violence in contemporary films including that of the femme fatale. Each of these chapters significantly informs my own research in regards to the use of violence in the context of revenge and victimization and suggests cultural influences. Moreover, all of these
sources include aesthetic and narrative analysis that parallels my own approach to understanding femme fatale violence.

**Chapter Outline**

Having constituted the theoretical frameworks which will inform this thesis, I focus now on each chapter which will construct my argument. I concentrate in three chapters on the defining cultural influences of physically aggressive and sexually manipulative women in contemporary film. An emphasis on the film noir genre will contextualize where resulting representations of violence and social issues occur in the medium, specifically as they relate to gender anxiety common to the genre. Each chapter will include a case study to enhance my analysis of contemporary women in film as well as socio-cultural concerns. These in-depth analyses specifically examine female characters who challenge constructed gender roles by exploiting their femininity through their sexuality, vulnerability and/or violence. The principal claims made in this thesis serve to highlight shifting cultural values in a post-modern and post-feminist context that are separate from feminist goals but reflected in the media as analogous.

In the first chapter I establish the use of gender ideology as a recurring thematic function in film noir, as well as how the narrative simultaneously evokes femme fatales from the classical period while granting new character endings in *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1994). By evaluating narrative and character explanations for the femme fatale’s violence, this section will illuminate patterns of feminine perversions as well as antagonistic representations of greed and sexual autonomy in the workplace. The second chapter focuses primarily on body ownership in relation to heterosexual relationships, specifically looking at patterns of male authority over female sexuality seen in noir of the early two-thousands. Analysis of the film *Derailed* (Mikael Häfström, 2005) will illuminate social issues regarding reproductive rights in relation to political
family ideology. Lastly, the third chapter evaluates the relationship between women in contemporary film noir looking specifically at *Columbus Circle* (George Gallo, 2012) and the reflection of hostility between feminist and post-feminist values. With a focus on deceptive and abusive intimate relationships, this chapter will demonstrate social and class divides represented by two opposing female characters.

The case studies presented in the subsequent three chapters, while limited in scope, serve to evoke the overall shifting patterns of sexually aggressive and hostile femme fatales in neo-noir and contemporary noir cinema. There are many films worth exploring from the catalog of noir; however, my justification for choosing these films is primarily concerned with the fact that each designates a femme fatale masquerading as a victim through constructed ideas of femininity and vulnerability. Additionally, each femme fatale demonstrates varying levels of aggression either towards men or other women within the course of the noir genre. Examples of both aggressive and docile femme fatales from the nineties to the present seemingly reflect feminist centered issues of their respected time which include equality in the workplace, reproductive rights, and domestic abuse. I want to examine further how exactly these social issues are portrayed within the noir genre of film, since they seemingly challenge yet perpetuate the culture in which they come from. Furthermore, I think it is worth mentioning that there are contemporary film noirs that visually emulate the classical noir period whether through setting, time period, hard-boiled dialogue, or lighting techniques, such as *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997), *Sin City* (Frank Miller & Robert Rodriguez, 2005), *The Black Dahlia* (Brian De Palma, 2006), *Hollywoodland* (Allen Coulter, 2006), and *Hotel Noir* (Sebastian Gutierrez, 2012). However, it is because these films purposely evoke the classical noir style that I chose to avoid analyzing them. Rather, the focus of this study is on noir films situated in their contemporary time period.
Drawing from established film genre theory, feminist studies, and film studies, I plan to examine the function of violence in film narratives and the implications of deceptive femininity. It is necessary for academics investigating media studies of genre and gender to continue to evaluate portrayals of women in cinema especially as the noir genre continues to implement some of the more superfluous elements of the hyper-sexualized and notorious femme fatale. Through the use of cultural studies, genre studies, and textual analysis, this thesis will reveal the contributing social influences in contemporary representations of women in film. Furthermore, it will continue the work that must be done to study noir and contribute to the limited scholarship available on contemporary film reflective of the culture and attitudes towards modern-day women.
Chapter One: Post-Feminism and the Career Fatale

Influenced by industry changes, modern filming techniques, and contemporary social issues, neo-noir films of the eighties and nineties reprised the popular style of noir while distinguishing themselves from the classical era. Primarily examining neo-noir of the nineties will reveal where and how feminist issues have been taken into account and challenged by reflections of gender confusion and women in the work place. This decade was chosen for analysis because it is often demarcated as the beginning of third-wave feminism alongside continuing backlash against second-wave feminism and growing concern regarding post-feminism. Additionally, this time period helps contextualize and understand the function of the genre currently and how the genre continues to articulate primary issues of sexuality and violence. Furthermore, starting in this decade will help draw visual and narrative comparisons of current and past femme fatales. In this chapter, I will examine representations of working women, their desire for money, and their use of sexuality and feminine constructions, with a primary focus on the femme fatale from The Last Seduction (John Dahl, 1994) as a case study.

First and foremost, I would like to distinguish between the principals of third-wave feminism and post-feminist theories which are discussed throughout this thesis and form the basis of understanding where and how the femme fatale aligns with these ideologies. Many scholars agree that the early nineties prompted the third-wave of feminism in order to restore the activism that had been deterred through backlash prevalent at the end of the eighties.¹ With an emphasis on the collaborative nature of identity, the third-wave strives to extend its concerns for people disadvantaged by gender, color, class, sexual orientation, or disability, rather than the exclusive focus on middle-class white women for which the second-wave has been critiqued.² The third-wavers tend to promote collective action to eliminate sexism and oppression by
working within organizations founded by their feminist predecessors like National Organization for Women (NOW), Planned Parenthood or The National Women’s Political Caucus, as well as organizations they’ve created on their own.³ For instance, the nonprofit National Asian Women’s Health Organization (NAWHO) works to achieve healthy equality for Asian women and families.⁴ On the other hand, post-feminism as it is analyzed in this study, focuses on individualism, choice, and empowerment by encouraging women to take control of their own lives by seizing economic, political, and sexual power.⁵ It is more of a sentiment that emphasizes new ideas about sexual difference and the ‘resexualization’ of women’s bodies.⁶ Consumerism is central to post-feminism and sexual difference is commoditized.⁷ Furthermore, there is a preoccupation in the media and popular culture with relating these post-feminist sentiments to middle-to-upper class Western women, while inequalities relating to race, class, age, sexuality, disability, and gender continue to persist within the same culture.⁸ In order to understand the femme fatale of this period, it is essential to explore post-feminist discourse further as it tends to incorporate yet challenge the feminist system of its time, as does the femme fatale through her constructions of femininity and violent behavior.

Noticeably, modern young women seem to find feminism less palatable than it once was in the late sixties and seventies. Angela McRobbie notes that, “women constitute half of the world’s population and their subordination and experience of inequality, though changed, remains unequivocal and substantial.”⁹ Interviews done in the late eighties showed that women did not want to be labeled feminist due to the negative connotations associated with the word such as “bra-burning, hairy-legged amazon, and female supremist.”¹⁰ McRobbie argues that this distaste can be encouraged through vilified representations of feminism in the media, which in turn can lead to backlash or a conscious effort to subvert feminist goals. Furthermore, she notes
that past feminist goals have been abandoned due to the seeming equality and promise of freedom and independence exemplified by wage earning as a sign of citizenship and respectability, as well as more access to education, employment, and participation in consumer culture.\textsuperscript{11}

To illustrate the aversion toward feminism and where subversive reactions exist in popular culture, McRobbie highlights two media advertisements in the early nineties. The first, a Wonderbra advertisement, which depicts busty model Eva Herzigova wearing the bra and looking down at her chest captioned with the phrase ‘Hello Boys.’\textsuperscript{12} The second example refers to a television commercial for Citroën featuring super model Claudia Schiffer undressing as she descends a luxurious staircase, walks out the door, and gets into the new car.\textsuperscript{13} Both of these examples, as McRobbie suggests, refer to the superficial expressions of female individuality and empowerment through sexuality which are ultimately contradicted by these women’s willingness to be looked at or objectified.\textsuperscript{14} Both advertisements, while depicting models that are known to be highly paid, simultaneously constitute conscious sexism by promoting the idea that objectifying women is no longer taboo. Taking into account that women are now included as target consumers for these products, sexualized imagery is to be accepted by women or they run the risk of being identified as crazy ‘feminists.’

When considering these sexualized images of women in the media and their ideological function, they are no more prevalent than in the noir genre of film. Following Altman’s genre theory of connecting themes, ideology, and interpretation through semantics, syntax, and pragmatics, this chapter designates the revival of the noir genre in the nineties as it embraced the classical style while simultaneously incorporating modern narratives and film techniques. As Douglas Keesey suggests, classical noir often depicted gender anxiety reflective of post-WWII
within the character relationships and balance of power between the sexes. Likewise, neo-noir of the nineties also reflected apprehension towards changing gender roles at home and in the workplace with an emphasis on female sexual performance. Kate Stables examines the postmodern femme fatale in her contributing chapter “The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the Femme Fatale in 1990's Cinema,” in Women in Film Noir. She states that, “the ‘new’ fatale represents and uniquely reflects current discourse around ‘woman’…. whose ingredients vary according to the time and climate of her creation.” Most notably, Stables suggests that examining the post-modern culture and changes in the film industry are principle to understanding the ‘new’ and highly eroticized femme fatale of the nineties. Once the Motion Picture Production Code was replaced by the MPAA film rating system in 1968, the film industry employed artistic freedom with more explicit content. In order to appeal to mass markets globally, cinema including neo-noir incorporated more universally marketable stories revolving around sexual obsessions and violent deaths. Associating women with sex and death is an age old equation that the post-modern femme fatale of the nineties only perpetuates as a new sexually-liberated and threatening figure. Additionally, the iconography historically inscribed in the cinematic interpretation of the femme fatale is hyperbolized by elaborate sex scenes that fundamentally alter the generic make-up and perception of the femme fatale.

As the pragmatic approach suggests the possibility for multiple readings and reception of a film or character, examining these representations of sexually-liberated and violent women requires acknowledgement of the various discourse available on the topic. Kate Stables adds to this by noting that because postmodern cinema is polysemic it therefore accommodates and privileges radically opposing discourse. Ergo, the same film might be reviled or celebrated for its construction of dominant ideology. For instance, McRobbie’s analysis of modern media
observes a seemingly negative departure from second-wave activism, while contributing authors to the book *Reel Knockouts* focus more on some of the positive aspects of female aggression as a reaction to persistent male dominance. In a chapter titled “If Looks Could Kill: Power, Revenge, and Stripper Movies,” the author (Jeffrey Brown) discusses the possibility for alternative readings of erotic imagery and violence produced in stripper movies and renegotiates the dynamics of power and control of the male gaze and the female object. Moreover, Linda Ruth Williams takes a more impartial approach to analyzing violent women in erotic noirs in her contributing chapter “A Woman Scorned,” in *Neo Noir*. Within the chapter Williams describes corporate noirs and the two-sided nature of the greedy femme fatale as neither a total narcissist nor a pure advocate of women’s rights. The objective of this thesis is not to necessarily privilege one perspective over the other but rather to question how femme fatales align with the women and cultural relevance of their time. Consequently, my approach does tend to align more with McRobbie’s arguments regarding post-feminist influence in media depictions of contemporary women that suggest a departure from the women’s movement. Further discussion of women’s issues regarding female autonomy and corporate positions will suggest the ideological and cautionary reactions towards career women represented by the femme fatales in nineties neo-noir. Ultimately, this chapter evaluates the threatening presence of female sex and violence as it relates to post-feminist sentiments towards economic, political, and sexual power and the status of career women.

**The Aftermath of the Second-Wave**

Women have long been part of the workforce in the United States in some capacity or another, whether as a governess, nurse, school teacher or even as clerical workers. Since 1900 they have never been less than 19 percent of the paid workforce. The efforts for better pay and
more esteemed positions grew exponentially following the women’s movement in the late sixties and seventies. After years of working in childcare, low education teaching, the service industries for minimum wage, and even manufacturing positions during WWII, women moved into higher paying positions in corporate America. In the decades following second-wave feminist political action, the younger generations of women put their new rights to use in the workplace with more access to education, higher employment, the rise of corporate jobs, and increased access to daycare. With the growing number of women who sought out careers, marriage and families, emerged the ideal of the ‘Superwoman,’ who wore power suits and worked both at home and outside the home. However, discourse about hidden burdens regarding the balance between families and careers emerged, which was designated as the ‘glass ceiling,’ or limitations to women achieving the highest possible positions. Even more so there was apprehension towards shifting the responsibilities at home amongst men, which upheld the patriarchal order that women should reside at home. Manifestations of these issues can be seen in films of the time like Baby Boom (Charles Shyer, 1987), which chronicles a career woman trying to balance work and being a new mom. Even Mr. Mom (Stan Dragoti, 1983) demonstrates the antagonistic relationship between gendered domestic and financial responsibilities.

Between 1980 and 1990 the gap between men and women’s median salaries decreased by nearly 10%. However, with little to no women in the top ranks of Fortune 100 companies, there was still a trail to blaze for female executives. By the early nineties, representations of working women climbing the ladder as well as in positions of power emerged in erotic thrillers with films like Single White Female (Barbet Schroeder, 1992), Basic Instinct (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), The Temp (Tom Holland, 1993), and Disclosure (Barry Levinson, 1994). While these films represent more of the mainstream cinema at that time, TV movies, made-for-cable, or direct-to-video films
also demonstrated similar sexed-up noirish themes regarding working women, including *The Last Seduction* (John Dahl, 1994) which was first released on cable. What these films seemingly have in common aside from career-driven female characters and themes of erotic violence is a preoccupation with middle-to-upper class white women. When combined, these dominant characterizations of female leads signify more of the post-feminist sentiments regarding sexual difference and individualized empowerment through the work force and wage earning capacity.

Taking into account the emphasis on inclusiveness that third-wave feminism encourages, women of color in corporate leadership roles were worse off. The lack of representation of powerful women of color in high ranking positions as well as in the media was evident. The exception to this pattern in mainstream films and erotic noirs focusing on white women advancing in the career world may perhaps exist in the neo-noirs directed by Carl Franklin. Franklin’s films underlined the plight of the ‘other’ including economic struggles and identity. Echoing expressions of racial strains from the LA Riots to the OJ Simpson trial, *One False Move* (1992) and *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995) each feature a leading woman of color socially strained by her ‘other’ identity. In the article, "Dumb Lugs and Femme Fatales," B. Ruby Rich notes the suggested moral development for neo-noir in Franklin’s films when she claims there is a “route out of the grifters and dead-end futures that litter the byways of the genre. It’s only made possible, though, by the deployment of an “outside” identity—African Americans, non-fatal femmes, gays and lesbians.” From this perspective, the femmes of *DIABD* and *One False Move* seemingly depict more feminist inclusiveness than that of the erotic thrillers. However, as this chapter is concerned with exploring representations of women within the career world, it is worth exploring further the spectacle of sex and violence in conjunction with working women demonstrated in the erotic noirs of the genre.
Whether justified as vengeance or seemingly excessive and erotic in nature, femme fatale violence in these neo-noirs indicates a need to explore the social climate. Ultimately these representations of aggression and betrayal from both white women and women of color are worth examining further as they are not only indicative of racial tensions but also reflections of gender anxiety present in the nineties. The following section further compares the third-wave and post-feminist criticism in regards to preventative and active aggressive behavior. As women were taking jobs outside of the home and in the public sphere, the issue of safety and labeling women as victims became a growing debate amongst activists and self-identifying feminists. In order to illustrate the contributing factors to the rise in female film violence in the nineties, it is essential to understand the efforts to promote female safety through real world self-defense methods as the two ostensibly coincide with the femme fatale’s victim mask.

**Girl Power**

During second-wave feminism of the seventies, women had few places to turn when they felt threatened, especially in their own homes. If a woman’s husband hit her, it was hard to find assistance due to the fact that domestic abuse was neither discussed in public nor a term yet coined.33 With more women moving into the public arena in regards to jobs and schooling, defense against violence and sex crimes became a particular topic with conflicting solutions. By the end of the eighties women could literally take violent threats into their own hands. In 1987 the chemical-based defense spray MACE® was being sold publicly with the purpose to subdue attackers.34 While the product had been invented roughly two decades earlier for the inventor’s wife, it developed into a handy tool for more women walking alone in public spaces. By the early nineties, more activists were rallying together to prevent crimes against women. For instance, in response to the several rapes committed in one New York community, RightRides
was a service developed to provide women free and safe transportation to their homes on the weekend evenings. Another initiative created for preventative measures was Seattle-based Home Alive, which offered affordable self-defense classes after up-and-coming musician Mia Zapata was walking home alone at night and was later found raped and murdered. While these examples are just a few, they are representative of the active and collaborative efforts made to prevent sexual and physical abuse towards women of various races and economic positions.

Contrary to the activists involved in these programs, some scholars criticized such methods of prevention and instead encouraged women to seize economic, political, and sexual power as their best defense. For example, author Katie Rophie argued that the activism to prevent violence against women has cast women as victims. Moreover, she has suggested that the activism against date rape on college campuses has led to a “culture of caution.” In regards to the gender ideology often associated with violent behavior, Hilary Neroni points out that women both literally and metaphorically function as victims of violence and men function as their protectors. It is this stereotype that women such as Rophie were trying to bring to an end by encouraging women to seize the opportunities now available to them. However, this perspective is reductive and does not account for the ways people experience victimization differently. Furthermore, it can be problematic because it tends to diminish victimhood to sexual rigidity and drains feminism of the collective action that invigorated it in the first place.

Within the mainstream media, representations of women using violence as a means of safeguarding their independence and seizing opportunities at whatever cost manifested across genres of film at this time. Action dramas depicted women seeking both just and unjust vengeance against primarily men who wronged them in films such as *Sleeping with the Enemy* (Joseph Ruben, 1991), *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991) and *Set it Off* (F. Gary Gray,
Science Fiction/Fantasy films like *Terminator 2* (James Cameron, 1991), the *Aliens* series (1979-1992), and *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995) featured protective mother figures with muscular builds. Women even wielded guns and badges in crime thrillers like *Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1989), *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), and *Fargo* (Joel & Ethan Coen, 1996). These various manifestations of women using weapons and violence destabilize the ideology that women are victims needing protection by men. Seeing these representations of women safeguarding their independence through means of violence and aggression typically marked as masculine indicate interference in the social order. In order to extend the understanding of the function of femininity and masculinity as they relate to violence, it is useful to analyze the juxtaposition of sexuality and aggression typical of the neo-noirs of this time.

**Eroticism, Violence, and Empowerment**

Parallel to aggression and self-defense practices, reflections of empowered women armed and authorized to defend themselves manifested in the erotic thrillers of the late eighties and early nineties. Femme fatales were no exception to the shift towards exceedingly more violent women in film. While each genre of film handles the subject of female violence differently, neo-noir tends to eroticize femme fatale hostility. This section will examine the sexuality and violence characterized by the femme fatale in several noirs in order to determine the association of third-wave feminism and post-feminism. Additionally, use of supplemental discourse from several scholars including a chapter selection from *Reel Knockouts* will illustrate where diverse perspectives exist in regards to female sexuality and aggression. The editors of *Reel Knockouts* suggest that films can be examined “not simply in terms of whether they properly represent women or feminist principles, but also as texts with social contexts and possible uses in the
reconstruction of masculinity and femininity.”42 While parts of their method vary from my own, studying both social context and reconstruction of gender are critical to this thesis in regards to understanding the drastic shifts in film violence and the ideology it represents.

Films such as Basic Instinct (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) and Body of Evidence (Uli Edel, 1993) quickly come to mind when examining eroticism in neo-noir. While both of these films have been discussed in terms of adopting noir techniques, the use of female nudity and pornographic content tend to overshadow discussions regarding the narrative, technical, and aesthetic facets distinctive of the genre. More significant is the fact that both of these films feature women who combine pleasure with pain by sexualizing violence. With the escalation of aggression alongside female nudity, it is critical to explore this piece alongside feminist film theory as it relates to Laura Mulvey’s revered theories of the male gaze and the objectified female body. In essence, Mulvey claims that woman represents the male ‘other’ and that man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through the image of woman as ‘bearer’ not ‘maker.’43 While this theory has been questioned and expanded upon since its establishment, it does serve as a foundation for analyzing representations of the female body and visual pleasures associated with it on screen.

Departing from this theory and providing an alternative perspective from my own, King and McCaughey propose moving beyond the criticism that these eroticized depictions of women are either sexist or oppressive.44 Furthermore they contend that just because violent women on screen tend to look like “runway models: young, thin, large breasted, and bare skinned,” does not mean that they should be disassociated with feminist activism.45 In his essay “If Looks Could Kill: Power, Revenge, and Stripper Movies,” Jeffrey A. Brown refutes the notion that a female character’s sexiness diminishes her toughness or the film’s feminist potential.46 While Brown
focuses primarily on low-budget, straight-to-video stripper films, his arguments can certainly be applied to other films that erotize violence, especially neo-noir. Brown primarily argues for the dual implications of scopophilia as it relates to the naked female body, meaning that desire and fear are both accentuated in the representations of erotic violent women. He notes that the relationship between female and male characters is usually hostile, and even audience viewers can enjoy watching naked women enact violence, since it is usually out of self-defense towards a male assailant. Femme fatales from the nineties neo-noir period are very rarely victims of the same threats that Brown reviews in stripper films; however, the fetishized depiction of femme fatales simulating sex acts alongside aggressive acts by extension also represents the phallic woman that Brown notes as being the real threat to male viewers. The male viewer does not feel threatened by masculine qualities that women take on such as physical violence, but rather the castrating power that they brandish as seductive objects like their bodies. In other words, while men feel they are in control with their so-called gaze, they are actually submissive to the woman who uses her sexuality to control them.

Understanding sexual agency from this perspective requires redefining the terms of objectivity and subjectivity. While Brown has suggested that women can control the gaze and therefore become the subject rather than the object, Rosalind Gill has proposed that this self-aware sexual ‘subjectification’ is really only objectification disguised as something more destructive. This self-contained narcissistic gaze is developed around post-feminist notions of choice, empowerment, and sexual difference; however, depictions of the female body as a powerful sex symbol are often presented as a woman’s sole source of identity. Ostensibly, women may feel empowered from a subject position, but they allow themselves to be objects to others. Furthermore, reducing women to their bodies consequently pressures them into
impossible standards of what is considered sexy and powerful. In this case, the standard is demonstrated as young, thin, large breasted, and bare skinned. Ergo, redefining sexual agency in terms of objectivity allows for new forms of gender anxiety and potentially more reactionary body policing.

The film *Basic Instinct* exemplifies where these contrasting points diverge. For example, the notorious ‘crotch shot’ scene demonstrates the gratuitous nature of the post-code era and the instability of gender and power characterized by the femme fatale. The scene is set up in an interrogation room with a group of men on one side of the room and Catherine Tramell, the femme, solely on the other side. The camera points to the men entranced and sweating as they question her. Catherine, however, is cool as a cucumber and she is represented as very much in control of the conversation. She further demonstrates her control by crossing her legs one over the other revealing that she is not wearing anything under her dress. Regardless of her toned arms and short boyish hair that traditionally connote maleness, the overt display of her female body parts points in all signs to the direction of the male ‘other.’ While this lewd conduct can be read as a method of controlling the gaze, it can also be read as diminishing female empowerment through the display of the naked female body. Brown argues in his analysis of overt nudity that “…the masculine look contains passive elements and can signify submission to rather than possession of the female.” However, this argument avoids addressing any of the impacts that male passivity may demand in response to female control and the ultimate effects on female conceptions of power through sex and violence. It is critical to understand the use of gender and violence during this time period as it implies confusion and chaos and ultimately influences the development of the genre in the subsequent decades.
The following case study will expand upon the function of the naked femme fatale, since the use of explicit nudity is seemingly crucial to distinguish male from female in these erotic noirs. If violence is a masculine trait, depicting the female body alongside violence only extends the instability of gender ideology common to the genre. Moreover, as it relates to women in the work place and in positions of power, the inexorable sexualization has provided neo-femme fatales with an exploitable tool.54 The femme fatale of The Last Seduction utilizes every aspect of her female body to not only accelerate her livelihood including her job, but also to distract her male victims from moving one step ahead of her.

Case Study: The Last Seduction (1994)

Like any genre film discussed in terms of its cultural relevance and reflections, the following textual analysis of The Last Seduction will further demonstrate the erotic and erratic nature of the femme fatale’s violence and detached emotions as it articulates gender issues of the time. The Last Seduction was chosen because of its reminiscent quality of noir of the classical period and its repeated discussion in contemporary film scholarship regarding its neo-noir themes of identity crisis and issues of subjectivity. The neo-femme fatale, Bridget, not only revives the spirit of the spider woman archetype of the forties, but she also brings an intensified manipulative and violent streak to the character. With a focus on the femme fatale’s career, motivation, and physical violence, this section will closely examine the narrative, supporting characters, mise-en-scene, and shot construction. I plan to identify how the previously discussed social issues regarding working women, independence, and sexual autonomy surface in this noir, and further discuss the potential effect they may have on the future of the genre.

Channeling the fatales of the past such as Phyllis Dietrichson in Double Indemnity (Billy Wilder, 1944), The Last Seduction delivers hard with a woman people can love to hate in the
apathetic anti-heroine, Bridget Gregory. Bridget (Linda Fiorentino) lives in New York City with her husband Clay (Bill Pullman) and manages a small group of employees at her telemarketing job. In order to make big money fast, Bridget convinces her husband, a doctor, to sell medicinal cocaine to some drug dealers. Once she has the money in her possession, she takes off without her husband, which she seemingly planned to do all along. With almost a million dollars in cash and on the run from her furious husband, Bridget is advised to lay low by her lawyer to avoid giving her husband half of the money in a divorce settlement. Bridget finds herself in a small town and meets Mike (Peter Berg), a local man entranced by her feminine exterior and looking to heal his wounded masculinity. While attempting to stay under Clay’s radar, Bridget starts a new job and strikes up a physical relationship with Mike. When Clay starts sending private detectives after her to collect his share of the money, Bridget formulates an intricate plan to eliminate her husband altogether using Mike as her pawn.

When we are first introduced to Bridget, she is working in an office in the city. The camera is low and pans across the room revealing desks of men talking on the phone making sales calls. At first, we see only Bridget’s mid-section walking the perimeter but can hear her ordering her employees around in a militant tone. We finally see her face when she bends down, clicks her stop watch, and reprimands her male employee for his inability to close a sale—suggestive of a drill sergeant. True to the genre, this introduction to the lead woman is enthralling. It, in some ways, pays tribute to the classic introduction scene in Double Indemnity in which the camera lens voyeuristically exposes the femme fatale starting at her feet and works its way up. In The Last Seduction, the femme fatale is similarly presented by just sections of her body before the whole reveal. Without attempting to psychoanalyze this introductory scene and depart on a tangent about the male and female gaze established by Laura Mulvey, I found it
worth noting the similarities between both films. While there is a sufficient amount of examples from the collection of noir, these two instances in *Double Indemnity* and *The Last Seduction* further connect the two eras by demonstrating how the neo-femme fatale continues to be displayed as a spectacle through fragmented images that reveal her whole show-stopper beauty. While the reveal of Bridget may be a conscious effort on the part of the filmmakers to imitate the classical era, it also cues the noir-conscious audience that yes, this is a woman to be wary of.

Unlike Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*, Bridget is not fragile in her demeanor nor is she subtle in her innuendo. In the post-code era, Bridget’s sexual spectacle is amplified. She is both threatening to the fear of sexual discovery and enticing to the hungry gaze of her male partner. Bridget not only initiates sex in public places such as back alleys and cars, but her bare breast and buttocks are often softly lit, evoking the narrative and aesthetics of soft core porn. Furthermore, her sexual and demanding language is candid, unsettling, and even pornographic at times. She not only refers to herself constantly as a ‘bitch’ and liking to ‘fuck,’ but she is crass and uses emasculating phrases to enforce her superiority over Mike and the men that work for her. She degrades Mike by referring to him as her ‘designated fuck’ and she refers to her employees as ‘maggots,’ ‘eunuchs,’ and ‘bastards.’ While her physical appearance—smooth dark hair, white blouse, black skirt, black nylons, and stiletto heels—may portray the feminine style of its time, her foul language and conduct are anything but ladylike. Her vulgarity contradicts her groomed exterior. Kate Stables suggests that these obscenities, especially paired with nudity, further indulge fantasy of sexual and aural pleasure and relay more transparency and truth about sexual difference between the men and women. These opposing feminine characteristics while challenging to the social expectations of her gender, seemingly indicate the
sadomasochistic pleasure of using traditional feminine and masculine codes as a masquerade—more so for the femme fatale’s own sexual and even financial desires.

**Greed is Good**

Bridget is presented as a smart and capable woman in her job; however, she consistently seeks opportunities to one-up herself and others. While she is situated in a job with authority where she obviously makes a living, she is motivated ultimately by money and making more of it without having to do the bulk of the work. Additionally, she is compelled to prove she can have control over men. Several scenes in this film indicate these desires. For instance, when we are first acquainted with Bridget, she clearly is in a position of power demanding that sales be made and then rewarding her male subordinates who deliver. Bridget’s authoritative tone is not the only indicator of her power and control over these men. The shots are set up with her standing above her male inferiors looking and leaning down to them. Her employees do the majority of the money making, while she ‘cracks the whip’ so to speak. She is a woman who likes to keep her hands clean by making men do the dirty work. This is reinforced in the following scene when it is revealed that Bridget had masterminded a drug deal that she has her husband carry out in order to make an ‘easy’ million dollars.

Bridget’s intelligence and capability in the workplace are reaffirmed when she is forced to lay low in the small town of Beston. There, she easily finds another management position based on her qualifications surpassing other applicants. With a million dollars in cash stashed at her rental house, financial security is not the motivation for her job search. She is in hiding and forced to stay put. Therefore, working is really just a way to keep her busy while she waits out divorce proceedings. Her situation tends to contradict western work ethic which encourages workers to be contributing to society as well as seeking maturity and independence. Rather,
Bridget reflects the public belief that women are less ‘permanent’ workers, due to the fact that she does not intend to stay at her job once her fortune is secure. Furthermore, her status situates her in a position of privilege where she does not work out of economic necessity, but as a way to relieve her boredom. While her professional competency is never called into question, she treats her job more as a game. She works in order to prove she can climb the business ladder by exploiting social expectations and disregarding moral judgment.

To illustrate this point further, when Bridget realizes she and Mike both work in the same building, she establishes the rules about their ‘relationship,’ and how she expects him to treat her in public. Excited to see her after she abandoned him, Mike pulls her over to a hall to talk. When no one is looking, Bridget shoves him into the men’s bathroom and explains to him that the sex they had was a product of his imagination and she further exclaims, “Don’t fuck with my image.” In another scene, Bridget makes herself clear about her image when she publicly chastises him for sexual harassment. Misperceiving their relationship yet again, Mike gives her a pat on the bottom, which is followed by an immediate slap to the face and Bridget asserting her power and appearance by demanding respect. She even scoffs to people watching, “Did you see that?” and walks off. Moreover, Bridget wants to prove to Mike and her that she can sell just about anything. She hacks into Mike’s computer database to locate a list of names of people with insurance claims. Afterwards, she dials a number to demonstrate to Mike that she can sell murder by hire to women who have been cheated on by their husbands.

These examples help illustrate contemporary social issues regarding women in the workplace and the cautionary reaction to women in positions of power who can abuse it. Bridget plays into societal expectations of how women should conduct themselves in order to sustain control over their position of power. She is fully aware that her image is crucial to the people she
works with. She goes to whatever length to keep her sexual escapades and unpredictable nature from being revealed publicly so as not to damage her reputation in the workplace. By her own admission, “a woman loses fifty percent of her authority when people find out who she is sleeping with.” While she proves her competence and business savvy, Bridget is never presented honestly or morally. She uses her acquired knowledge of social norms and professionalism to manipulate and toy with others. Bridget exhibits the career achievements of women in America in regards to more accessibility of corporate positions and career advancement. Despite her authoritative presence, her abuse of power and disregard for other employees counteracts these achievements. Likewise, this exploitation of power is illustrative of the subversive nature of post-feminist critique.

**Gender Anagrams**

Bridget not only relies on her wit and skill to attain positions of power in the workforce, but she also uses her unique talent of word play to construct her identity. Wendy Kroy is the name Bridget develops for herself while in hiding in Beston. Her husband even notes that, “she’s got this crazy talent, where she can write backwards. neW yorK. Backwards.” This talent is previously indicated when she signs her name upside down from where she is sitting so that it reads correctly on the paper. While the name may signify an alter ego, Wendy also exemplifies the manner in which Bridget likes to reverse or play with gender roles and expectations. In whatever the situation calls for, be it at work, or fending off detectives, Bridget relies on social constructions of gender to influence people’s beliefs about her. Standards of femininity and hetero-normativity are primarily used to disguise her true intentions and motivations. Thus, Bridget (and the film) use gender as a form of subversion. Her preferred method is to present
herself as a victim while simultaneously abusing men and enacting violence towards them. Also, she uses sex to deliver death or doom to these unfortunate men.

When Bridget first arrives in Beston, she locates a bar in which to unwind. Obvious to everyone in the bar that she is not from the area, the bartender ignores her drink order. Unable to assert any presence as a normal woman ordering a drink, she resorts to crass or ‘unladylike’ language, remarking, “Who does a girl got to suck around here to get a drink?” Mike, seeing nothing but her feminine exterior and distress, is unfazed by her vulgarity. He is interested in what her seeming femininity can do for his injured masculine ego. He saves the day by ordering her a drink and using manners like “please” and “thank you.” This act is indicative of one of the many cultural traditions between hetero man and woman in a public space where men can assert their authority and express their intentions.

The introduction between Mike and Bridget is evocative of the sexual nuances and banter known to the classical noir films, however highly exaggerated and explicit. While Bridget seems uninterested in Mike’s flirtations at first, her actions say otherwise. She moves past him to sit at a booth in the back. Seated, her thigh-high stockings are exposed as she lights a cigarette in her mouth, each act coded in sexual signals. Thinking he can entice her rejections with overt reference to his male genitalia, Mike whispers, “I’m hung like a horse, think about it.” Expecting flirty innuendo back from her, Mike is caught off guard when Bridget humors his advances, by saying bluntly, “Let’s see.” Bridget’s disregard for feminine modesty surprises Mike to the point that she returns back to her feminine mask by dropping the tone in her voice and making eyes at him reassuring him that, “I can be nice when I try.” However, once Mike gives into her innocent change in demeanor, Bridget abandons her mask once again and takes control of their playful
exchange by grabbing his pants to look inside. She claims she wants to verify if his previous statements were true, and she further presses him for his sexual history.

Bridget’s forceful sexual advances towards Mike hardly deter him from getting involved with her. In fact, her feminine shell consisting of fitted blouse, skirt and exposed thigh-high nylons only arouse his sexual desire and validate his heterosexuality. Ultimately for Mike, an intimate relationship between the two of them would reconcile his identity as the male protector. However, Bridget’s interests lay in maintaining her independence and using Mike only to fulfill her needs. When Mike consistently expresses his desire to have a more emotionally fulfilling relationship with her, Bridget shrugs him off reversing the expected exchanges between men and women:

  Mike: I’m having more and more trouble with this, Wendy.
  Bridget: Don’t worry; you’ll get the hang of it.
  Mike: I mean you’re keeping me at arm’s length all the time; I’m starting to feel like some kind of…
  Bridget: Sex object?
  Mike: Yes, exactly, a sex object.
  Bridget: Live it up.

Her blasé response to being a sex object, as if it were liberating, is suggestive of post-feminist notions of subjectivity, and the emotional and physical relationship between Mike and Bridget perfectly characterizes new sexual differences. While this film reflects the tendency to reverse gender roles, it simultaneously expresses new attitudes toward autonomous female sexuality. Bridget/Wendy does not feel the need to be attached to a man through sex. She identifies as sexually independent from men and rejects the concept of family formation in both her relationships with her husband and Mike.

While Mike is eager to prove his masculinity making him an easy target for Bridget, there is also no shortage of male pride in this film. Bridget relies on sex and the self-assurance of
private detective, Harlan, to protect herself from him. After locating Bridget’s hideout, Harlan catches her off guard getting into her car. She reaches for her MACE®, but is overpowered by the gun he pulls on her. Now under his control, and headed back to New York to give her husband back his money, Bridget proceeds to use the tools she knows best. Relying on sexual innuendo to bribe him, Bridget inquires about the racial stereotype regarding black men’s genitalia being large. To his demise, Harlan unbuckles his belt to remove his pants and prove his manhood. Bridget then slams the car into a pole, throwing Harlan through the windshield. This is one of many examples of Bridget utilizing gender as well as racial constructions to her benefit.

When the male image is called into question, the man is vulnerable and the femme fatale uses the opportunity to strike; in this case violently and deadly. When later questioned by a male detective about the accident, Bridget turns on her feminine victim role and explains that Harlan, a scary black man, was hired by her husband and advancing on her sexually, against her will. With head tilted down, puppy watery eyes looking up at the detective, Bridget asks him to keep her business discreetly between them. Believing her to be a victim, the detective obliges, buying into the role with which women are often associated.

Despite her incapacity to use the MACE® at a time when it would be called for in defense, Bridget exploits its use at a later time. At the end of the film, Bridget devises an elaborate plan to have Mike kill her husband, Clay. When she is signaled to enter the apartment after the deed is done, Bridget finds Clay still alive. Taking the task into her own hands, Bridget relies on her sexuality to disarm and catch Clay off guard. She climbs on top of him at his request to be husband and wife again, kisses him to calm any concern or alarm, pulls out her MACE® once again, and this time sprays it down Clay’s throat while his hands are tied behind his back. The very device created to protect women when attacked was now being used to attack
the defenseless and even kill. Additionally, while seeming innocent, her feminine sexuality ultimately proves to be a threat to the male ego and life.

Another instance of Bridget’s deceptive use of gendered crimes in either a physical or sexual manner occurs after she kills Clay. In order to frame Mike, Bridget challenges his insecurities regarding masculinity and identity. With the knowledge that Mike had previously wed a transgender man and was still nursing his confused sexual identity, Bridget dresses in masculine clothing—black dress pants, white dress shirt, suspenders, and boxer briefs. She encourages Mike to have sex with her referring to the situation as a ‘role play,’ where Mike plays the intruder who rapes her. This suggested sadomasochist performance further characterizes Bridget’s use of sex and violence as concomitant. At first, Mike refuses her advances to pretend to ‘rape’ her, so she resorts to his weak spot. Calling into question his sexual experience with a man that he mistakenly married and his small town insecurities, she refers to him as a “farm town fagot.” Mike retaliates by attempting to prove his masculinity and concedes to her role play game. His retaliation and use of violence to punish her is again characteristic of not only the male and female relationships of classical noir but specifically the compensatory sequence utilizing sexual violence towards the fatale, which Kate Stables suggests occurs more commonly in nineties noir. However, Bridget has dialed 911 while this is happening and their role play becomes evidence of an accused rape and murder, leaving Mike as the fall guy.

Conclusion

While the film itself was not a box-office hit, the theatrical distribution did make a profit and the reception at the time of its release was widely praised amongst critics. Reviews included the New Yorker stating, “The spectacle of Bridget’s progress is scandalously good fun,” and Times movie critic Richard Schickel claiming, “the grace that redeems a wretch like Bridget
Gregory in *The Last Seduction* is her breathtaking lack of hypocrisy. She’s economic woman on an intricate and divinely sociopathic rampage.\(^{62}\) Roger Ebert even celebrated the film and questioned the lack of timely distribution in American theaters. In his review he states,

“Do distributors think American audiences are so dumb they can’t appreciate a smart woman who unspools a criminal plan of diabolical complexity, while treating men like disposable diapers? Are they afraid of a female character who is really evil - not just pretend-bad, like the saucy heroines of the glossy Hollywood slasher movies?”\(^{63}\)

The actress playing Bridget, Linda Fiorentino, was even celebrated by critics and fans, and the contention over distribution of the film extended to litigation over her qualifications for nomination for an Oscar that year.\(^{64}\) Ultimately, the financial success of this small budget film and the positive critical reception it received suggests that the strong-willed and self-determining woman characteristic of the femme fatale, Bridget, were worthy of praise and recognition within the industry and contemporary culture.

Bridget’s ability to mastermind such a grand scheme and walk away with a million dollars is seemingly impressive and reflective of the female aptitude to achieve social independence and economic advancement at the time this film was made. However, while this film like many other noirs in the genre derisively addresses gender and racial tensions, it actually furthers itself from third-wave feminist objectives to repair relationships with economically, sexually, and racially oppressed groups of people. Bridget’s gender defiance may be noteworthy, but the construction of her character ultimately signifies her greed and immoral nature. She is self-serving in her career and intimate relationships and she resorts to extreme violence to maintain her individuality at the expense of others. While she is highly intelligent and resourceful as demonstrated by her unusual talent for wordplay and professional achievements, she has no desire to earn her rewards ethically. Rather, she exploits her talent and skills in high
risk/high reward methods. In this way, she is a byproduct of her temporal economic environment rooted in neoliberalism. Her propensity towards neoliberal self-regulation parallels the active, freely-choosing, and self-reinventing characterizations of post-feminism. Moreover, the applause for an asocial character and even an actress who willfully objectifies her naked body onscreen exemplifies the post-feminist problem McRobbie suggests exists in contemporary media culture. Likewise, Bridget’s subversions to gender demonstrated by her feminine victim mask undermine feminist activism to eliminate sexism and discrimination in the workplace.
Chapter Two: Taming the Femme Fatale

The millennium continued depicting the perceived sexual liberation of women in film noir; however, violent female characters that were rampant in the nineties came to a seeming halt, as if to tame the beast. As Hilary Neroni and others have suggested the association between female violence and disruption of ideology, this shift in the behavior of the femme fatale has prompted me to explore the gender ideology of this time. With little to no violence represented by femme fatales in this era, what if any challenges to ideology occur within the genre? While I have already established the conflicting principles between post-feminism and feminist activism in the third-wave, further examination of the two values will illuminate possible contributing factors to the femme fatale’s change in behavior. In the last chapter, I discussed varying views amongst feminists and scholars regarding the culture of sex, violence, and victims. Within this chapter, I will investigate these conflicting beliefs further as divisions have seemingly been exacerbated amongst feminist activists and a new generation of self-proclaimed feminist. Since the late seventies, the issue of female sexuality especially in pornography has led to deep divisions in the feminist movement. The social porn-craze of the late nineties and early part of the millennium which included CAKE porn parties, Playboy and Maxim enthusiasm, pole dancing classes, and even college courses offered on porn filming techniques, has continued to be a primary point of contention. Author, Ariel Levy, has designated these conflicts in female sexual ideology of the past and present as a form of new incoherent raunch feminism that has dominated popular culture.

Throughout this chapter, I will examine the rise of raunch culture and over-sexualization of women and adolescents as they are connected to the commodification associated with beauty, body autonomy, and maternity. This cultural spectacle of the early millennium directly weighs
on feminist issues regarding reproductive rights. Furthermore, I believe the seemingly drastic change in violent behavior between the women of the neo-period and the early contemporary-period of film is related to the sexual ideology of raunch culture that tends to self-subjugate women rather than truly empower them. I plan to explore the political climate as well as the cultural significance of such a docile character representative of this time. Specifically, I will analyze several representations of the femme fatale, her empowered perception of sexuality, her use of feminine constructions, and her avoidant physical aggression. The main focus will be a textual analysis of the film *Derailed* (Mikael Håfström, 2005). *Derailed* was chosen primarily for its deceptive femme fatale character and seemingly conservative view of gender relations and family values which directly weigh on feminist and post-feminist views of sexual and social independence.

A vast majority of critical media text of the early part of the two-thousands written by authors such as Angela McRobbie and Kathrina Glitre tend to focus on genres like the romantic comedy, or ‘chick flicks’ as they are often branded. In her chapter on Nancy Meyers films in *Women on Screen*, Kathrina Glitre notes these films usually bare the markings of ‘popular feminism,’ or what we in the contemporary era believe to be feminism through character representations of women. Glitre further describes the Hollywood formula for representing the history of feminism as if it were acts of a play. Act 1 would be the time for women to break free from patriarchal control and prove their self-worth by becoming independent. In Act 2, women realize the difficulties of having it all on their own. Act 3 brings us the moment where the contemporary woman decides the cost of independence is too high; no longer wanting to feel alone and frustrated, she therefore settles for a nice new man. Suzanne Leonard adds to this idea when she argues that while the denunciation of marriage was once a staple of feminist discourse,
contemporary economic situations have dramatically changed the terms in which women enter marriages. Marriage is less of a financial necessity and more of a choice. Glitre admits this may seem like an overly simplified version of the history of feminism, nonetheless these representations are typical of Hollywood and they exemplify just how popular culture can generalize complex issues through short narrative and character structures. The films where we can recognize these women supporting the post-feminist stance by reclaiming their femininity through the institution of hetero-normative relationships include Bridget Jones Diary (Sharon Maguire, 2001), Miss Congeniality (Donald Petrie, 2000), Legally Blonde (Robert Luketic, 2001), and even in male centered films such as What Women Want (Nancy Meyers, 2000).

Whereas the romantic comedy genre is a key site for these values, these depictions and ideals can also be recognized in the film noir genre. This chapter will point to the instances where reclaimed femininity and sexuality especially in contemporary noir tend to reflect the principles of post-feminism, but also where these instances devalue feminist efforts for reproductive rights in favor of more conservative control over the female body. The following section will provide context for the shift in attitudes about female autonomy and the recuperation of patriarchal values. Moreover, the noir genre of this time specifically emphasizes the revival of the clever and cunning male protagonist, which directly affects the motivation and aggression of the femme fatale.

**Body Autonomy: The Phallacy of Being One of the Boys**

The masquerade of femininity is often addressed when discussing the femme fatale and her ability to adapt to her surroundings through sheer disguise of gender norms. The previous chapter discussed the ways in which the femme fatale Bridget did so through her appearance, body language, and tone of voice. Bridget assumed such feminine mannerisms when her crude
and crass actions alienated her from the men around her. This chapter will extend the notion of the masquerade and its phallic makeover when discussing how female millennials have increasingly adopted hegemonic masculinity. In her critique of post-feminist culture, Angela McRobbie describes the concept of phallic girls. She asserts that “Phallic girls give the impression of having won equality with men by becoming like her male-counterparts.”

Specifically, the activities that define this type of girl include “heavy drinking, swearing, smoking, getting into fights, having casual sex, flashing her breasts in public, getting arrested, consumption of pornography, and enjoyment of lap dances.” The key to the phallic girl is her ability to adopt these behaviors while maintaining desirability to men by simultaneously representing femininity.

Allegedly, the phallic girl threatens the goals of second-wave feminism by accepting this myth of equality through performing masculine behaviors. Ariel Levy demonstrates what female equality and inequality look like in popular culture of the millennium in her book, Female Chauvinist Pigs. Through scrutiny of cultural aspects from fashion to films, Levy stresses the importance of defining what female sexual liberation looks like and what it ultimately represents in a contemporary mindset. A recognizable shift towards exhibitionist entertainment developed early on in the decade. As Levy notes, these were the years of “Sex and the City, Brazilian bikini waxes, burlesque revival, and thongs.” While Levy delves into great detail about the ways women and girls try to ascertain the sexual experiences in which boys and men have been partaking for years, her primary arguments reveal that females of the millennium have developed a sexist and opportunistic attitude that ostensibly contradicts the progress made by second-wave feminists. One of the examples that best illustrates this argument comes from her description of the popular HBO show Sex and the City (1998-2004). The show centers on four women in New
York City shopping for not only sex but luxury items in a proud way—a way that symbolizes status and independence. Furthermore, the characters on the show allude to the acceptance of raunch culture from mud flap girls and playboy bunnies on their jewelry to parties at the Playboy Mansion. While she further notes that the show progressed through the years and through a film franchise, by layering the characters with complex relationships with men and becoming mothers, generally the primary themes are “women as consumers and women as things to be consumed...sex and money are concomitant.”

Moreover, Angela McRobbie expands upon this argument revealing why characters such as the women of *Sex and the City* might not feel the need to apologize for such behaviors. These characters like others from their time, such as Bridget from *Bridget Jones Diary* (Sharon Maguire, 2001) or *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002) object to the sexual double standard by way of openly and brazenly expressing their sexual experiences. Simultaneously, they take into account feminist principles regarding independence socially and financially as a way to counter any dishonor that might have previously come from not having a husband and dating promiscuously. These examples represent women who are capable of living on their own without husbands, yet wanting to reclaim their femininity in an era where it seems as though feminism has taken away many of the indulgences of being girlish, from gossip to romance. While terms like *liberation* and *empowerment* are frequented by feminists to remove any previous limitations and indicate a sense of equality, Ariel Levy suggests that these words have been warped into the one women’s issue regarding sexuality and the freedom to be promiscuous and provocative. “Many women today, whether they are fourteen or forty, seem to have forgotten that sexual power is only one, very specific kind of power….looking like a stripper or a Hooters waitress or a Playboy bunny is only one, very specific kind of sexual expression.”
Restoring Old Gender Norms in Contemporary Noir

These types of women who are ‘liberated’ and ‘empowered’ by their blatant sexuality surface in contemporary noir more often than not functioning as the desired heterosexual element to the male lead’s confused and wounded identity. They rarely function as the protagonist like Bridget in The Last Seduction or the antagonist like Catherine in Basic Instinct. While these contemporary women demonstrate the characteristics of the femme fatale by luring men into dangerous situations and providing a sense of sexual motivation, they lack the agency and physical aggression of former fatales. This shift from domineering violence to docile sensuality is connected to the fallacy that women have achieved the status of men. Any equality that may have seemed to exist amongst men and women in social settings through popular culture is clearly challenged in the noir genre by the reinstatement of a strong male lead and patriarchal values. Douglas Keesey points out that the characters in noir are often affected by their assumed identities which ultimately become morally ambiguous.21 I have observed themes relating to such issues concerning identity and restoring the male ego in films like 8mm (Joel Schumacher, 1999), Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000), Vanilla Sky (Cameron Crowe, 2001), Minority Report (Steven Spielberg, 2002), A History of Violence (David Cronenberg, 2005), and The Lookout (Scott Frank, 2007). By further examining the female counterparts to such films, especially the femme fatale’s sensuality and unchaste experiences, this section will amplify this myth of equality discussed by McRobbie and Levy and reveal the genre’s representation of sexual ideology.

Case in point, in The Lookout, the femme fatale character demonstrates shameless sexual ‘liberation’ by discussing her job as an exotic dancer while also contributing to the objectifying and crude behaviors of her male associates. The femme, Luvlee Lemons—a non-discreet double
entendre—is tasked with seducing the main character Chris. Chris desperately needs consistency and normalcy in order to function after a tragic car accident leaves him with permanent short term memory loss. As a former schoolmate, Luvlee reminds Chris of the person he used to be before his accident by describing to him what an icon he was in high school—a real ego boost. Luvlee’s primary purpose is to distract Chris from his complicated life by offering sexual incentive which his daily routine does not allow. With little evidence of skill or cunning, Luvlee is essentially a pawn in the plan to frame Chris for a bank robbery set up by his new found friends. She neither significantly forwards the plot nor agitates it, and her involvement with the rest of the men in the gang is solely represented as a sexual diversion. While she is confident in discussing her job and sexual history, she does not have the same confidence in criminal activity. Her meek performances around men demonstrate more submission to rather than liberation from without any redeeming agency to her character.

To expand upon this, in the noir Kiss Kiss Bang Bang (Shane Black, 2005), regardless of how self-deprecating and referential the film may be even in regards to gender, it continuously limits female ‘empowerment’ to expressions of sexuality. The male lead, Harry, is conservative and seemingly wholesome in his values of sexuality and lifestyle. While obviously wounded by his history of rejection from his childhood friend Harmony, he blatantly critiques her and all L.A girls for being so promiscuous and objectionable. He even assumes that some childhood perversions must have drawn these types of women to be so unrestrained by their sexual lifestyles. In contrast, the femme fatale and female lead, Harmony, is a struggling actress in L.A who will accept just about any objectifying role to climb the Hollywood later. Harmony, however, takes no shame in the work she does—in fact she is proud of it and will defend what she and countless other women in L.A do for a living. These contrasting opinions of sexuality are
telling of the contemporary male self-image and the myth that female sexuality could ever be akin. Harry explicitly expresses the double standard that he feels for men, women, and sex. While Harmony is represented as more of a plot driven character than Luvlee, and constantly talked about in terms of her intelligence, she consistently fails to deliver results. Just when you think she might be one step ahead of the men in solving the murder mystery, it turns out she goes to work as a sexy Santa waitress, abandoning her lead on the case. Additionally, while she manages to fight off a male attacker at one point, she fails to do so again in the climactic escape, signifying her reliance on Harry’s heroism. The film ostensibly pokes fun at these old gender expectations common to the classical noirs; however, by reproducing them, the filmmakers perpetuate the demeaning aspects of the characters. Harmony is introduced by her thin bare legs and Harry is narrating what nice ‘stems’ she has. Because this particular sectionalizing method for introducing the femme fatale is so replicated in the genre, by acknowledging it and then using it for the same purpose, these filmmakers are continuing the cycle of reducing female bodies to the gaze. This further demonstrates what McRobbie describes as part of the post-feminist problem of mocking and narcissistic sexism.

An exception to these helpless and hapless side-character femmes could perhaps be found in the film In the Cut (Jane Campion, 2003) which follows the lead character Frannie (Meg Ryan), an English teacher who demonstrates her intelligence and competence throughout the film with her use of language and ability to decipher cryptic slang. However, Frannie has severe sexual repression, and she acts upon it in risky ways. This character is symbolic of what Levy discusses about the initiative for women to open up about sexuality. Even more noteworthy is this role for Meg Ryan, who had achieved the status of America’s sweetheart up until this point. Earning the reputation from the variety of romantic comedies in which she starred, Meg Ryan
was being sensationalized in the media as having a bad streak for her extra marital affair at the
time. Her film career reflected this blatant change in sexual identity, since she was literally and
figuratively exposing her sexuality with numerous sex scenes and explicit nudity in this film.

Aside from the sexual aspects of the character, Frannie enacts violence as self-defense when
necessitated, which makes the character seemingly more complex and dynamic than other fatales
of this time. While this example is more of an exception to the passive femme fatale, it more
significantly indicates the issue of sexuality continuously presented as a primary source for
female expression and power through the erotic and voyeuristic themes of the film.

These examples of female sexuality in noir contribute to this concept of sexuality as the
one insular domain of power. The genre is but one outlet for these social issues to surface.
Distorted expressions of female empowerment are further demonstrated throughout the
mainstream media which bombards U.S culture with female subjects like the burlesque dancing,
pop-singing Pussycat Dolls, the sexy crime-fighting heroines of *Charlie's Angels* (McG,
2000/2003), or the voluptuous girlfriends of Hugh Hefner on *The Girls Next Door* (E!, 2005-
2010), all of which prove to offer an attractive way to make excessive amounts of money. The
young girls and women who watch these shows and films, purchase music, take on erotic
hobbies, and sport familiar apparel and accessories to identify with such women, contribute to
the link between consumption and female sexuality that Levy suggests. Even more significantly,
expressions of empowerment and sensuality have shifted into the maternity space. Pregnant
women are no longer isolated from the public but rather are invited to participate in consumer
habits and feel sexy doing so. The following section will further demonstrate where and how
such examples of sexual expression have over-shadowed and undermined the myriad of other
issues regarding sexuality, while simultaneously representing the new pregnant ideal as a reclaiming of the conservative values of family stability.

**Renegotiating Motherhood and Women’s Reproductive Health**

In stark contrast to the family dynamics of the eighties and early nineties that reflected a sense of delayed family plans in order to pursue a career, Imogen Tyler recognizes a shift in the early millennium where pregnancy and motherhood have taken center stage in the political and cultural mainstream. Pregnancy and motherhood have been proven consumer gold mines evidenced by the corporate stores dedicated to endless prenatal and baby products like Babies“R”Us and BuyBuyBaby, the must have pregnancy photography, and the fashion accessories that clearly identify pregnant women, such as T-shirt that read “Sexy Mama.” As Tyler points out, no longer does pregnancy carry with it the stigma of lower class status, immoral sexuality, or the lack of desire to work. Alternatively, pregnancy is associated with a new kind of femininity, one that signifies “sexual freedom, consumption, choice, agency, and futurity in a powerful and seductive post-feminist cultural ideal.” Pregnancy is not something to be concealed any longer but rather embraced by those women with the money and status to indulge in the commodification associated with mommy-hood. That being said, it is critical to differentiate what contemporary American culture does value and find sexy in maternity, as there is a seeming disparity amongst class, age, and race. Maternity is more often celebrated by and for those who fit the specifications of pregnant beauty. Young, white, thin, and financially able are typically considered the ideal. Moreover, it is a condition that women do not reproduce outside of marriage or civil partnership, and that single parenthood still bears a mark of non-acceptance. When these idealizations are represented in the media they come with a set of superficial and vain views of pregnancy which can be problematic.
In popular culture, countless celebrity endorsements of products and magazine articles promote the sexy facets of pregnancy through boudoir fashion and even pornography. In 1998, soap opera actress Lisa Rinna was featured in *Playboy* as the first pregnant woman to pose nude for the magazine. There are even companies that specialize in sexy maternity lingerie such as HOTmilk. Moreover, post-partum weight loss through dieting tips and tricks to cosmetic procedures such as tummy tucks and breast lifts have become widely discussed in popular culture. While pregnant women no longer hide away their bodies in a way that seems empowered, there too comes a sense of shame and scrutiny. These adverse aspects of maternity and the pregnant body come with a reevaluation of what maternity means in a contemporary sense and what if any ethical implications or consequences there may be. The pop-culture sanctioned representations of family, pregnant beauty and female sexuality disregard any other concerns that may pertain to even a broader sense of body autonomy such as reproductive rights.

Contemporary culture may proactively endorse contraceptives to teenage girls as well as promote the industrialization of maternity to married women by creating new opportunities for sexual expression; however, the long and arduous political battle to achieve and maintain liberties such as carnal autonomy now seems to carry less weight with the modern woman. As one of the central issues relating to second-wave feminist activism, reproductive rights are symbolic of the status and opportunities available to women and young girls. The privileges that women have inherited in regards to their physical and mental sovereignty are worth examining alongside gender ideology addressed in films reflecting current issues in contemporary culture. The semantic aspects of noir demonstrate marks of gender and anxiety through the physical manifestation of men, women, and the environment in which they exist and experience conflict. Moreover, the syntactical element of the noir genre enhances these marks of gender and related
anxiety, specifically for women through their sexual and violent portrayals as they work to accept or challenge the ideology in place. Examining these media representations in contemporary noir alongside reproductive rights in the U.S. will illuminate where and how post-feminist sentiments toward consumerism and brazen sexuality allow for conservative critique and subvert feminist activism in the depiction of the femme fatale’s sexuality and attitudes towards family.

When examining the contemporary state of reproductive rights, it is beneficial to first establish the Women’s Health Movement beginning in the seventies which challenged patriarchal authority. In order for women to take control out of the hands of male physicians and legislators, organizations surrounding the issue of contraceptives advocated for distribution of information, access to services, safety of drugs and other devices, and choice. The landmark for reproductive rights in the U.S. was the legal case of Roe v. Wade (1973) which resulted in the abortion decision in favor of a woman’s right to privacy. Prior to this legal decision being made, women turned to various clandestine options to terminate their pregnancies, such as the so-called ‘back-alley’ abortions. The safer alternative to these dangerous practices would be to submit a request for an abortion to a doctor who would in turn evaluate the requester’s mental state. Some women would even turn to the law and let the police affirm or deny claims of rape or incest. In the case of ‘Jane Roe,’ the alias given to the plaintiff who sought to obtain an abortion for a pregnancy she could not afford, she claimed she had been gang-raped in order to justify the proposed abortion. In the years following this legal decision, much of the debate has translated to the polarities of pro-life or pro-choice. It is imperative to note that the terms pro-life and pro-choice are expressions of a belief system that affects political activism for woman’s rights. They are not however, specifically associated with either feminists or post-feminists
values necessarily. More importantly, they are terms that define the issue of abortion. Advocates of pro-choice stress the necessity for information and services in order for women to fully exercise their rights for body autonomy. Advocates of pro-life respect all human life, which includes unborn children, and therefore are against abortion and most forms of contraception. For the purpose of this research, these two terms are being used solely to help illustrate the issue of abortion; they are not mutually exclusive with feminism or post-feminism.

In the thirty years since Roe V. Wade, much of the discussion surrounding reproductive rights has shifted from the right to choose to more conservative values on family and sex education. During the Reagan administration Congress enacted the Adolescent Family Life Act in 1981 which would provide financial support to educational programs that focused on abstinence and traditional family roles. The purpose was to steer young people away from being sexually promiscuous due to the accessibility of contraception and decrease the rate of teen pregnancy. Even with evidence of its ineffectiveness to prevent premarital sex and teen pregnancy, the Bush administration continued funding the abstinence-only sex education throughout the early two-thousands. With the Bush administration seemingly supporting the pro-life ideology with such practices, the debate over abortion shifted towards the issue of the availability of emergency contraception and the right to scientific knowledge. In 2003, the pharmaceutical company that manufactures the emergency contraceptive or ‘back-up plan,’ Plan B pill, proposed that the FDA make it an over the counter drug. Pro-choice advocates recommended this treatment for women who were victims of rape or had their contraceptives fail. Pro-lifers opposed this request due to the fact that Plan B works to prevent fertilization of an implanted egg. By 2006, the FDA approved the sale of emergency contraception to those women over the age of eighteen with a prescription. The debate remains a controversy over
whether or not these types of drugs constitute preventative measures or alternative abortions. Moreover, the issue of access to these types of drugs and other reproductive services are clearly disproportionate when considering people with low income or little access to sex education. While the government supports the right of choice, it also neglects to assist those who cannot support their choice financially or due to other social limitations. It is an issue that remains to be continuously evaluated in order to provide the right of equality and privacy to all women regardless of age, race, ethnicity, class, or religion, as well as any demographic in the foreseeable future.

With such a conservative political climate existent in the early part of the decade, reflections of these issues regarding gender and reproductive rights are apparent throughout the noir genre. Contemporary noir reveals and reproduces the anxiety surrounding such representations of femininity, sexuality, and maternity. With a seemingly old-fashioned shift towards reclaimed masculinity, contemporary noir of the early two-thousands demonstrates patterns of anxiety towards women and young girls partial to raunch culture and who reject the traditional family model. The male scrutiny of these types of women has been demonstrated by the characters from The Lookout and Kiss Kiss Bang Bang. The phallic girl represented within the genre as the femme fatale may represent a version of sexual freedom, but she is limited to what is socially acceptable, and she consistently poses a threat to the nuclear family and domestic values. The following case study will further investigate these themes and illustrate the effects that the temporal socio-political environment has on the femme fatale’s sexuality and submissive nature.
Case Study: *Derailed* (2005)

To extend the previous discussion of reproductive rights and the connection between film portrayals of female sexuality and aggression, the following textual analysis of *Derailed* will demonstrate the lack of physical violence as well as the passive nature of the contemporary femme fatale as they correspond with hegemonic values of sexuality and empowerment in the early two-thousands. *Derailed* was chosen because of its adoption of visual noir elements, cynical attitudes toward urban life, and distrustful attitudes towards sexually promiscuous women and reproductive rights. The modern femme fatale, Lucinda, is played by another one of America’s sweethearts (Jennifer Aniston) who emulates the mystery and allure of past femme fatales. Additionally, both character and actress epitomize this raunch culture shift from ‘the girl next door’ to the ‘girl gone wild’ which is representative of sexual attitudes of the time. Furthermore, examining this character representation alongside a hyper-masculine protagonist will identify challenges to female sexual autonomy. Specifically, I will be observing the narrative, themes, and characters in relation to family values, sexual deviation, and gender relations.

Unlike most of the representations of independent women in television and film from this time, *Derailed* unmistakably reflects the juxtaposition of women in the domestic space and public space. This comparison between two women is reminiscent of the classical period as exemplified by *The Big Heat* (Fritz Lang, 1953), as well as the early neo-noir era with *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987). The film follows Charles Schine (Clive Owen), a family man with the added responsibility of a sickly child. Lucinda Harris (Jennifer Aniston) is the fellow Chicago train commuter that generously pays Charles’s fair one morning. Both married and working professionals, Charles and Lucinda strike up a conversation followed by Charles’s
insistence on repaying her so as not to feel impugned. The two develop a friendly relationship of lunches and dinners which escalates into them checking into a seedy motel in the city. The love affair is interrupted by two thugs intent on robbing them and sexually assaulting Lucinda. Beaten and robbed, Charles and Lucinda agree to keep the incident a secret so as not to destroy their marriages and families. Believing the situation is behind him, Charles is visited by one of the thugs, LaRoche (Vincent Cassel), demanding more money and threatening his family. With every effort to head off these criminals being squashed left and right, Charles finds himself left with no option other than to pay them with his family’s savings. After Charles hands over the money, he uncovers that Lucinda is not the woman he thought she was, and that she may have been part of the plot to rob him all along.

**The Nightmare Next Door**

Employing the genre’s tried and true method of character introduction, Lucinda is first presented by her legs. Like Bridget from *The Last Seduction*, Harmony from *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, and even Phyllis from *Double Indemnity*, she immediately is characterized by her body parts. Adorned in black sheer nylons and stiletto heels, Lucinda’s legs capture the attention of most of the men on the train, including Charles. In fact the audience sees her legs through a point-of-view shot from his perspective. When she offers to pay for Charles’s train ticket, he feels compelled to thank her personally and explain his lack of train fare so as not to damage his ego. Lucinda shrugs off her generosity and plays coy to any offer of repayment Charles offers. Her modesty on top of her attractive exterior is what provokes Charles to continue a conversation with her. The low tone in her voice projects a feminine softness, nothing intimidating or overbearing like Bridget’s mouthy insults in *The Last Seduction*, or even Harmony’s constant use of the F-bomb in *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. Her witty banter and sexual innuendo are not raunchy but
rather a sign of intelligence and humor, which comes across to Charles as a breath of fresh air. He admits in the end that she was sweet, and smart, and that he couldn’t believe she was attracted to him—“too good to be true.” What could be harmful about flirting innocently with an intelligent and generous commuting companion?

Jennifer Aniston is an essential part of the mask that Lucinda wears. While this chapter does not primarily implement star studies as a methodology, it is worth noting the importance of the perceived reputation of the actress playing the character and how it relates to culture of the time. Like Meg Ryan who came before her, it is no secret in popular culture that Jennifer Aniston is considered one of ‘America’s sweethearts.’ In 1998, People magazine put her at the top of their list of ‘The Girls Next Door.’ Prior to Derailed, Aniston’s roles in a number of romantic comedies and of course her role as Rachel on Friends helped garner her reputation. Early in the new decade, Aniston changed up her routine with her role in the dark comedy The Good Girl (2002, Miguel Arteta) where she plays a married store clerk, bored with her life and looking to mix things up with a love affair. Roger Ebert said, “Jennifer Aniston has at last decisively broken with her ‘Friends’ image…. It will no longer be possible to consider her in the same way.” His words are a bit foreboding; however, this role was just a glimpse into a new side of Aniston. Taking on the role of a seductive and deceitful femme fatale in Derailed still came across as a surprise to some critics and fans. As one critic said,

Jennifer Aniston’s role in the film is a decided departure from her previous work. From the moment she first appears on screen she exudes a different personality than I’ve ever seen her play before. It’s a more mature Aniston than the one that appeared on television for years as Rachel.

More importantly, the role of Lucinda as a ‘good girl gone bad,’ and the casting of Aniston seemingly work on multiple levels to reflect post-feminist notions of liberated sexuality and
economic independence that inspire individuality and choice. Specifically, the phallic girl that McRobbie describes comes to mind. The phallic girl seeks equality by abandoning any modesty about sexual activity; rather she agrees that sex is a light-hearted pleasure, recreational activity, reward and status.\textsuperscript{52} Aniston’s career move from the wholesome Rachel on Friends to adulterous Justine in The Good Girl parallel this shift in sexual identity from ‘good girl’ to ‘girl gone wild.’ Additionally, the adulterous woman that Suzanne Leonard describes extends this sexual identity. The adulterous woman that Aniston performs in both The Good Girl (2002) and Derailed (2005) not only echoes the publicity around the dissolution of her real-life marriage to Brad Pitt, but illustrates the desire for women to emulate masculine behaviors. In 2005, Aniston divorced Pitt amidst the tabloid media claiming he stepped outside of their marriage with another woman, an actress and co-worker.\textsuperscript{53} Regardless of whether he did or not, Aniston’s portrayal of the adulterous woman in both The Good Girl and Derailed imitate this behavior. Possibly these roles are a reaction to her unsuccessful marriage, or merely a coincidence. They are nonetheless reflections of the threat to the patriarchal order posed by working women, since the workspace provides women with more access to men and boosts their confidence. It can also increase male anxiety over the possibility of their wives betraying them.\textsuperscript{54}

Even more so, the femme fatale, Lucinda, parallels this sexual identity shift of the working woman. On the surface, Lucinda is a caring mother and wife but she is tempted into an extra-marital affair. As far as Charles and the audience are concerned, performing fellatio on someone other than her husband is her way of liberating herself sexually. Additionally, Lucinda’s true identity under her mask demonstrates the promiscuity of women in the public sphere. As her part in LaRoche’s scheme, she is sent to seduce a variety of men and engage with them intimately. This representation of female sexual expression not only demonstrates rebellion
towards monogamy but proves to be risky and unrewarding. The underlying conservative values throughout the film caution of such brazen sexual opportunities and reckless behavior. This is validated by not only the interruption and assault Lucinda and Charles encounter during their affair, but by Lucinda’s ultimate demise. Female sexual assertiveness is literally and figuratively brought to its knees and punished by male authority and upholding the fidelity of marriage.

**Family Values and Femme Fatales**

The film is set in both the urban cityscape and suburbs of Chicago. These contrasting locations demonstrate not only racial and social differences but also the politics of gender. Traditional family dynamics and social stability are represented by Charles in the safety of the suburbs. Lucinda, on the other hand represents the risks associated with a vice-ridden city. She not only rejects traditional family status by suggesting extra-marital affairs with married men, she is in actuality associated with the corruption and greed characterized by the city and its inhabitants. The conservative interpretation of urban existence and its transgressions is evidenced throughout this film by the heroic representation of Charles as caring father, provider, and protector tempted into the corruption of the city, and Lucinda as the dishonest ‘other’ woman tempting Charles with an affair and extortion.

The Schines live in a nice house in the Chicago suburbs and by all appearances have the model nuclear family. Charles is identified as the primary source of income of his household. His wife, Deanna, maintains a regular job as a school teacher; however, Charles’s position as a marketing executive is what finances their daughter’s expensive healthcare and keeps them above water. Deanna represents the model female of domesticity; she contributes to the family finances, cares deeply for her daughter, and even supports her husband when he has a bad day at work, or cheats on her for that matter. She fits right into her ostensibly pre-feminist assigned role
as passive, innocent, and virtuous.\textsuperscript{55} On the other hand, Charles demonstrates his masculinity by safeguarding his family and shielding his wife and daughter from the truth of his affair and harassment by the antagonist, LaRoche. He not only goes to great lengths to cover up a murder he didn’t commit, he also hides the fact that he cleaned out his family’s life savings. Eventually, he turns to vigilantism in order to recover the family money—money he constantly refers to as his daughter’s money—and eliminate the threat of LaRoche. He confronts Lucinda and indirectly gets her shot and killed in a scuffle. He also stages a plot to personally murder LaRoche in prison, which he succeeds in making look like self-defense. Deanna, who is completely oblivious to these events, believes his lies and blames the city for Charles’s streak of bad luck. Her feelings towards the city are validated and reinforced by the right-wing representation of criminal blacks, violence, and sexual depravity that Charles encounters.\textsuperscript{56} In the end, Charles’s actions are presented as justified and affirm the values of the middle-class nuclear family. Moreover, Deanna’s disappointing nescience of her husband’s actions as well as Charles’s over-compensation is further suggestive that husband and wife maintain their traditional gender roles. Likewise, Lucinda’s ultimate demise cautions women who object to the sexual double standard by utilizing sexuality to dominate and seduce married men.

While we never meet the real Lucinda Harris, we learn through various narrative devices that she is a working professional and a highly educated one at that—graduated from Stanford University and working as a financial planner. She is married and has a young daughter, a real model of a healthy balance between work and home. By all appearances this stolen identity reflects the ‘have it all’ mentality that must be projected in order to gain the trust and respect of male contemporaries. However, as the pretending Lucinda confesses to Charles in one of their lunch dates, things are not so perfect at work, home or in her marriage. This admission is
relatable to Charles who also feels the pressures of his prescribed life and the challenges of his demanding job. For both of these characters the discovery that ‘having it all’ is not enough then makes their affair even more enticing—a way to liberate themselves from the confines of social expectations. At least this is what the femme fatale would have her male prey believe. Once Charles discovers he is not the first target of Lucinda and LaRoche (nor their last), it becomes clearer how Lucinda manipulates the male ego by masking herself as a victim of violent and sexual crimes. In reality, she is LaRoche’s girlfriend mixed up in his schemes to rob countless men craving new sexual experiences. Lucinda is assigned to lure men in with her perceived good-girl mentality and then confide in them her desire of marital sin. She is represented by all accounts as a male fantasy, and worse yet one that can be controlled.

As the previous chapter pointed out, femme fatales in the nineties demonstrated a desire for independence and utilized sex and aggression as a form of enjoyment. Lucinda, on the other hand, is neither completely independent nor violent, and she doesn’t explicitly express gratification from sex with random men. Sexual deviance is represented as a way to overpower her male victims; however, she does not revel in her indiscretions. Moreover, while she comes off as in control of her relationship with Charles demonstrated by her sexual assertiveness and ability to execute her part of the scheme, she is dominated by him and his superior cunning. With just glimpses into her relationship with LaRoche, Lucinda appears to be more submissive. She allows him to physically and sexually abuse her in order to maintain the ruse of her as a victim. If anything, she signifies a devoted girlfriend to LaRoche who obediently follows his lead. Both relationships, in their respective ways, ultimately exhibit male-dominance and female restraint.
Power and Control

These reflections of sexual control and dominance seen in the heterosexual relationships of *Derailed* are critical to the contemporary issue of reproductive rights and more specifically rape and abortion. Lucinda pulls out the abortion card as almost a last resort to control the situation between her and Charles when he starts developing a conscience. Charles insists that Lucinda make a formal statement to the police acknowledging their attack and her rape. In order to get him to back off, she starts small with insisting that her marriage would be ruined if her husband found out about her attempted affair. When Charles pushes her further, she resorts to extreme measures in order to regain control. The shot construction and character blocking further suggest their power play by situating Lucinda physically and metaphorically backed into a corner. With Charles blocking her path, Lucinda pauses and reluctantly reveals she had an abortion. Asserting himself as male protector, Charles exclaims, “Why didn’t you tell me? I could have helped. I could have done something.” Lucinda reclaims her position of power by rhetorically asking, “What would you have done?” This dialogue is representative of the issues surrounding a woman’s right to choose and privacy. Charles wants some sense of control of the situation they have found themselves in, therefore her decision making process challenges his ability to defend and control. Lucinda’s response signifies a sense of female authority and provokes his insecurities. Paralleled by the fact that she has already stolen his money, she has also taken away his authority over her body. Her words are hauntingly symbolic of the fact that male power is limited within the laws of abortion.

In order to regain the control that was taken from him, Charles actively tracks Lucinda down. He not only demonstrates his cunning by uncovering the elaborate schemes of Lucinda and LaRoche, he also proves his strength and bravery by circumventing the law in order to
recover his ‘daughter’s money.’ With a gun pointed at Lucinda, Charles exposes her methods of entrapment including a staging of the attack to look like a sexual assault, which he exclaims, “wouldn’t really be rape, would it?” Admittedly, he claims this act of disguised sexual assault would weigh on the male conscience. “It makes you feel guilty that you didn’t stop it. You didn’t protect her.” He continuously degrades her from this point, referring to her as a ‘bitch’ and calling her ‘sick’ for pretending to have had an abortion. The femme fatale is not only exposed for the fraud that she is but also punished for her crimes with a shot to the chest. Her death is slow and unsympathetic. The threat of such a woman that could disguise herself as anything more than the girl next door is lifted in the end.

What this narrative component and character representation ultimately does is challenge the women of the world who have been victims of sexual abuse as well as the activism to assist these women. Lucinda’s story of alleged rape and unproven abortion is not all that different from the historic case of Roe claiming sexual assault; however, the light in which it is represented clearly defies the legitimacy of such a decision. To raise a controversial topic such as abortion is bold and brings with it problematic depictions which can weaken the cause and cast doubt on future claims. While discussing rape and abortion openly in the media is one way to approach the issue, this film clearly represents reproductive rights from a more right-wing, conservative manner that reinforces male authority over the female body. The ideal form of conception is reinforced by the white, middle-class, nuclear family that is the Schines. Suburban bliss is not something to be contested by the depravities of urban women. The display of sexual deviance demonstrated by adulterous men and the promiscuity of the femme fatale suggest that sexual liberation is a one-way street where men are merely slapped on the wrist and women are cast off as immoral and ultimately punished. Assuming that equality comes from women acting like men
would be ill advised. This film advocates for male dominance and further expresses anxiety regarding female sexuality and body autonomy.

**Conclusion**

Lucinda’s inability to maintain control of her scheme which results in her demise is clearly a response to former fatales like Bridget from the *Last Seduction* who walked away unpunished with millions. Her ineptitude is reflective of more conventional reflections of the femme fatale archetype from the classical period of noir. Deviation from the social expectations typically required that the femme fatale be punished in some fashion. In this case, Lucinda is condemned by death while Charles lives happily with his family. There is nothing subtle about the way this film compares the gender expectations of women and men. Lucinda’s feminine structure from form fitting clothes to her docile behavior is not merely an imitation of classic femme fatales of the forties or even the neo-noir period, but rather expresses the ideological agenda of the early two-thousands. Lucinda personifies what Suzanne Leonard describes as the post-feminist working girl—white, upper-middle-class, affluent, educated and urban\(^{57}\)—with her Stanford education and corporate job in the city. Her added family life exemplifies contemporary work/life balance and the more cultural – rather than political – anxiety that comes with it for women.\(^{58}\) Lucinda rarely stresses over the corporate culture or demands of her job, unlike Charles who constantly feels and expresses the pressure from his job, especially from a female client.

Her ruse of wanting to explore her sexuality outside her marriage also illustrates this good-girl-gone-bad mentality that typifies the rise of raunch culture in the decade and further demonstrates the sexual difference between men and women. The femme fatale’s sensuality is suggestive of sexual performance rather than sexual enjoyment. Furthermore, her actions and
masquerade as a victim challenge feminist efforts to secure reproductive rights for those women socially restricted by age, class, race, gender and disability. The representation of urban decay and immoral sexuality in this film further suggests a need for more social and patriarchal stability. Patriarchy is restored through the protagonist Charles, while reflections of progressive women are categorized yet again by their sexual aberration. This chauvinistic approach to reflections of progressive women and social issues directly affects the level of female aggression. The femme fatale relies on her feminine construction and the strength of her male counterpart to achieve her desires. She allows violence to happen to her as opposed to utilizing it as an act of rebellion or retribution. Therefore violence is reestablished as a masculine quality that must be used solely at the discretion of men. However, this lack of physically violent women in the early part of the decade does allow for response within the genre. The following chapter will explore how the noir genre has reacted to this passive version of a femme fatale and once again employed female violence as a sign of ideological interrogation. Further analysis of conflicting feminist beliefs alongside post-feminist critique in the present culture is demonstrated in the representation of opposing female characters in contemporary noir.
Chapter Three: The Femme Fatale and Contemporary Women at Odds

Contrasting feminist perspectives have been ever present in media representations of women across multiple genres of film and television in the last decade or so. While many of the goals of feminism over the last 160 years have worked towards a common goal of equality and opportunity, there have always been variances in feminist approaches to policy and strategy.¹ Specifically, Rory Dicker acknowledges the disparities amongst the different generations of women from second-wave to third-wave feminists and proposes a more collective approach to eradicating sexism and domination. She proposes that rather than classifying women from one wave to the next, continued feminist activism performed together by young, middle-aged, and older women would help eliminate these variances in perspectives.² These generational divisions have manifested in the contemporary culture through various aspects including narrative cinema in the United States. Comedies and dramas such as Mean Girls (Mark Waters, 2004), Monster-in-Law (Robert Luketic, 2005), The Devil Wears Prada (David Frankel, 2006), Because I Said So (Michael Lehmann, 2007), and It’s Complicated (Nancy Meyers, 2009) are examples of where these divisions and hostility can manifest whether in mother-daughter relationships or in the work place. Additionally, scholars like Angela McRobbie, Yvonne Tasker, and Diane Negra have been critical of post-feminist sentiments towards individual pursuit of sexual, political, and economic independence that discourage collective action and seemingly take into account yet challenge feminist objectives. The film noir genre has evidenced fluctuating hostility between women and towards women’s issues throughout this time span as well. This has been demonstrated thus far by the varying levels of violence in the character of the femme fatale from the nineties to the early two-thousands.

The previous chapter revealed the more conservative reflections of progressive women and gender expectations as a seeming response to the violent streak of apathetic femmes in the
nineties and a reestablishment of patriarchal values. With more than a decade gone by in the millennium with political and social restructuring, the noir genre now seemingly concentrates on these ever-present conflicting beliefs regarding women’s rights and social issues relating to economics, femininity, and violence. Contemporary noir from 2006-present has noticeably illustrated these conflicts presented by opposing two primary female characters. Furthermore, the level of violence within the femme fatale character has increased during this time period and has echoed various aspects of women from classical noir which includes conflicts within class structures and economic dependency. With an emphasis on the issue of domestic abuse and intimate partner violence, this chapter will analyze the use of hetero-relationships as well as antagonistic bisexual relationships between female characters in film noir. While there will be reference to several noirs of this time period, an in-depth textual analysis of *Columbus Circle* (George Gallo, 2012) will highlight where these themes occur and ultimately oppose women of different social strata which include but are not limited to class, race, religion, and sexual orientation.

Angela McRobbie acknowledges a division in women from different class status and how that has developed into a form of female symbolic violence. While she focuses this attention on TV makeover programs in the UK, the U.S.’s equivalents *What Not to Wear* (TLC, 2003–2013) and *Ten Years Younger* (TLC, 2004–2009) illustrate her arguments that class divides force young women to compete with each other and sometimes mercilessly through the use of insults and disparaging gestures. One of her key points is the mark of aspiration and sexual identity through glamour. Women prove their hard work through the beauty standards of the middle-class. The symbolic violence she refers to is the belittling of poor and disadvantaged women brought on by the new social division of female individualization. These new gender hierarchies are based on
adhering to prescribed gender attributes and femininity as a sign of success or social mobility. This competitive nature among young women as well as the symbolic violence of class antagonisms is present in the contemporary noirs that will be discussed here. However, the violence is represented through both physical and symbolic methods on screen which enhances the discussion on class divides as well as gender ideology in the genre.

Hilary Neroni states that film violence can be an integral part of changing gender expectations. Female violence in contemporary film is often used as a device throughout varying genres of cinema to not only disrupt the narrative but also call into question social conceptions of masculinity and femininity. For this reason, the threat of the violent woman can also be exciting to audiences. It is worth examining further this concept of symbolic violence alongside physical violence and their relation to the femme fatale’s constructions of femininity. I have previously illustrated the rise of violence in the neo-noir femme fatales of the nineties and the decline of female violence in noir from the early two-thousands. Bridget’s maniacal aggression in The Last Seduction and even Catherine’s eroticized ferocity in Basic Instinct are representative of apprehension towards changing gender expectations of that time, while the decline of violence in the early two-thousands indicated a way to contain such issues of gender crisis and restore longstanding values. However, this interchange has allowed for an upward peak in violent women in the ensuing decade, which also allows for an interrogation of presumed gender expectations. This chapter will demonstrate the manifestation of conflicting beliefs in feminist theory and criticism of post-feminism evidenced by antagonistic female relationships in contemporary noir. Moreover, this chapter will point to instances where multiple women’s issues have been put at the forefront of opposing female characters. The variation in feminist beliefs and disconnect with regards to empowerment and autonomy will be emphasized by the
characterization of femme fatales as well as the rise in physical aggression throughout the last decade of film noir.

**Greed, Glamour, and Vicious Women**

Considering that the femme fatale has been regarded as one of the distinctive features of film noir, it is important to investigate where the characteristics of her visual and narrative composition come from as filmmakers continue to replicate her iconography in contemporary noir. Mark Jancovich discusses the idea of the *kept woman* in connection to what he refers to as “vicious womanhood”—recurring instances and themes of violent and antagonistic female characters in Hollywood films, specifically of the post-war era. The characteristics of “vicious womanhood” connected to the *kept woman* include the figure of a slacker, greed, selfishness, ‘Mrs. Stay-at-Home,’ and the opposition to women presented as independent and publicly active. As the femme fatale is often presented as such, Jancovich discredits any association of post-war working-class women with the gender anxiety presented in the femme fatale, as she is more clearly associated with the *kept woman* persona. Classical noir fatales that demonstrate these characteristic include Kitty, played by Joan Bennett in *Scarlett Street* (Fritz Lang, 1946), who has been described as “a pretty little gold-digger” and a “figure of greed, selfishness, and idleness.” Another example Cora, played by Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946), is described as being “married for financial security rather than for love.” These more economically dependent attributes of “vicious womanhood” would suggest a departure from anxiety over post-war male displacement in the workforce; however, they more significantly represent anxiety towards the divisions of gender and economic struggles. Since these characteristics of the *kept woman* have seemingly resurfaced in contemporary noir, this chapter will investigate further contemporary femininity in relation to economic status. While
chapter one highlighted the financial independence of femme fatales of the nineties in relation to women in the U.S. workforce, it also pointed towards the goals of the femme fatale Bridget, who too could be described as a ‘figure of greed.’ In addition to her violent acts, her greed and selfishness throughout the film could also easily be associated with this concept of “vicious womanhood.” Additionally, Lucinda, the femme fatale from Derailed, while lacking in the same physical aggression as Bridget, also demonstrated qualities pertaining to greed and vicious mind games.

The nostalgia for the classical period and femme fatale archetype has been appropriated in contemporary film with the use of lighting, costumes, themes and film titles. More recently, reflections of the classical femme fatale can be seen in noir of the last several years, in regards to her glamorous style and self-indulgence. As McRobbie notes, the desire for social mobility often is characterized by glamour and panache which have long been associated with the vicious, kept woman. Films like Side Effects (Steven Soderbergh, 2013) and Columbus Circle (George Gallo, 2012) apply the glamorous aspects of the femme who uses beauty and fashion as a way to disguise her social status and signify the desires of the upper middle-class—a lifestyle to which she believes she is entitled. The femme in Columbus Circle resides in a luxury high-rise in Manhattan and indulges in high fashion shopping sprees. The femme in Side Effects desires—and attempts to restore—her former east coast lifestyle of sailing, garden parties, and luxury cars. Moreover, the film Black Swan (Darren Aronofsky, 2010) employs not only the high fashion and glamour of the ballet but also examines the competitive nature of women within the profession. Through the use of both physical and symbolic violence these films demonstrate the competiveness and envy between rivaling women.
The misinterpretations around the femme fatale as economically autonomous that Jancovich points out from the classical era can be useful when investigating the key social and cultural anxieties that manifest in contemporary reflections of this character. This *kept woman* personae and the vicious womanhood that comes with it seemingly call into question the current gender hierarchies of the time that include the desire for social mobility. Portraying women from different age groups, sexual orientations, and class structures pitted against each other not only demonstrates a lack of female solidarity but also point towards the hostility of such divisions. The following section will examine the previously mentioned contemporary noirs as they also employ bisexual aggression as a tool to represent “vicious womanhood.” As the femme fatale’s sexuality is a primary point of exploration in this thesis, examining the contemporary use of bisexuality combined with violence adds to this notion of social antagonisms represented between two women.

**The Femme Fatale’s Sexual Duplicity**

The bisexual femme fatale has been discussed in terms of her pornographic pandering towards male fantasies as well as alternatively indicating the opportunity for sexual diversity. Katherine Farrimond explores the multiple meanings of bisexual representation in film noir femme fatales of the post-code era in an article titled “Stay Still So We Can See Who You Are.” Rather than being used solely as a symbol of excess, sexual fluidity offers the potential to disrupt current popular discourse on monosexuality and gendered binaries.\(^\text{15}\) Contemporary noir that demonstrates bisexual femme fatales expresses the anxiety about female sexual behavior, specifically the threat prescribed by those women who refuse to follow the monosexual ideal.\(^\text{16}\) Furthermore, Farrimond declares that “bisexuality forces into the foreground the idea that it is not always possible to tell the entirety of a person’s desires.”\(^\text{17}\) This statement is indicative of the
very nature of the femme fatale character who masquerades not only her sexual preferences but even victimization. Bisexuality is then not only a representation of alternative sexual orientation, but seemingly a narrative device employed to disguise the femme fatale’s intentions and desires. Furthermore, it increases the complexities that may exist between female characters. While not all female relationships in noir are constructed by their sexual associations, the following two contemporary noirs—*Black Swan* and *Side Effects*—portray female antagonisms through their bisexual relationship with one another.

*Black Swan* portrays the cut throat world of women starring in the ballet. Nina (Natalie Portman) is given the lead in Swan Lake and her fears and self-doubt manifest in the relationship she shares with her contemporaries. Age and sexuality are points of divergence and antagonism amongst the women in this film. Nina is a hard-working over-achiever with hopes of acknowledgement in her dancing career. As a young up-and-comer in the company, she proves to be competition to the older dancers. Her pink clothing and childlike bedroom further code her as youthful, naïve, and more importantly feminine. Beth (Winona Ryder) is the aged and ousted principal dancer that has been overshadowed by Nina. She is not subtle in her jealousy of Nina and lashes out at her by using offensive and degrading words like ‘Bitch’ and ‘Whore.’ Lily (Mila Kunis) represents the femme fatale, as indicated by both her timely arrival and looming threat to Nina. Lily’s confidence and experience as a dancer are paralleled by her sexual assertiveness. Her self-assurance manifests as the black swan as well as the femme fatale within Nina’s mind. The director of the ballet, Thomas (Vincent Cassel), encourages Nina to find freedom in her sexuality, which is something she is lacking. In order to find perfection in herself and her performance as both white and black swan, Nina indulges her darker and unrestricted sides through sex and violence. Nina violently attacks Lily, whom she believes to be stealing her
coveted role in the ballet. Nina’s aggression towards Lily comes not only from a place of professional competition, but also her confusion over their bisexual experience together. Nina believes Lily to be the threat, but she is actually the cause of her own anxiety. Ultimately, she finds perfection in losing control of her sexuality and multiple personalities. She becomes both the beautiful white swan that is feminine and sweet, as well as the sexually precarious black swan. The relationships Nina shares with the other female characters at first come off as innocent, naïve, and sympathetic; however, they develop into this symbolic representation of the competitive and unapologetic nature of women from different social strata that challenge each other in their workplace.

Moreover, the bisexual femme fatale in Side Effects also represents the misconceptions of sexuality, desires, and intentions as part of the enigmatic personae. The relationship between Emily (Rooney Mara) and Dr. Siebert (Catherine Zeta-Jones) is indicative of the generational and even sexual divide between women. Dr. Siebert is older and of the generation that directly benefitted from the women’s movement of the late sixties. For instance, she is not only educated, but a practitioner in the medical field which traditionally had been male-dominated. Also, her interest solely in women differentiates her from Emily and monosexual women. Dr. Siebert succumbs to the manipulation of sexual advances by the younger Emily who provides the intimacy she desires. Emily, on the other hand, signifies a younger generation dissimilar to Dr. Siebert and ultimately at odds. While this younger generation has also benefitted from the women’s movement in regards to securing a job and allowing for social mobility, Emily signifies a reclaiming of traditional gender roles that align her more with the classic notion of a kept woman. While she lacks the visual codes often associated with the femme fatale such as hair, make-up and costume styling, Emily still represents the greed, selfishness, and idleness of the
classical fatales, and she uses other social codes to conceal her immoral behavior. The male protagonist Dr. Banks (Jude Law) easily mistakes Emily for a victim of depression and marital anxiety exhibited by her weakened and run-down appearance. She goes to great lengths to physically harm herself and her husband, Martin (Channing Tatum) to contribute to her perceived depression and prescription drug side-effects. For instance, she drives her car into a concrete wall under the guise of her melancholy. Additionally, she stabs her husband to death in a drug induced somnambulant trance. The relationship between Emily and Dr. Siebert is at first depicted as a doctor/patient relationship. Their bisexual relationship is not even revealed until the end when Dr. Banks has uncovered their elaborate scheme. Ultimately, Emily cooperates with Dr. Banks at the expense of Dr. Siebert in order to save herself from life in a mental hospital. The liaisons, murder plot, and financial schemes are exposed through narration and the use of flashbacks. Emily’s betrayal of both of her lovers is revealing of the duality and deception of her sexuality as well as how sex is used as a performance which compares to nineties neo-noir. For instance, a montage sequence portrays Emily and Martin rebuilding their marriage followed by an explicit sex scene displaying her fully nude body on top of a concealed Martin. Likewise, the softly lit flashback scenes of Emily seducing Dr. Siebert are evocative of soft-core porn with Dr. Siebert running her hands up Emily’s legs and under her girlish dress. Additionally, Emily relies on seduction to entrap Dr. Siebert into incriminating herself, talking about their first time together and all their plotting all while wearing a wire under her dress. Emily’s true motivations for killing her husband in conspiracy with Dr. Siebert ultimately come down to the kept lifestyle she had and Martin took away from her. She is less interested in her relationship with Dr. Siebert as she is with getting back her leisurely lifestyle of sailing, garden parties, and luxury convertibles. The conflict and betrayal represented by Emily and Dr. Siebert speaks to the divide
in women of different generations, class status, and sexual orientation. Dr. Siebert symbolizes female financial success and educational achievement, and she is ultimately abandoned by Emily, a spoiled girl forced into employment by her failure of a husband. More significantly, they are defeated and pitted against one another by the more competent male doctor, Dr. Banks.

These two examples are fitting illustrations of what Farrimond regards as patriarchal appropriation as well as subversive representations of the bisexual woman.\(^{18}\) The bisexual element to these femme fatales not only addresses the political meaning of representations of sexually powerful women, especially those categorized as “other,” but also signifies what McRobbie calls the phallic girl version of a lesbian. For instance, these depictions of bisexual women adopt masculine traits such as drug and alcohol induced sexual encounters while conforming to feminine standards of beauty and fashion in order to seek male praise as well as attention.\(^{19}\) The added violence to the bisexual femme fatale is also critical to understanding her duplicitous nature. These two films demonstrate the femme fatale using violence against herself and/or an intimate partner which not only adds to the adverse representation of bisexual femme fatales, but also signifies more complexity and confusion about the character’s identity.

Additionally, the betrayals that exist between the female characters in these films represent the mistrust and opposition of women attempting to work in harmony. Bisexuality is utilized in these noirs for its historically mistrustful connotations, but as we have seen in previous chapters, femme fatales rely on various methods of gender expectations in order to achieve their goals. Manipulation takes on many masks, be it bisexual or heterosexual. As this research is most concerned with representations of victimization as a tool for the femme fatale, the following section will examine the issue of abuse in contemporary culture as it relates to domestic and partner violence seen in present-day noir.
Recognizing the Issue of Violence

Anti-violence and domestic abuse has surfaced in the mainstream media in various forms. Most recently celebrities have endorsed a new campaign called ‘No More,’ which seeks to break social stigma, normalize the conversation around domestic violence and sexual assault, and increase resources to address these urgent issues. Even the White House has taken action on the matter of sexual assault with its ongoing ‘It’s On Us’ campaign. At the 57th Grammy’s in 2015, President Obama encouraged Americans to take personal responsibility to stop domestic violence and sexual assault, which was followed by a spoken word piece by activist and domestic abuse survivor, Brooke Axtell. Following Brook Axtell’s message was the somber and emotional ballad *By the Grace of God* performed by pop singer, Katy Perry. While the issue appears more visible in contemporary culture, this was not always the case. Prior to second-wave feminist initiatives, domestic disputes and abuse towards women by their husbands were not in the public sphere and more astonishingly did not warrant the law to intervene. Subsequent to the activism to make the issue more visible, legal reform to allow restraining orders, special protection orders, warrantless arrests, and anti-stalking laws have given control to women who before may have felt powerless to an abusive husband or lover.

Despite these legal reforms and social efforts to support battered women, there are some who continue to endure the abuse, which usually tends to be a matter of economic dependency and isolation as well as matters of race and sexual orientation. Women from different classes, race, and sexual orientation experience and handle assault differently. Dorothy McBride and Janine Parry acknowledge the hesitancy of women of color to report abuse based on their history of mistrust with law enforcement, as well as the hesitancy by lesbian women who fear their sexual identity being exposed. Failures to report abuse is not the only concern feminist activist
have encountered. With the issue entering the mainstream, comes with it the criticism of feminists losing control of the definition. Domestic violence does not just include women who are abused by their spouse, but also children who are abused by parents. While child welfare is an important issue, it distracts from the historically gendered issue of violence and abuse between adults. Therefore, some feminists have adopted the term ‘intimate partner violence’ in reference to violence used solely between adults. Moreover, the term is intended to not only refer to disputes between husband and wife, but rather any adults engaged in a close relationship whether they live together or not. This new definition would include lesbian and gay couples. 

These current understandings of intimate partner violence have allowed for a re-evaluation of traditional systems of oppression and discrimination. More importantly, at the forefront of the issue is the matter of violence and what actions are taken in both direct response and aiding victims of such abuse. There are opportunities and organizations set up now for women who are being abused to seek out, but what about the women who choose to take matters into their own hands and fight back? Self-defense and battered woman syndrome are two types of defense that have been used in cases where women have killed their abusers. How the media and American culture react to these cases has been varied. Film has been one such media outlet to manifest women violently reacting to their abusers and attackers across genres in films like *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill, 1974), *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991), *Enough* (Michael Apted, 2002), *Kill Bill* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003-2004), and *The Brave One*, (Neil Jordan, 2007). Even neo-noir from the nineties demonstrated female vigilantism as a response to male cruelty and inequality as was demonstrated in the first chapter. The following case study will explore more in-depth the relationship between two women and their shared experience of domestic and partner abuse. Furthermore, the two women in this noir film not only represent the lack of
solidarity around this issue, but speak to the varied cultural response of punishing and rewarding women for killing their abusers as a symbol of empowerment.

**Case Study: Columbus Circle (2012)**

Reflections of previous femme fatales surface in *Columbus Circle* in regards to not only their physical representation, but also their ideology and use of violence in relation to victimization. E. Ann Kaplan argues that classical femme fatales lusted more so after money, in contrast to the added sexual gratification sought out by femmes in neo-noir films of the nineties.\(^{27}\) In follow-up to the section on bisexuality used as narrative device to demonstrate female antagonism, this film features two opposing female characters that share a friendly heterosexual connection but ultimately turn on each other. The women in this film are represented not by their sexual interests but ultimately greed, likening them to the classical fatale. Furthermore, their experience of enduring a form of domestic abuse is what brings them together as well as what tears them apart. This antagonistic female relationship not only embodies conflicting feminist philosophies and objectives, but also illustrates an increase in female violence from the previous decade. *Columbus Circle* was chosen for discussion for multiple reasons including its adoption of narrative and visual noir elements, as well as the distrustful attitudes towards women posing as victims. *Columbus Circle* channels the nostalgia for the classical era of noir with its murder mystery plot and usual line-up of characters. While this film is in color, the use of chiaroscuro lighting imitates the classical noir style and the musical score builds on the drama and suspense. However, playing on the complexities and mystery of the genre, the femme fatale character is not so easily distinguishable between the two female characters, Abigail and Lillian.
Set in an upscale neighborhood of Manhattan, the urban location is yet another noir code for the foreboding and pessimistic people and activities that are about to be uncovered. The film begins with the murder of an elderly woman in a luxury high-rise apartment and the narration by her neighbor, Abigail (Selma Blair), requesting permission to take over the old woman’s lease. Conscious of the classical style, the narrative then turns to the skeptical Det. Giardello (Giovanni Ribisi) questioning Abigail, who carefully keeps her face hidden in the shadows of her dimly lit apartment as if to hide something. Her guarded responses about her relationship with the murdered elderly neighbor only intrigue the detective more. In time, it is revealed that Abigail is actually Justine Waters, a wealthy heiress who mysteriously disappeared from the public eye to escape her abusive father over a decade ago. Abigail is being supported financially by her considerable inheritance and emotionally by an old family friend, Ray (Beau Bridges). Abigail’s request for her deceased neighbor’s apartment is denied, and Lillian (Amy Smart) and her husband Charlie (Jason Lee) move in. Lillian and Abigail develop a sort of friendship based on their similar experience of physical and mental abuse. Eventually, Abigail uncovers that she is being deceived by Lillian’s victimization, and that there is a plot between Lillian, Charlie, and Ray to steal her inherited wealth.

Abigail emulates the semantic and syntactical aspects of the classical era of the genre in regards to the femme fatale characteristics. She is rich, stylish, and resembles the classic beauty of Veronica Lake wearing silky, loose blouses and long soft waves in her hair. She continuously hides in the shadows of the draped windows of her apartment which signify isolation and paranoia. These peculiarities of a shut-in mirror the enigmatic allure of classical fatales like Norma Desmond from Sunset Blvd. (Billy Wilder, 1950). On the other hand, Lillian is coded similarly with a more modern stylish appearance and her long blonde hair. Her arrival in
Abigail’s life immediately following the death of the neighbor could also signify the looming danger the fatale tends to bring with her. While Lillian may not blatantly connote the classical fatale like Abigail does, she does emulate the desperation for a new start with financial gain that classic kept fatales have displayed. Both women demonstrate the characteristics of a femme fatale in terms of their financial objectives and reliance on gender expectations to accomplish these goals. However, they come from two very different social classes which set them apart. Abigail is the wealthy heiress of a powerful industrialist, and Lillian grew up in the trailer parks with working-class parents. While both women endured the abuse of their fathers, they took different routes to escape. Lillian ran away at age fifteen with Charlie who was able to support her financially because she had no money of her own. Abigail disappeared with the help of Ray at age eighteen, once she had access to her inheritance. Their experience with abuse brings them together yet establishes room for resentment primarily on Lillian’s end. The following sections will further identify the social issues regarding violence towards women and how it reflects and challenges gender ideology, and more importantly how this issue is designated as an opposing point between two women. By closely examining the narrative, mise-en-scene, and themes relating to violence, this section will point out where and how the genre uses the femme fatale to problematize social issues regarding domestic and partner abuse through fabricated representations of violence and female antagonisms.

**Symbolic and Physical Violence**

The punishment of vulnerable women is demonstrated by a wide-ranging use of violence from the murder of the elderly neighbor, Mrs. Lonnigan, to the flashbacks of Abigail’s father beating her mother, to the staged attacks on Lillian by her husband, Charlie. Each of the female characters affected by violence seems to fit neatly in her designated gender expectations of
susceptibility to violent acts. The inciting incident is marked by the murder of a sickly old woman living alone. She is thrown from her staircase, and it is made to look like an accidental fall. Exposing the weakness and defenselessness of an aging woman, she proves to be an easy target for Charlie who executes the murder. The protagonist, Abigail, is also portrayed as a fragile woman suffering socially and psychologically from her traumatic childhood. Using narration and more contemporary noir techniques such as flashback sequences, we discover the cruelty Abigail endured by her father when she tried to protect her mother from abuse. While it is not explicitly stated how exactly her mother died, it can be presumed her father had some part in it. Her father, also deceased, no longer poses a threat to her; however, Abigail is depicted as a recluse in hiding not only from her abuser but from the intrusiveness of the press about her past. While Abigail is sensitive towards abused women, further demonstrated by her willingness to help Lillian, she exhibits more strength and autonomy as the voice of reason. Abigail gives Lillian shelter, listens to her, and asks her why she stays with an abuser, claiming, “I couldn’t.” Abigail has made a life of her own and subtly encourages Lillian to do the same. Granted, Abigail has the financial means to live her life of solitude. Also, she is reliant on Ray and the apartment concierge to take care of her daily matters; therefore, she is not necessarily self-sufficient. Her fears of the outside world and her childhood abuse make her susceptible to the manipulation by Charlie, Lillian and Ray.

Lillian, both a victim and victimizer, specifically torments Abigail in many ways without getting violent with her. She uses Abigail’s weakness for abused women to attack her. First, Lillian goes to great lengths to demonstrate that she herself is the victim of textbook partner abuse. For instance, she takes on multiple physical beatings from her husband and even performs the charade out in the hallway for Abigail to hear and see with her own eyes. Lillian further
recites the excuses of a battered wife stating things like: “I don’t want him to go to jail,” “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for this to happen,” “He works hard and drinks when he is stressed, I set him off,” “He is a reliable guy,” and “I wouldn’t have anything without him.” She even walks around the apartment lobby wearing large sunglasses to shield her marked up face from other residents and employees. Lastly, Lillian urges Abigail to try walking around in the hallway outside of the safety of her apartment. Once in the hallway, film techniques are used to enhance the pain and anguish Lillian is causing Abigail. For example, the editing speeds-up and then slows down, and the use of close-ups and skewed angles portray the unease and disorientation Abigail is feeling. Moreover, juxtaposed shots of Abigail hiding under a table in the hallway and a flashback to when she was a kid hiding under a desk expose the fear she feels around abusive men.

Regardless of age, class, or consent, each of these situations demonstrates the vulnerability of women to physical and emotional violence primarily used by men. Economic dependence proves to be a central component in the portrayal of these women enduring such abuse. Furthermore, these examples, especially Lillian and Abigail, highlight the notion of the femme fatale as a kept woman. Lillian exploits the aspects of intimate partner violence by exaggerating what a drunk her abuser is, as well as how her unlucky teenage years left her financially dependent upon him. Furthermore, when their plan backfires and Charlie ends up dead, Lillian still pursues Abigail’s inheritance so as not to end up penniless. Abigail is also reliant on the money she inherited from her father’s fortune. She has been able to maintain the comforts of her wealthy upbringing, hence the stylish lofted apartment and chic wardrobe. Even though her father is deceased, she refuses to be publicly active. Additionally, she lives her luxurious life in solitude letting the public believe her to be another missing person or possibly a
victim of foul play. Moreover, Mrs. Lonnigan is only living next door to Abigail because Ray arranged to support her financially in order to make sure Abigail’s identity stay hidden. It is in fact Ray’s restlessness with taking care of both Abigail and Mrs. Lonnigan that he enlists the help of Charlie and Lillian to get rid of them. He is an accessory to the murder of Mrs. Lonnigan and the mastermind behind stealing Abigail’s money. While Ray’s anxiety motivates the series of unfortunate events, he and Charlie underestimate the perseverance of Lillian and Abigail to maintain their lifestyle, and both men end up dead.

**Vicious Victims**

Former advocates from the seventies approached the issue of abuse as something that could happen to everyone in every class and every community in order to discredit the widespread belief at the time that battery occurred only in slums and was prompted by drugs and alcohol. Nevertheless, the issue has been critiqued as not necessarily being a mutual one. The experience of abuse is not always shared when considering the community or social situation of the victim. Lillian and Abigail exemplify the idea that abuse can happen to anyone; however, their different class status divides their experience and approach to the issue. Additionally, this strained relationship demonstrates how women of different social positions are disengaged from a collective approach to eradicating prejudice and male domination.

Abigail’s experience suggests that abuse can also happen to the upper-classes. She is the representative of wealth and opportunity, and the champion of overcoming adversity. Demonstrated by her eagerness to escape and remain hidden from her abuser as well as her emotional support towards Lillian, Abigail is a positive figure for abused women. Whether as an act of self-defense or out of revenge, Abigail stabs Charlie to death when he attacks Lillian. Positioned with flashbacks to her childhood abuse, Abigail’s use of violence is depicted as valid
due to the fact that she herself is a victim. Furthermore, the police detectives recognize her as a victim, hence their willingness to let her off consequence free.

Lillian, on the other hand is actually non-violent, but ultimately loses the battle for Abigail’s wealth and identity. She is the representative of the deprived, desperate and manipulative women. While she may be falsifying the partner abuse, she nonetheless has come from an abusive home and moreover is taking a physical beating from her husband as part of their act. Rather than hit back, Lillian is a docile femme fatale who relies on manipulation as a deterrent. Her pursuit for the massive wealth is not that dissimilar from Abigail’s, although she has no legal claim to it. Therefore, every calculated move is represented as undeserving and deceitful. She sidesteps every opportunity to work collectively and morally with Abigail on the issue of abuse; thus, her masquerade as a victim and undermining of the issue are consequently punished. Lillian is not only framed for the murder of Charlie but exposed to the predatory gaze of the media. Abigail on the other hand is validated for safe-guarding her fortune, and her vengeful acts towards Lillian do not carry the same vindictive connotation. The class division represented by Lillian and Abigail is what ultimately opposes these two characters and brings out their most spiteful and vicious actions against each other. The perceived good girl triumphs over the perceived bad girl, as marked by their social upbringing and approach to abusive relationships.

**Conclusion**

*Columbus Circle* was not released theatrically; however, its straight-to-DVD release and availability on popular on-demand websites like Netflix reflect the film industry’s current influence on audiences. As Kate Stables has noted that post-modern culture and the film industry directly affects noir and the femme fatale, this shift in media availability online was certainly a
contributing factor to the selection of this film. Furthermore, its response by audience and critics seemingly suggest its use of generic plot and characters is weak and underdeveloped, which could be due to the oversaturation of media content online. For instance, one critic from Film Gate Reviews that specializes in reviewing independent films including thrillers states, “It's not a bad film per se, it's just that the characters that interested us at first start acting in unrealistic ways and we're left scratching our heads over the point of it all.”^30^ Another response to the film from Aboutentertainment.com states:

Less a horror/suspense thriller than a double-crossing heist thriller, *Columbus Circle* has Hitchcockian potential, but despite a strong cast and a premise that delivers some level of intrigue, it can't sustain the sort of consistent tension or unpredictability that the best thrillers of this ilk boast.^31^

While these reviews suggest a more tempered response to this film than *The Last Seduction* or *Derailed* received from mainstream reviewers, they more importantly suggest that the film relied on the elements of suspense and characters common in noir. Furthermore, they indicate excess and unrealistic qualities of the film and its characters weaken its potential. Since this thesis serves to interrogate such aspects of film and its industrial and cultural components, I think a film such as this exemplifies superfluous depictions of the femme fatale in contemporary media.

The upward peak in female violence depicted in this film as well as the previously mentioned contemporary noirs suggests a renewed questioning of social conceptions of gender in relation to current issues. Revitalizing the *kept* fatale personae from the classical era also brings with it questions regarding the desire for economic autonomy and the challenges that come along with such dependency. Each femme fatale discussed in this chapter relies on the traditional conceptions of femininity and its reflection of status in order to veil her sexual and/or financial desires. Domestic and partner abuse have been linked to the financial subordination of women regardless of age, class, race, or sexual orientation. This particular issue has resonated with U.S
culture in last several years, especially in 2015 with the media coverage surrounding the NFL players suspended for using violence against their partners and children. Additionally, activists, politicians, and the public persist to question the structure of relationships, family dynamics, and possible solutions to the problem. As influential as the media can be, this has become a space to address the issues of abuse and create a culture where this type of violence is not endured. As a creative outlet for socio-political issues, cinema has the opportunity to address the anxiety around such an issue. Since film noir specifically thrives on this sort of social anxiety, domestic and partner abuse has manifested in the characters, especially the femme fatale. Columbus Circle directly addresses this issue through two characters, the protagonist Abigail and the femme fatale, Lillian. The femme fatale blatantly undermines the expectations and efforts to help women overcome abusive relationships. Through her masquerade as a victim of partner abuse and her eagerness to rob Abigail, another victim of domestic abuse, Lillian demonstrates a lack of female solidarity and further problematizes how we recognize signs of women in need of help. Moreover, the opposition of both Abigail and Lillian perpetuates this distance between women of varying social and cultural branches that has hindered any collective efforts to overcome issues such as abuse. This also tends to support the post-feminist notion of female individualism in that the only one of the women walks away with the money and a better life.

Moreover, as it relates to the women in Columbus Circle as well as other female characters mentioned in this thesis, contemporary noir demonstrates that women who openly challenge the status quo are not necessarily to be celebrated but possibly feared as overly aggressive. Specifically, in the present decade, the women that challenge traditional conceptions of femininity through their ‘other’ sexual identity, falsified vulnerability, and violence are punished by the law or with death. It is the women that adhere to the status quo that ultimately
succeed. Additionally, portrayals of women from different age groups, sexual orientations, and class structures that desire social mobility and are pitted against one another illustrate not only the hostility of social divisions but the competition that capitalism encourages. Also, these representations of contrasting women seemingly suggest that the femme fatale’s desires are not always indulged as exemplified in neo-noir of the nineties, but rather she remains a vessel for symbolizing ideological conflict.
Conclusion

What defines film noir in the neo-noir and contemporary eras is not just the presence of familiar characters, settings, and plots. Since the genre developed from social, historical and industrial influences in the forties, its manifestations in contemporary cinema lend itself to the possibility for modern influences. Contemporary social changes, historical events, the latest trends, and modern filmmaking techniques breathe new life into the same dark and cynical stories of the classical era. With this influence comes the need to investigate said socio-cultural and political changes, beliefs, and anxieties as they manifest into some of the most depraved and immoral characters on screen. Likewise, it is significant to understand the impact these noir characters and themes have on representations of women across media platforms, including coverage of true crime stories. One can look to the story of Amanda Knox and Meredith Kercher as an illustration of just how openly the genre of noir and the femme fatale were manifested into the media coverage of two young college girls and the horrors of contemporary female sexuality and independence. Female violence is a primary theme within this research, and demonstrating its manifestations within the neo-noir and contemporary eras has proven its function for expressing and challenging gender ideology. Furthermore, anxiety over female sexuality and power is paralleled by the violence enacted by and towards the femme fatale.

The women’s movement of the sixties and seventies opened doors politically and socially for women in regards to their access to education, sexual freedoms, and more highly regarded careers. At the same time, the film industry brought an end to the Hays Code which censored language and explicit content. Consequently, this new environment had an effect on the film noir genre. With the ability to now show overt violence and nudity on screen (with official ratings), neo-noir and contemporary noir utilize these new methods for articulating social
anxiety. With that said, critical investigation of sex, violence, and social issues manifested in the narrative and aesthetics of the femme fatale have proven that contemporary noir does not necessarily employ these new methods to challenge social structures, but rather solely as an entertaining form of expressing existing conflicts in gender ideology.

Each of the contributing chapters has discussed in detail the social attitudes and anxiety represented towards women working in corporate America, women choosing against the traditional family structure, and openness about female sexuality and body autonomy. These factors have had in some way or another an effect on the level of violence of the femme fatale character in both neo-noir and contemporary noir. The nineties was a time of reinvigorated feminist activism alongside growing scholarly concern over post-feminist attitudes towards female individuality and consumerism. At this time, noir demonstrated an extremely violent femme fatale and explicit use of nudity and sexual content. The following decade offered a more conservative response to any enlightened ideas of political activism and female social and economic liberation. With a rise in raunch culture, women sought equality to men through their crude, boy’s club behavior with foul language and sexist activities. The femme fatale seemingly responds to this social behavior by retreating to an obedient state and allowing for more conservative patriarchal imposition within the noir genre. However, not all women felt the need to jump on the raunch wagon, and due to conflicting ideologies within feminist politics and post-feminist culture, the last several years of noir have manifested violent women at odds with their oppressed status and with other women. I have shown in this thesis that in both past and present noir, the representation of violence disguised as a desperate act by a helpless woman (the femme fatale) symbolizes the empowerment of women’s sexuality and independence and consequently the fear that comes along with it. All of the femme fatales discussed in this thesis have
represented through their narrative construction an important feminist issue. However, the way in which they present the issue through the use of sex, violence, and/or deception suggests what McRobbie has described in her post-feminist critique as feminism being taken into account, then destabilized through acts of enlightened sexism and disloyalty.

**Generic Constructions of the Femme Fatale**

The femme fatale has historically been rendered as a violent and seductive woman in film and literature. Specifically within film noir, she has been defined in terms of her ideological pandering towards society’s fantasy about the underside of femininity as well as the undeniable threat she poses to the social order and masculinity. It is imperative to examine this seeming threat within a cultural context as it is predominantly characterized by sex and violence and directly relates to the events and triumphs of ongoing efforts for woman’s rights. Lisa Coulthard argues in her chapter “Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Film Violence,” that the neo-femme fatale ought not to be read automatically as a symptom of the crisis of masculinity or even femininity but rather as signifying anxiety related to collective action and political engagement of feminism. Additionally, she maintains that the contemporary violent woman in noir “articulates a postfeminist discourse of individualistic, ‘have it all’ feminism that yokes violence to individual, personal, erotic, and financial success.”

Moreover, in her discussion of the revenge-seeking violent heroine, Coulthard argues that the violent woman enacts fantasies of recuperation, redemption, omnipotence, and transcendence. However, this justified violence does not fit neatly into the narrative construction of most of the femme fatales discussed here. On the contrary, the femme fatale in each of the case studies discussed in this thesis masquerades as a victim and leverages this as a justification for her actions. Therefore, her deception would seemingly counteract any inherent or sanctioned
transgression of dominant patriarchal and capitalist ideology. Although, like the post-modern action heroine, the violent femme is not necessarily masculinized by her violence or muscular frame—due in part to the overt use of female nudity and reliance on feminine codes. Rather, the femme fatale is what Coulthard refers to as ‘postfeminized’ through her superficial transgression, post-political individuality, and problematic pleasures of sex, violence, and financial gain. Furthermore, the femme fatale reflects an image of innovation and revolutionary change through her job, education, and opportunity, but ultimately renounces any actual engagement with its relation to feminism, female solidarity, collectivity, or political action. In other words, while the femme fatale may allude to social repressions through encounters with other characters, she does not offer them support—rather she denies them for her own self-serving, individualism.

The Hollywood version of the femme fatale in contemporary noir does not upset but rather validates the status quo. The femme fatale in neo-noir and contemporary noir has signified revolutionary feminist objectives as depicted by her positions alongside men in the corporate world, her right to privacy and choice over her body and reproductive rights, and the option to choose civil independence over marriage. However, as this research has demonstrated, the underlying ideology of these women and their respective feminist positions is negated by their post-feminist characterization. The femme fatale has taken feminist achievements into account and has stifled them for her own financial and/or erotic gratification. Whether the femme fatale triumphs, survives, or dies, the current social values are what ultimately succeed in these films—from consumerism and good greed to individuality and sexual politics.

Noir as a genre has successfully given the people what they want out of the femme fatale. As Rick Altman discusses in his theory of genre, the structures of Hollywood cinema serve to mask the very distinction between ritual and ideological function. Moreover, because the public
does not want to know it is being manipulated, the successful ideological/ritual appropriation is one that disguises the potential for manipulation while playing up the capacity for entertainment. In terms of noir as a genre that does such, Hollywood cinema has given us decades of films with the recognizable femme fatale and male authoritative figure involved in a crime. Sexual, cultural, and political ideologies are expressed through these characters, the crime, and the setting. In contemporary film, these elements are often characterized by the explicit use of violence and nudity for more entertainment value. However, there is variation as to how these rituals and ideologies are understood by audiences. I have shown how some authors like Jeffrey Brown perceive violence and sexuality in films, especially erotic narratives, as a form of rebellion, empowerment, and subjectivity, while others like Ariel Levy and Linda Ruth Williams have critiqued these films as both feminist and deeply problematic. Without employing reception methods, it is difficult to express other varying opinions regarding the neo and contemporary femme fatale. Whether audiences love her or hate her, what is most certain in this research and answers the questions posed, is that the femme fatale is a construct of ideological beliefs as they surround the time period in which she manifests.

**Chapter Summary**

The femme fatales discussed in this thesis all demonstrate superficial markers of power illustrated by their individualism, capitalistic goals, and primary use of sexuality. As Lisa Coulthard suggests, the femme fatale is not automatically a sign of male anxiety over female empowerment, but rather she suggests more complex socio-cultural attitudes towards feminism and collective activism. Each of the films chosen for analysis demonstrates preference of characters that are white, middle-class women between the ages of 20-35. These demographics exemplify the default characterization of the post-feminist woman. Each of the chapters within
this research demonstrates just how the femme fatale represents a feminist issue but ultimately portrays post-feminist approaches to maintaining individuality, reclaiming femininity, enlightened sexism, and neoliberalism.

Because the nineties presented resurgence in feminist activism as well as a growing debate about post-feminist critique, this decade was a strategic starting point in examining the femme fatale of the neo-noir era. Corporate noirs from this era demonstrated women as publicly active in the workforce and highlighted feminist efforts towards higher paying and more esteemed careers. However, they largely depict post-feminist and opportunist attitudes about women as individual agents for sexual and financial gain as opposed to collaborative activists for social change. The femme fatales from *Basic Instinct*, *The Temp*, and *The Last Seduction* all exemplify women competent at their jobs yet aggressively wanting more for themselves socially, sexually, and financially. Gender ideology and complementary hetero relationships are often primary conflicts within these films. Specifically, in *The Last Seduction*, the femme fatale, Bridget, demonstrates just how traditional constructions of gender can be exploited for her personal gain. In *The Violent Woman*, Hilary Neroni argues that Bridget reveals her feminine mask by challenging male attempts to feminize her while also overemphasizing aspects of her femininity. For example, crass language and philandering are Bridget’s way of challenging her role as female, yet there is no question that Bridget is female, illustrated by not only her hair/make-up/wardrobe but the multiple explicit sex scenes displaying her naked body. Also, Bridget undermines the claims of female victimization by relying on her feminine mask to manipulate men and prove that she is not an actual victim but rather capable of victimizing.

The new millennium commenced a rise in raunch culture, which consequently allowed for more conservative backlash as demonstrated in the ideological depictions of the femme fatale.
from this period. While noirs from this time displayed a sense of self-aware irony in regards to constructions of gender and female objectification, their attempts at recoding outmoded marks of gender oppression also perpetuated the problem through new forms of sexist iconography. Feminist issues of body autonomy and reproductive rights surface in these films alongside a patriarchal system of beliefs. Specifically, films like *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, *The Lookout*, and *Derailed* demonstrate sexually assertive women with idealized body types who not only lack in the physical violence of former fatales, but also are submissive in relation to their male counterparts. In *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, Ariel Levy interrogates the cultural phenomenon of females performing patriarchal stereotypes of sexual servility in the name of empowerment. The film *Derailed* specifically represents these gender complexities through ideological depictions of family structures and sexual deviation. The film explicitly brings up the issue of adultery and abortion as a source of power. The femme fatale, Lucinda, not only entraps married men into illicit affairs with her, but she also masquerades as a victim of rape who resorts to having an abortion. Lucinda exploits not only her right to choose as a woman, but undermines the claims of victims of sexual assault. Her attempts at establishing control are ultimately thwarted by prevailing male authority.

As pragmatic analysis stresses the possibility for multiple and conflicting opinions in regards to interpreting genre, the contemporary femme fatale has manifested what appears to be these varying interpretations of female politics and questions of autonomy in the present decade of noir. As third-wave feminism strives to include those people oppressed by society in regards to gender, race, class, sexual orientation and disability in the name of social and political equality, post-feminist attitudes tend to focus on the elite finding and realizing equality and independence through consumerism. Moreover, the narrative opposition of women in
contemporary noir from this time, in films like *Black Swan*, *Side Effects*, and *Columbus Circle* represent women of different social strata while simultaneously perpetuating the oppression between them. The level of violence used by the femme fatale has noticeably increased from the previous decade, and has also been directed towards her opposing female counterpart. The victim masquerade yet again reveals itself in the film *Columbus Circle*. While both female characters are conflicted with the issue of domestic and partner abuse, the femme fatale, Lillian, exploits the issue by misrepresenting such acts of cruelty. The protagonist, Abigail, seemingly neutralizes Lillian’s attempts at weakening claims of victimization through her own visual and narrative experience of abuse. However, Abigail’s use of violence towards an abusive man, and her ultimate triumph, are suggestive of something more complex to the genre and to representations of women. In *Interrogating Postfeminism*, Tasker and Negra suggest that post-feminist culture centralizes the affluent elite and tends to confuse self-interest with individuality. Even though Abigail represents a woman overcoming adversity, she denounces the collective approach to eradicating abusive relationships in favor of her own self-serving agenda. Both Abigail and Lillian work at odds with each other for their own selfish reasons rather than collaborate towards independence for both of them.

What is significant about each of the women from these case studies is her ideological masking as a victim which parallels the masking of feminism within post-feminism. For these reasons, the neo and contemporary femme fatales are a symbolic embodiment of post-feminist depictions of power and fear associated with opportunities for professional development, choice with regards to domesticity and work, and sexual empowerment. Violence is a fluctuating method of expressing aggression that is determined by the cultural atmosphere. However, the femme fatale’s compulsory greed and use of feminine constructions permeate throughout the
genre as a constant, specifically during the time frame examined here. The femme fatale may be a threat to both men and women, but she more ominously is a threat to how women’s rights are portrayed in the media. By depicting the femme fatale as a victim and a victimizer, she becomes a symbol for the complexities of women’s issues as they are discussed within the present culture. Contemporary constructions of femininity are used by the femme fatale to misdirect her unsuspecting prey, assert a sense of female empowerment, and institute social hierarchies. While the characterizations of femininity seemingly vary throughout the nineties to the present, femininity itself remains a critical source of expressing gender unease and uncertainty.

**Criticism**

The traditional expressions of femininity alongside violence within media and cinema studies are something to be further interrogated, as they are continually fluctuating within their cultural context, and are often symbolic of gender anxiety and the relationship of women to feminism. In the chapter selection, “The Contradictions of Successful Femininity, Postfeminism, and ‘New Femininities,’” Shelley Budgeon notes that many norms associated with traditional femininity operate to obstruct any particular choices that might threaten its boundaries which include “choosing” to be a lesbian, childless, single, or feminist. The violent and/or sexually deviant femme fatale examined in this research typically tends to express gender difference while also posing as a threat to traditional femininity and therefore the cultural norms. I am arguing that the femme fatale represents the ideal form of post-feminism which proves to be advantageous for her as long as she does not stray too far from the socio-cultural and political ideology of the time. Her feminine masquerade is merely a temporary shield that reveals itself through her acts of violence and other socially considered deviations regarding sexuality.
In an ever increasingly media-saturated culture, depictions of female violence and sexuality have an effect on viewers in one way or another. My goal of this research was to investigate the socio-cultural and political factors associated with the femme fatale who is often regarded as a threat within the noir genre of cinema. Moreover, I wanted to investigate the manner in which the femme fatale’s violence and sexuality were presented to audiences, because she often masquerades as a victim and demonstrates a lack of ethical and moral grounding.

In western contemporary culture, the femme fatale has been integrated across multiple media and sold to female consumers as a figure of empowerment. The femme fatale has become a commodity of beauty and popular culture, further aligning her as a post-feminist figure. She appears in beauty products such as the ‘They’re Real’ line of Benefit Cosmetics, and even in the title of Britney Spears 2011 studio album, Femme Fatale, which was followed up by a world-wide tour of the same name. Additionally, the femme fatale’s alias, ‘black widow,’ consistently appears in popular culture as the titular crime-fighting heroine from the Marvel Avenger’s series, and again in pop singer, Iggy Azalea’s song Black Widow. In the music video for Black Widow, Iggy Azalea imitates the heroic sword fighting scenes from *Kill Bill: Vol 1.* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003). What these representations of the femme fatale all have in common is her characteristic sexuality and fetishized violence twisting her entanglement with actualized feminist empowerment. Contrary to these representations is the case of Amanda Knox, who was branded as a criminal, murderer, and sexual deviant through the media’s portrayal of her. This particular case embodies the social fears regarding educated female students, living on their own, partaking in casual sexual encounters, and who have reached the limits of ideological acceptance.
Illustration 5.1: Product advertisement illustrating the film noir femme fatale produced in beauty culture.

Hilary Neroni notes in *The Violent Woman* that identity is something that one picks up based on the dictates of ideology.\(^{17}\) I do not seek to claim that the films analyzed in this thesis are the standard model of neo-noir or contemporary noir, nor do I assert that all femme fatales within the noir genre fit this model of post-feminist ideology. Rather, I would emphasize that the noir femme fatales predominantly self-manifest in the mainstream media and popular culture as an icon of beauty and sex rather than a representation of collective feminist progress. While narrative cinema and noir specifically have the flexibility to express cultural attitudes and anxieties from any perspective, very rarely do we see a representation of a femme fatale of ‘other’ identity who additionally is more concerned with social injustice, rather than how much money she can make, with whom she can and will have sex, or how competitive she must be with other woman. Sexuality is only one sense of female empowerment, and violence is only one method of portraying hostility. I do not intend to overestimate the potential for future noir to venture outside of the entertainment value of greed, sex, and violence, due to the nature of the
Hollywood system and the current cultural ideology with which many women identify. Rather, I must advocate for the possibilities for alternate interpretation and reading against the grain in hopes that critical film examination of the genre continues to inform future generations of filmmakers and audiences.
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