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Bitch: Introduction

The perpetrator: a perky blue glass cup with “Bitch” splashed across the front in a swirly, girly, silver script. Showing here:



Figure 1

Oh, so humorous. Turns out this “Slang Pint Glass” is one of a family: Douchebag, Fucker, Slut, Pimp, and Hot Mess are all neatly packed in right next to each other on the shelves of Urban Outfitters. What a set! Who the hell is buying these? And why? It is here, with one not so average drinking glass, that this Bitch Thesis began.

Further research reveals copious amounts of other Bitch products running around town. The pervasive Bitch! Lest the glass be lonely, Urban Outfitters accompanies it with almost anything your little Bitchy heart could desire. Glasses, plates, bowls, snow globes, birthday banners, you name it: Urban has a version of it with Bitch scrawled across the front. Barnes & Noble proudly displays “Bitch a Day” calendars and planners, along with relationship advice books (*Why Men Love Bitches* [2000] and *Why Men Marry Bitches* [2006] by Sherry Argov) and dieting books (*Skinny Bitch* [2005] by Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin). Australian-based R Winery manufactures a red wine titled simply “Bitch,” and also the more upbeat “Bitch Bubbly” champagne.

What is going on? These products suggest a sort of highly commercialized, mainstream Bitch Culture. To the non-critical consumer, it may seem that American women are now embracing the term “Bitch” (at least materially), and claiming it as their own self-elected, self-empowering label, rather than letting it be used against them in its traditional derogatory fashion. Is that true? Can “Bitch” ever be an empowering term? If so, what type of woman claims that empowerment? Exactly what type of woman is the envisioned consumer of this Bitch Culture?

Before we really dive in, it is of the utmost importance that the Capital B Bitch be distinguished from the lower case b bitch. For my purposes in this thesis, I use the term “Capital B Bitch” (or just “Bitch”) to define both the commodified products (referred to as Bitch Products or, collectively, Bitch Culture) and the belief held by some that by capitalizing the derogatory “bitch,” the term becomes immediately redefined as a strong, independent, and empowered female. When referring to the term historically used to put women down, I will use the term “lower case b bitch” or, simply, “bitch.” Onwards.

It would be easy to write these products off as just another mechanism of a repressive patriarchal society: some fat cat white dudes chilling in their corporate headquarters, laughing at the drones of mindless upper-middle class American women who have too much money and too much free time, out purchasing these products. It’s tempting to simply point fingers and shake heads at the sad state of contemporary American society and modern-day feminism. But doing so would not fully explain *why* this commercialized Bitch Culture exists today, and why the products themselves are so popular. The fact remains: these products not only exist, but continue to be manufactured and purchased, and have been for at least the past ten years. What does this tell us about

feminism and American women today? Cue academic research into postfeminist consumer culture.

All that's needed is a nice, tidy definition of postfeminism to help contextualize the Bitch Products, and analyze them more thoroughly. Only one minor detail poses a problem: the single consistent characteristic of postfeminism, as it is defined or described by many a heady academic scholar is its inherent contradictory-prone, ambiguity-infused nature. The whole tiresome "love the feminine/hate the feminine, you can't be a feminist if you're this, you can't be a feminist if you're that, and put the damn lipstick down, no wait pick the high heels up" debate, prevents the formation of, or agreement on, any sort of concrete definition of postfeminism, and at the same time, keeps modern feminists arguing amongst themselves rather than rallying together as a collective whole.

It was one particularly long Christmas break afternoon spent at Spyhouse Coffee in Minneapolis that almost did me in. My attempts at full concentration on Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon's *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (2009) were continuously thwarted by the inability to drown out the conversation of the two hipsters to my left, engaged in a game of "casually" mentioning bands-that-really-aren't-that-good-but-that-only-I've-heard-of-and-therefore-demonstrate-my-superior-alternativeness-to-you. I reached a boiling point in trying to discern a useful, working definition of postfeminism, and left discouraged and frustrated with the futile infighting among feminists today, both within and outside of academia.

Imagine my elation then, upon returning to college and being assigned an article titled "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility" by one Rosalind Gill. Actually, the elation didn't come until after I had read the article, and discovered

precisely what I was searching for: a refreshing and honest admission that the attempts to define postfeminism are indeed circular and ineffective. Our best bet is to take a step back and understand it in an entirely different context: that of a sensibility, of a cultural feeling and understanding. As Gill writes:

Rather, postfeminism should be conceived of as a sensibility. From this perspective postfeminist media culture should be our critical object—a phenomenon into which scholars of culture should inquire—rather than an analytic perspective. This approach does not require a static notion of one single authentic feminism as a comparison point, but instead is informed by postmodernist and constructionist perspectives and seeks to examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media. This new notion emphasizes the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them.¹

In working with this definition, I was able to take a deep breath and admit to both myself and my thesis advisor that I am not, in fact, academically challenged, but had been going about this project in the entirely wrong way. The interesting, noteworthy, and productive part of this thesis lies not in determining whether or not these products are feminist or empowering (indeed, what would a truly feminist or empowering pint glass even look like?), but rather, in reflecting on how the existence of these products generates an understanding of gender and identity in the twenty first century, and how these products both individually and as a collective whole shape and form an understanding of contemporary feminism both as a lifestyle and as a political movement.

Gill also provides what has proven to be an immensely useful framework for contextualizing Capital B Bitch Culture, and specifically, Bitch Products:

This new notion. . .also points to a number of other relatively stable features that comprise or constitute a postfeminist discourse. These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline;

¹ Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture," 148.

a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. These themes coexist with, and are structured by, stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to “race” and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability as well as gender.²

For my purposes, analyzing individual Bitch Products and what they tell us about the relationships between American women and feminism today, requires that particular attention be paid to several of Gill’s points regarding postfeminism: individualism, choice and empowerment; naturalized sexual difference; consumerism and the commodification of difference; and a heavy emphasis on self-surveillance/self-discipline.

Later on in this same article, Gill touches on what will prove to be an absolutely essential concept for fully understanding Capital B Bitch Culture: the notion of irony and knowingness as it fits into the postfeminist discourse. She writes:

No discussion of the postfeminist sensibility in the media would be complete without considering irony and knowingness. . . [I]n postfeminist media culture irony has become a way of ‘having it both ways,’ of expressing sexist, homophobic or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized form, while claiming this was not actually ‘meant.’³

By placing an appropriate amount of distance between oneself and the statement being made, women today are allowed to be Capital B Bitches in an ironic and humorous manner. But does this attached irony really allow us to subvert the socially engrained derogatory definition of the term “bitch?”

Moving forward with this understanding of a postfeminist context, it is also crucial to understand the various ways in which contemporary pop culture can be used as a tool for a critical analysis of Bitch Culture. Rather than dismiss the realm of popular

² Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149.

³ Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 159.

culture as a site of complete oppression and repression that brings nothing worthy of deeper analysis to the table, it is important to view it instead as a site of identity crafting and negotiation: a space that is both reflective and constructive of American society. Full of contradictions and ambiguity, much like the notion of postfeminism itself, pop culture both pedagogically and pervasively informs us of both the “proper” and “improper” ways to conduct ourselves as young American women today.

Stating the obvious: no one exists in society today without interacting with pop culture in some way, shape, or form. Be it hearing an ad on the radio, watching a television show, or merely hearing people talk about it, pop culture is insidious and unavoidable in contemporary American society. A study of the way these messages, through mass media, are transmitted, and then individually interpreted, is essential in understanding how different identities are crafted and negotiated. In his theory of encoding/decoding, British sociologist Stuart Hall highlighted the wide variety of ways in which individual people can interpret a mass media, commercially produced message, as described here by Daniel Chandler:

Hall proposed a model of mass communication which highlighted the importance of active interpretation within relevant codes. . . .Hall rejected textual determinism, noting that ‘decodings do not follow inevitably from encodings’ (Hall 1980, 136). In contrast to earlier models, Hall thus gave a significant role to the ‘decoder’ as well as to the ‘encoder.’⁴

Hall more eloquently states what I personally feel, and a large motivation for this Bitch Thesis: the assumption that all women (or any part of the world’s population, really) passively consume the original messages encoded in mass-produced products without decoding the potential problems within those messages. This assumption is insulting, and

⁴ Chandler, Daniel. “Semiotics for Beginners.”

does not allow for adequate space to learn from pop culture. In Bitch Culture, the 'encoder' is those producing the products, and the decoder is each woman exposed to those products. Naturally then, as Hall proposes, it makes sense for each individual woman to have a unique reaction to and interpretation of the products, resulting in the negotiation or renegotiation of her personal identity.

Understanding this process, and the commercialized context in which it occurs, then, is crucial to understanding young women in America today. Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon take this understanding of encoding/decoding and apply it more precisely to the interaction of pop culture and feminism:

We maintain that popular/consumer culture should be reconceived as a site of struggle over the meanings of feminism and the reconceptualisation of a postfeminist political practice that...does not rely on separatism and collectivism. . .and instead highlights the multiple agency and subject positions of individuals in the new millennium...[W]e define the popular domain not as an autonomous space in which free choice and creativity prevail but as a contradictory site that interlaces complicity and critique, subordination and creation.⁵

Translation: pop culture should not be written off solely as a site of repression and manipulation of women, but rather should be critically considered as a highly nuanced space in which women live in constant tension: pulled back and forth between both feminist and anti-feminist ideals while attempting to negotiate identity. As Gill noted, the notion of difference becomes highly commoditized within this site of contradiction and ambiguity. A woman who, by purchasing a number of cleverly ironic and hipster Bitch products, supposedly embraces the term Bitch as empowering, certainly claims difference.

⁵ Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, *Postfeminism Cultural Texts*, 25-26.

The final piece of the framework needed to properly analyze Bitch Culture is a solid definition of feminism. bell hooks, in her work *Feminist Theory: from margin to center*, provides an indisputable (a real rarity in the tricky business of defining feminism) definition of feminism as follows:

Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. . . A commitment to feminism so defined would demand that each individual participant acquire a critical political consciousness based on ideas and beliefs.⁶

It is this understanding of feminism, as an inherently political project aimed at ending sexist oppression, that I use when discussing feminism throughout this paper.

hooks also highlights another important aspect of feminism that is crucial to keep in mind when analyzing Bitch Culture:

[Feminism's] aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives. Most importantly, feminism is not a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role one can step into. . . Focusing on feminism as political commitment, we resist the emphasis on individual identity and lifestyle. (This should not be confused with the very real need to unite theory and practice.) such resistance engages us in revolutionary praxis. The ethics of Western society informed by imperialism and capitalism are personal rather than social. They teach us that the individual good is more important than the collective good and consequently that individual change is of greater significance than collective change.⁷

Bitch Culture exists within this tension of understanding feminism as a way of celebrating the individuality of women (as pointed by Gill in her framework for analyzing postfeminism media culture) and the understanding of feminism put forth by hooks as a political movement to end sexist oppression (regardless of race, class, age,

⁶ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 24.

⁷ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 26, 28.

gender). Being mindful of both understandings helps to illuminate the complexity of Bitch Culture, and what can be learned from it.

Chapter One

Bitch: Things Of A Historical Nature

To fully appreciate why one woman might identify with and embrace the term Capital B Bitch as a positive, while another may wholeheartedly reject it, a brief jaunt through the powerful and informative history of lower case b bitch is required. While widely understood today as a put-down for powerful and assertive women, the term “bitch” has its origins in ancient pagan religions, and specifically, in reference to the Goddess Artemis-Diana:

Barbara Walker (1983, 109) reveals that *Bitch* was “one of the most sacred titles of the Goddess Artemis-Diana,” who often appeared as a dog herself, or in the company of hounds. Indeed, around the world, the Lady of the Beasts assumed the full or partial form of an animal (e.g., with or carrying horns) or appeared with characteristic animals, such as birds, fish, pigs, snakes (Neumann, 1963, 268). This ancient, powerful Bitch is the sacred archetype behind the contemporary profanity, reflecting fear of the “bitch goddess” (as well as the sexually sovereign, creative, autonomous woman).⁸

Beginning in Christian Europe, the term “son of a Bitch” began this centuries-old game of negative word association with “bitch” and “powerful female,” as this slur against a man referenced the pagan Goddess Artemis-Diana as his mother, insulting that man’s character as anti-Christian.⁹

As the Goddess Artemis-Diana was the Goddess of Hunting, and was often surrounded by dogs, bitch then became a reference to both female dogs and powerful human females. The line between the two has blurred over time, allowing the term bitch to operate as a derogatory slur towards women by aligning them with the subhuman category of beasts or dogs. This places us nicely into the delightful category of “man’s

⁸ Jane Caputi, *Goddesses and Monsters*, 378.

⁹ Barbara G. Walker, *The Women’s Encyclopedia*, 109.

best friend,” ever faithful and loyal to our master. Or, on the flip side, we get “bitch” as a highly accusatory term thrown at women not fulfilling this role of servitude, as one attempting to break out of her rightful place. Either way...simply delightful.

With these undertones of subservience, subordination, and subhumanity, the negative racial implications of lower case b bitch are amplified—particularly in portrayals of black women within pop culture. Focusing primarily on 1970s black fantasy action films, Stephanie Dunn analyzes the historical racial connotations of bitch in her book, *“Baad Bitches” and Sassy Supermamas: Black Power Action Films*:

The “Bad Bitch” suggests a black woman from working-class roots who goes beyond the boundaries of gender in a patriarchal domain and plays the game as successfully as the boys by being in charge of her own sexual representation and manipulating it for celebrity and material gain.¹⁰

Within this study, Dunn highlights how black women, through black action fantasy films, were finally able to view themselves in popular culture in a more positive light—albeit one that was highly sexualized. The association, for black action heroines such as Foxy Brown and Cleopatra Jones, is that being a “baad bitch” means gaining personal empowerment and strength through ownership and manipulative use of ones sexuality.

Dunn cites Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Sexual Politics* as a source for more thoroughly understanding the racial and class connotations of the term ‘bitch:’

...Patricia Hill Collins observes that it has become a contested term fraught with racial as well as class implications, as her students argued: “All women potentially can be ‘bitches’ with a small ‘b.’ This was the negative evaluation of ‘bitch.’ But the students also identified a positive valuation of ‘bitch’ and argued...that only African American women can be ‘Bitches’ with a capital ‘B.’ Bitches with a capital ‘B’ or in their language, ‘Black Bitches’ are super-tough, super-strong women who are often celebrated.” As Collins outlines, “bitch” links the historical constructions of black female sexual wildness whereas “Bitch” suggests a woman who controls her own sexuality, manipulating it to her advantage.¹¹

¹⁰ Stephane Dunn, *“Baad Bitches” and Sassy Supermamas*, 27.

Here, Capital B Bitch is a persona to be embodied, an attitude to be embraced by African American women, and then a persona which, if correctly actualized, will create an autonomous space of self, one that will allow them to survive in a racist, patriarchal society. It is this Capital B Bitch that we will see appropriated and commodified by the mainstream media and consumer culture in Bitch Culture—shifting from the powerful and sexualized identity that black women were offered in 1970s pop culture, to an assertive, independent, still sexualized (though in a more subtle, implicit manner) identity only offered to white upper-middle class women through the Bitch Products.

At about the same time as these “baad bitches” of black action fantasy films were entering the realm of pop culture, an important manifesto was produced by prominent feminist activist Jo Freeman. Provocatively titled, *The BITCH Manifesto* (published in 1970) presents a vision of Capital B Bitch as a reconfigured feminist term for strong, independent, autonomous women, regardless of race, gathered as a collective group in “BITCH [an] organization which does not yet exist.” The entire manifesto outlines what types of qualities or characteristics a real Bitch has, including:

A true Bitch is self-determined, but the term “bitch” is usually applied with less discrimination. It is a popular derogation to put down uppity women that was created by man and adopted by women. Like the term “nigger,” “bitch” serves the social function of isolating and discrediting a class of people who do not conform to the socially accepted patterns of behavior. BITCH does not use this word in the negative sense. A woman should be proud to declare she is a Bitch, because Bitch is Beautiful. It should be an act of affirmation by self and not negation by others.¹²

The parallel between “nigger” and “bitch” that Freeman draws here is a bold and thought-provoking one. Before going further in detailing those parallels, it is essential to acknowledge the complexity of doing so. Individually, both “nigger” and “bitch” are

¹¹ Stephane Dunn, “Baad Bitches” and Sassy Supermamas, 27.

¹² Jo Freeman, *The Bitch Manifesto*.

loaded terms, each with its own unique racial and gender undertones. In comparing the two, I do not wish to suggest that they are similar in terms of definition or political background, but rather, to emphasize how these two terms, operating as words meant to oppress certain groups of people, are manipulated by the very groups they mean to oppress (particularly by younger generations) in an attempt to reclaim and subvert their meanings in various ways. But, can claiming a negative term as a positive really be empowering?

Jabari Asim centers his history of the word “nigger” around this very question in his work *The N Word: Who Can Say It, Who Shouldn't, and Why*. In discussing the utilization of “nigger” in popular culture today, Asim cites the work of Richard Pryor, Dave Chapelle, Sterling Brown, and August Wilson as:

Hav[ing] effectively critiqued the language of oppression even as they invoked it, shining a glaring light on its limitations, its unintended ironies, and its relative uselessness in most settings beyond art. Theirs is a big-picture approach that pulls back the carapace of polite society to show a larger and more revealing view of a culture in which words such as “nigger” can be successfully spawned and popularized. Their performance of the N word consistently alludes—subtly and overtly—to our nation’s troubled and complicated past. The art of their less talented peers who invoke the N word often fails precisely because it neglects to acknowledge the word’s origin in white supremacy, suggesting instead that it was coined in a vacuum and can be pulled and stretched into new meanings that wipe it clean of centuries of blood and filth.¹³

It is this belief that a historically demeaning word can exist in a sort of vacuum, and thus, without questions or difficulties, can be re-appropriated and redefined, that undermines the credibility of so many of the Bitch Products as truly empowering, particularly the ones of a lower complexity, such as the Urban Outfitters “Slang Pint” glass. Without

¹³ Jabari Asim, *The N Word*, 172-173.

acknowledging the troubled history of the term “bitch,” it cannot be truly reclaimed or redefined as an empowering term.

The contention that these historically derogatory terms can only be reclaimed by a certain subset of the general population is also one that Asim addresses. Quoting the rapper Mos Def, Asim writes:

As he sees it, “If you define hip-hop as a survival mechanism, as a means of making something from nothing, then the act becomes compulsory. It’s an act of empowerment. When we call each other ‘nigga,’ we take a word that has been historically used by whites to degrade and oppress us, a word that has so many negative connotations, and turn it into something beautiful, something we can call our own. I know it sounds cliché, but it truly becomes a term of endearment.”¹⁴

Asim continues in his analysis of this, highlighting the tendency to change the spelling of “nigger” to “nigga” as a way to claim the term as one of empowerment and strength, but to be used only within the black community in reference to one another. In a similar vein, Freeman’s manifesto puts the emphasis on Bitch with a capital B over “bitch” with a lower case b. Here, the capitalization is meant to distinguish Bitch as empowering from bitch as insulting. This Capital B Bitch is one that can be found in all the Bitch Culture products, hence my own capitalization of the word in describing both the products and the postfeminist Bitch Culture that they both grow out of and also help to create.

Asim also analyzes another way the N word is seemingly reclaimed: through making it into a positive acronym:

Tupac Shakur, the celebrated gangsta rapper who continues to attract a huge following several years after his violent death, devised an unusual attempt to give “nigga” a positive spin. N-I-G-G-A, he said, was an acronym for Never Ignorant and Getting Goals Accomplished. To my knowledge, few if any of his followers have endorsed his proposed innovation. Perhaps Tupac’s effort...was prompted by that same irrational mixture of attraction and repulsion that many African Americans feel toward the unlikeliest of words. As with so many other tensions

¹⁴ Jabari Asim, *The N Word*, 224.

animating our hard and tedious journey on this storied continent, the roots of those conflicting impulses can likely be found in W.E.B. Du Bois's durable concept of double-consciousness. "One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." It makes sense if you think about it: Why wouldn't our language also reflect that bifurcated vision?¹⁵

This positive acronym approach can also be seen in one of the Bitch Culture products: an online store B.I.T.C.H, standing for Babe In Total Control of Herself, whose goal is stated as "to inspire women of all ages to be the master of their lives and aspire to be the woman of their dreams."¹⁶ Asim's inclusion of W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness is illuminating, and one that can also be applied to the tensions contemporary American women find themselves navigating within current pop culture.

As Asim demonstrates with his discussion of the appropriation of the N word by black communities, the term "bitch" is deployed in pop culture in multiple ways (with multiple meanings) at the same time. It is essential to study both sides of this phenomenon, particularly as it has become so highly commercialized within mainstream America in the past decade. In her in-depth work *Feminist Stylistics*, Sara Mills discusses the capitalization of derogatory references to women as a way of subverting the meaning of those words:

For example, Mary Daly suggests that one of the ways to combat this trend of pejorative words referring to females is to use those words and disrupt their meanings. She takes words such as 'dyke,' 'virago,' or 'crone' and she suggests that we capitalize them, making them into words with the same magnitude of importance as God and the Queen. This she suggests will subvert the meaning of the words and allow us to reclaim them...However, it is unclear whether feminist interventions are enough to change the meanings of terms. If someone used the word 'dyke' and intends to insult you, then there is little that reclaiming that term

¹⁵ Jabari Asim, *The N Word*, 225.

¹⁶ B.I.T.C.H: Babe In Total Control of Herself. <<http://www.babeintotalcontrol.com>>.

will have done.¹⁷

The entries for “Bitch” in two feminist dictionaries seem to agree with Mills’ contention that regardless of capitalization, a negative term can never be fully redefined. From

Cheris Kramarae and Paula A. Treichler’s *A Feminist Dictionary* (1985):

BITCH

“In technical use, a bitch is a female dog or other canine capable of estrus and gestation...A dog in heat actively seeks insemination; judged by our cultural standards, the dog is ‘lewd,’ and according to standard dictionaries that is one of the meanings the word bitch is assigned when applied to a woman...” (Casey Miller and Kate Swift, 1976, 118-19)

The main term used by a member of the (male) oppressor group to a member of the (female) oppressed group who challenges the oppressor on his use of oppressive tactics...

“Has certain phonetic qualities that make it an unlikely candidate for rehabilitation. It can be spat out in such a way that anyone within earshot whose native tongue is English will recognize it as an epithet of disgust...” (Casey Miller and Kate Swift, 1976, 120)

BITCH MANIFESTO

A feminist tract which argues that “bitch” is a word used to put down uppity women but that is also a synonym for a special woman: “Bitches are good examples of how women can be strong enough to survive even the rigid, punitive socialization of our society. As young girls it never quite penetrated their consciousness that women were supposed to be inferior to men in any but the mother/helpmate role. They asserted themselves as children and never really internalized the slave style of wheedling and cajolery which is called feminine.” (Joreen c.1970, 3)¹⁸

The fact that two of the definitions cited by Kramarae and Treichler came only six years after the publication of Joreen’s *The BITCH Manifesto* signals the multiple ways in which “bitch” and Bitch were deployed in American society at the same time. From Jane Mills’s *WomanWords*:

¹⁷ Sara Mills, *Feminist Stylistics*, 125-126.

¹⁸ Cheris Kraemarae and Paula A. Treichler, *A Feminist Dictionary*, 72-73.

BITCH

A woman is but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order.
Edmund Burke (1729-97)

...[T]he 1811 edition of the Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue reveals the extent to which the word had actually derogated: "A she dog, or doggess, the most offensive appellation that can be given to an English woman, even more provoking than that of WHORE, as may be gathered from the regular Billin[g]sgate or St. Giles answer—"I may be a whore, but can't be a bitch." (Billingsgate and St. Giles were euphemisms for the abusive language of working women, the language of a FISHWIFE)...Today bitch does not seem to have lost its early associations of lewdness...Bitch conveys the same connotative meanings when used of a woman as it does when used of a female dog, and in using the word a speaker "betrays a preconceived judgment that a woman's behaviour [sic] is directed by her reproductive function; it also repudiates her for want of docility to the male."'¹⁹

Today, Capital B Bitch differentiates itself from the "lewdness" of nineteenth century lower case b bitch by adding in a good dosage of sexual liberation and agency. This is what allowed the "baad bitches" of the 1970s to gain power through the manipulation of their sexuality, an understanding of that sexuality, and a hold over their sexual power. In the commodified version of Bitch, however, this sexualization is much more subtle, even implicit.

Particularly in items such as "The Daily Bitch," which relies heavily on the 1950s housewife retro imagery, sexuality operates more as a mix of strong sexual awareness and agency, but combined with traditional white, feminine ideals, and thus presented in a latent, lurking just beneath the surface manner. The Bitch then can sometimes be read as a woman who is aware of her sexuality, and thus frustrated by her inability to express it accordingly.

¹⁹ Jane Mills, *Womanwords*, 27-28.

Chapter Two

Bitch: The Products

Now that we've gone on a fun little learning romp through the ambiguous postfeminism/pop culture context, and traveled together through the historical journey of degrading lower case b bitch to empowering Capital B Bitch, the contemporary physical products of Bitch Culture are ready to be critically analyzed. What better way to assert oneself as an empowered individual woman than to brazenly flare forth with an ironic BITCH attached to a glass, bowl, or bottle of wine? By purchasing this product you've alerted the world that you're bold, badass, strong, assertive, confident, in charge...a Bitch. You're embodying the famous Madonna quote: "I'm tough, ambitious, and I know exactly what I want. If that makes me a Bitch, ok."²⁰ The list of cultural catch phrases to describe the current trendiness of this blatant, in your face backbone is extensive: 'Sorry I'm not sorry,' 'I do what I want,' 'I mean, I don't *hate* it,' 'Sucks to suck,' and 'whatever, fuck it!' are just a few of the more popular ones today. And now, there is an abundance of products available that embody the bold Capital B Bitch sentiment behind these phrases.

There are varying degrees of complexity within the material products of Capital B Bitch Culture. I have organized and analyzed the products accordingly, progressing from Product Group A—simple, declarative "I Am" Bitch products—to Product Group B—guides on how to be Bitch, and what one gets once Bitch status is achieved. Finally, I examine Product Group C: more thorough exploration and identification of Bitch's potential feminist beliefs. Let's begin!

²⁰ The Guerilla Girls. *Bitches, Bimbos, and Ballbreakers*, 25.

Chapter 2.1

Bitch Products: Product Group A

Product Group A: In Your Face Declarative Products that Boldly State I Am A Capital B Bitch Because This Glass/Plate/Snowglobe/Calendar Says So.

In this category, we begin with that sneaky little bitch of an instigator: the glass. As part of Urban's "Slang Pint Glass" series, the Bitch Glass is well at home with its friend Humorous Irony. But it begs to be analyzed a little more closely than just a humorous chuckle and knowing wink might suggest. Starting with the obvious question: Where does one use a glass? The obvious answer: In the home, and specifically, in the kitchen. While every person will have a different reason for purchasing either the Bitch Glass or its cousin, the Bitch Plate, the fact remains that these products are dishware, and thus, irrefutably domestic items.

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decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 2

To be fair, Urban does expand beyond the kitchen nook in its Bitch Product offerings. One can choose to accessorize any room at all with the Bitch Snowglobe, a friendly, year-round decorative reminder of who you are, and what you stand for:

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 3

And for those of us who want to highlight the selfish, all-attention-on-me aspect of the Bitch, Urban provides not only a Birthday Bitch glass (an extra special version of the plain-Jane solo Bitch glass), but also a “My B*tches Party Pack.” This nifty kit comes complete with one “I’m the Bitch” birthday badge and eight “My Bitches” party hats, in addition to the quintessential napkins, balloons, and plates.²¹

Are these domestic items merely an attempt at tricking women into thinking they’re liberated within their cozy kitchens or hipster-chic apartments? Too simple. These specific products aren’t technically about keeping the female domesticated and repressed. They signal something greater: a woman’s desire to negotiate, make sense of, and then assert her individual identity in an easy, accessible manner, and through it all, with a good dose of ironic humor. But is this kind of identity negotiation available to all women?

The retailer of these Bitch products offers tremendous insight into the demographics of who is expected to be exposed to, understand the humor behind, and ultimately purchase these products. Urban Outfitters is the haven of all that is expensively

²¹ For “Birthday Bitch” Glass, see:

<<http://www.urbanoutfitters.com/urban/catalog/productdetail.jsp?id=18008433&itemdescription=true&navAction=jump&search=true&isProduct=true&parentid=SEARCH+RESULTS>>.

For “My B*tches Party Pack,” see:

<See:<http://www.urbanoutfitters.com/urban/catalog/productdetail.jsp?id=19383116&itemdescription=true&navAction=jump&search=true&isProduct=true&parentid=SEARCH+RESULTS>>.

not expensive looking, alternative-hipster/non hipster-I-care-so-much-about-not-looking-like-I-care-at-all apparel and accessories. Bitch Culture fits perfectly into this heavily ironic demographic, which is mostly comprised of late teens/mid 20s white upper-middle class females.²² Based on internet traffic to the Urban Outfitters' website, which offers an even more expansive range of hipster-ironic products and clothing than their in-store retail locations, Urban Outfitters' primary target demographic is white, 18-34 year old, upper middle class females, generally college-educated, and with incomes in the \$30,000-60,000 range.²³

So now Bitch Culture, as it is presented through these particular commercial products, becomes classed, raced, and aged within the postfeminist pop culture context. As Gill pointed out: the postfeminist themes of irony and knowingness, individual empowerment, and commodification of difference (all present in lump-sum in these Bitch accessories) are accessible only to a very particular person: the middle to upper-middle class, white, educated, and affluent woman.

With this demographic in mind, and recalling Gill's emphasis on the importance of irony and knowingness within postfeminism, a uniquely illuminating Bitch product is that of Sellers Publishing's "The Daily Bitch" and "The B Word" calendar line. With these products, a profit is made from commercially producing retro images paired with ironic, sarcastic witticisms that add an implied wink and nod to the consumer. In both

²² For an entertaining and enlightening look at Urban's stereotypical demographic, please view the website www.latfh.com, paying particular attention to the Honda commercial posted on July 30th.

²³ Quantcast, "Urbanoutfitters.com - Quantcast Audience Profile."
 <<http://www.quantcast.com/urbanoutfitters.com>>.
 Alexa Company Info, "Urbanoutfitters.com Site Info."
 <<http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/urbanoutfitters.com#>>.

“The B Word” calendar (a 12 month traditional format) and “The Daily Bitch” calendar (a tear-off, daily desk calendar), the humor relies heavily on an implicit understanding: that a retro image of the stereotypical smiling, white, upper-middle class 50s housewife, captioned by a blatantly anti-traditional female domesticity message is ironic, and therefore, humorous.

So popular as to be currently out of stock on Seller Publishing’s website, “The Daily Bitch” boxed calendar is described as follows:

Packed with attitude, The Daily Bitch calendar contains a smart remark on every page. Savor alone, or pass along to share—all in good fun, of course! No cute and perky aphorisms here. Even the crabbiest curmudgeon will enjoy these sassy declarations and witty sayings.²⁴

With this calendar, Sellers Publishing is accomplishing two things. First, by inserting the phrase “all in good fun, of course!” they are placing a safe distance between themselves and the underlying sexism within the captions. As Gill describes, “Irony is used also as a way of establishing a safe distance between oneself and particular sentiments or beliefs...”²⁵ Second, they are playing to the consumer as a knowledgeable and wise woman, able to see the irony, and therefore the humor in the product, also described by Gill as, “[Irony] is used in advertising...by hailing audiences as knowing and sophisticated consumers, flattering them with their awareness of intertextual references and the notion that they can ‘see through’ attempts to manipulate them.”²⁶ The safe distance between the production of a certain product and the message it carries, as well as flattering the consumer through that use of irony, both obtained here through the use of retro imagery, allows consumers to believe they are buying into a clever subversion of

²⁴ “Rsvp.com - Sellers Publishing Inc. - The Daily Bitch 2011.”
<<http://rsvp.com/item.php?item=1411>>.

²⁵ Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 159.

²⁶ Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 159.

what the image of a 50s housewife stands for (the idyllic white woman: beautiful and immaculate, smiling with a string of pearls in her domestic kingdom), when in fact, that may not be the case.

In closely analyzing several weeks' worth of Daily Bitches, I was able to break down the captions into a number of different categories, all drawing on a different cultural understanding of the word "Bitch."

Daily Bitch Category 1: The Selfish, Self-Centered Bitch

January 3rd: "Call me sometime when you don't need anything."

January 12th: " 'Roughing It' is a motel without room service."

January 24th: "Never put off until tomorrow what you can dump in someone else's lap today."

January 28th: "She could not shake the nagging feeling that she gave a damn."

February 8th: "Beauty is in the eye of whoever is looking at me."

February 14th: "Hard work is for people with bad coffee break skills."

February 15th: "I always put the blame where it belongs—on someone else."

February 19th/20th: "Does it bother you that the world revolves around me?"

Daily Bitch Category 2: The Anti-Man Bitch

January 1st/2nd: "If I worked like a man, they'd call me a lazy bitch."

January 5th: "Basic law of estrogen: We're right, you're wrong. Shut up!"

January 13th: "I love sensitive men, they're easier to take advantage of."

January 14th (and my personal favorite): "I'm still looking for a man who excites me as much as a baked potato."

February 21st: "In my next life, I'm coming back as a man. I need the rest."

February 24th: "Man cannot live on bread alone, so I give mine water too."

Daily Bitch Category 3: The Crazy Bitch

January 21st: “Madness takes it’s toll—exact change please.”

February 2nd: “I’m smiling because they’ve finally driven me insane.”

February 4th: “You are lucky I’m so terrified of prison.”

February 23rd: “Leading lady in my own psychodrama.”

Daily Bitch Category 4: The Literal Bitcher (Complainer)

January 4th: “Because sometimes it just feels good to BITCH!”

January 11th: “Happily ever after my ass!”

January 17th: “If you need me, I’ll be in my office screaming.”

January 20th: “Language was born from our deep inner need to complain.”

January 25th: “Of all the pleasures in life, I love bitching the best.”

January 27th: “Raising sarcasm to a higher art form.”

January 31st: “A job worth doing is a job worth complaining about.”

February 9th: “Can’t resist. Must bitch and moan about everything!”

February 16th: “Destined to be an old broad with plenty to bitch about!”

February 25th: “Bitching up a storm is just my way of coping with reality.”²⁷

These four distinct categories of Bitches suggest the complexities of a product like this, as well as why it exists at all. First, within these seemingly harmless ironic phrases, a sense of what today’s women view as their burdens (bearing in mind that the particular woman this product speaks to is again the young, white, upper-middle class, affluent woman) is revealed. Women are, according to this product, dissatisfied with their lives (“Bitching up a storm is just my way of dealing with reality”), and in particular,

²⁷ “The Daily Bitch 2011.” Sellers Publishing Inc.

dissatisfied with the men in their lives (“I’m still searching for a man who excites me as much as a baked potato”). They are one step away from a mental breakdown (“I’m smiling because they’ve finally driven me insane”), and at the end of the day, unwilling to deal with or confront it all (“She could not shake the nagging feeling that she gave a damn”).

The issue of being ill-at-ease in contemporary society, exemplified by less than satisfying relationships with men, mental illness, and a general sense of apathy towards the ability to fix any of these problems, are all issues prevalent among white, upper-middle class women in modern American society.²⁸ The ability to purchase products that offer a humorous take on all of these very real issues becomes, then, an easy, accessible, and oftentimes enjoyable way of negotiating an identity within today’s postfeminist tensions. What is important to remember, however, is that this identity-negotiating within Bitch Culture has so far only been truly accessible and relatable to a very specific segment of the larger American population: younger, white, upper-middle class women.

“The Daily Bitch” also draws from another interpretation of lower case b bitch, that of the Literal Bitch-er, or the Complainer. The company Knock Knock takes this to another level with their all inclusive “The Bitch Kit.” Beautifully crafted in a soothing array of pastel pinks, browns, taupes, and greens, The Bitch Kit proudly proclaims itself as “A toolkit for the bitchy, the bitchier, and the bitchiest!” promising that “Suppressing the inner bitch will be a thing of the past!” “LOOK INSIDE” Ok! It continues:

²⁸ For relationships, see: Hymowitz, Kay S. “Where Have the Good Men Gone?”
For mental illness, see: Peele, Stanton. “Ballooning Depression Among Women.”

The Bitch Kit
Never Pull Bitchy Punches Again!

Whether or not we're willing to admit it, we all harbor a bitch within. With the Bitch Kit, now you can let your own inner bitch roar rather than allow her to fester unexpressed—then stand back and watch all your fellow bitches bitch with admiration!

HERE'S HOW

- 1. Get yourself in the mindset by broadcasting your bitchiness into the universe: wear the pin and post the magnet somewhere prominent.*
- 2. Gain inspiration for your upcoming bitchiness by reading the wise words contained in the Bitch Quote Book.*
- 3. Using your "Such a Bitch" pen, write a letter to your favorite bitch.*
- 4. Tell your least-favorite bitch why he or she is such a bitch.*
- 5. Vent your own bitchiness by writing down your complaints about the bitchy universe.*
- 6. In general, use your BITCH/BEE-YOTCH stickies to spread your fierce bitchiness all over town.²⁹*

Bitch. Over. Load. This particular Bitch Product is a primetime example of how Capital B Bitch/lower case b bitch are deployed within pop culture in multiple fashions, at the same time. All in one tidy kit we've got the empowered/term of endearment Capital B Bitch, the insulting lower case b bitch, and the literal bitch-er. Ah, the complexities of Bitch Culture. Something essential to point out concerning the literal bitch-er, is how very gendered lower case b bitch as a verb is. When someone is "bitching," it is now culturally understood that they are either whining unnecessarily, constantly griping about things that aren't really that bad, or just generally being a wet blanket Debbie Downer. The gendered nature of lower case b bitch as a verb is especially highlighted when it is flung as an insult against men. The phrase "quit bitching and man the fuck up" (either

²⁹ "The Bitch Kit." Knock Knock Co.

together, or separately) illustrates this perfectly. To bitch is irrefutably seen as a feminine form of expressing discontent or disapproval. So when women share their opinions, they're bitching. Lovely.

Another common, though less consistent theme among "The Daily Bitch" witticisms is that of the Drunk Bitch stereotype. From the boxed calendar set, January Nineteenth's "Turns out I'm a social drinker...I just happen to be REALLY social," offers insight into another real issue growing among white, upper-middle class American women: that of alcoholism.³⁰ Lo and behold, there's a Bitch product that caters to this exact niche of women: Bitch Wine, manufactured by the Australian company R Wines, as well as a separate line of wines manufactured by Sassy Bitch Wine.

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decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 4

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Figure 5

The wine market has historically been an area for white upper-middle class individuals (and in contemporary times, especially white upper middle class women) to demonstrate their fine breeding, as wine is widely acknowledged to be a symbol of elegance and class. Expertise is flaunted through extensive knowledge of the appropriate

³⁰ For more on this, see: Charlotte Metcalf: "Why Middle Class Women are Dying for a Drink."

rhetoric to use when describing the subtly nuanced tastes of each individual variety.

When drinking wine branded with Bitch, then, a woman has instantly identified herself as a mysterious paradox: elegant and cultured, yet also edgy and complex.

Returning to Gill's framework of postfeminist media culture, the ideals of individualism and self-surveillance abound in these products. Owning a plate, cup, or snow globe that screams BITCH automatically identifies one as unique, one-of-a-kind, not-so-average woman. Not only this, but the individualism so heralded by postfeminist consumer culture is meant to be a performed one, one that is displayed prominently to others. The assumption is that a Bitch Cup or Plate is not purchased merely to be stored in a cupboard for secret, personal use, but rather, to be put on display at your next Ladies Night or cocktail hour. Bitch and Sassy Bitch Wine also fall into this category of conspicuous consumption, as the catchy and provocative labels suggest: this is wine to be shared publicly, to be laughed over, talked about. These domestic houseware products operate in conjunction with the irony at play between the idyllic 50s housewife imagery and modern witticisms found in "The Daily Bitch."

Taken as a collective whole, this particular group of products demonstrates a way of publicly performing domesticity, but in a way that stresses the utmost importance of maintaining your individuality while so doing. This emphasis on individuality in consumption then leads us into a cycle of continuous self-surveillance and monitoring. When one is constantly performing individualism for others, it becomes a necessity to closely monitor not only your own choices and consumptions, but also those of others, in order to secure your individualism as just that: individual. These Bitch Products focus primarily on celebrating the individuality of each woman, keeping women busy

monitoring both themselves and each other in order to maintain that individuality.

Because of this, these products are not contributing at all to the creation of that collective whole that bell hooks stresses in her definition of feminism as a “struggle to end sexist oppression.”

Thus far, all the products featured have been of a somewhat simplistic (at least on the superficial level), declarative “I Am” Bitch nature. In order to more fully unpack the levels of meaning in Bitch Culture, a deeper analysis of another, more complex set of products is required.

Chapter 2.2

Bitch Products: Product Group B

Product Group B: Product Guides to Being Bitch That Also Help You Realize The Fabulous Life Being Bitch Can Ultimately Allow You To Achieve.

If we've learned anything in our lives thus far, it should be that there is no better way to craft an assertive and self-empowered identity than to turn to a self-help book. Embarrassingly enough, I was gifted the book *Why Men Love Bitches* (2000) by Sherry Argov at the age of sixteen by a former boss. Having just gone through what my angsty teen self was certain was the world's most horrific heart wrenching young love breakup of ALL time, my boss (a 20something white upper-middle class female) took it upon herself to bestow upon my still-forming personality this self-help guide to acting "dumb like a fox."

It should be immediately noted that the "Bitch" in the title is written in red lipstick, a not so subtle signal to what the book will eventually reveal to its readers: one must cultivate and present a beautiful, yet strong personality in order to capture that man. This book is a veritable treasure-trove of humorously hidden traditional sexist messages instructing women how to act in order to win over that guy's affection. Argov starts out with a good premise:

So what's the message of this book? It's that a bit of irreverence is necessary to have any self-esteem at all. *Not irreverence for people, but rather, for what other people think.* The bitch is an empowered woman who derives tremendous strength from the ability to be an independent thinker, particularly in a world that still teaches women how to be self-abnegating. this woman doesn't live someone else's standards, only her own. This is the woman who plays by her *own* rules, who has a feeling of confidence, freedom, and empowerment. And it's this feeling that I hope women will glean from reading this book.³¹

³¹ Sherry Argov, *Why Men Love Bitches*, xv.

Most unfortunately then, Argov proceeds to dispense wisdom and advice to women that not only reinforces traditional gender roles, but also places a good amount of emphasis on slyly manipulating men in order to gain what you (the empowered Bitch) desire.

Chapter 4, “Dumb Like A Fox: How to Convince Him He’s in Control While You Run the Show,” most blatantly displays this sly manipulation that places unflattering and insulting assumptions on both men and women. Argov writes:

Remember, when he behaves like a man and he treats you well, pay a little “homage” to that ego. He should feel like Conan the Barbarian a couple of times a week. Whenever he does something handy around the house like putting up a shelf, praise him. It doesn’t matter if the shelf hangs at a 45-degree angle and the stuff keeps sliding off the other end. Clap like the happiest seal at the zoo, and then have a handyman come over to fix it when he isn’t around.³²

I can’t speak for anyone else, but personally, I would not “clap like the happiest seal at the zoo” if anyone, whether it be a boyfriend, a best friend, a blood-related relative, or even just a rando off the street hung a shelf at a 45-degree angle and considered this a job well done. But it doesn’t end there. Argov also offers a helpful list of tips on how to make your man feel “studly,” including, but not limited to:

- *If he kills a little bug, look away. And don’t turn back around until he lets you know he has “secured the premises.”*
- *Ask him to open a jar that you can’t open (even if you can) or unzip your dress (even if you can reach it). Or, you can ask him to lift a small box for you.*
- *Let him move a piece of furniture (even one you could move yourself). When he does this with ease, tell him how heavy it was. “You are so strong! Gee, I don’t know how you moved that.”*
- *Let him parallel park your car or back it out of a tight spot. If you tell him he’s a “much better driver” than you are, he’ll really be eating out of your hand. He’ll probably wash your car or fill your tank with gas.³³*

³² Sherry Argov, *Why Men Love Bitches*.

³³ Sherry Argov, *Why Men Love Bitches*.

And she's serious. These "helpful" suggestions reinforce age-old stereotypes of women such as physical weakness, fear of bugs, and the perennial favorite: bad driving skills. However, because these actions are set forth as *knowingly* done by the woman, it becomes acceptable, and especially when posited in such a humorous tone. Not only that, but these suggestions, and indeed the message of the book as a whole, assumes highly stereotypical gender roles for both men and women. In the postfeminist consumer culture context, these assumed stereotypes translate to the theme of naturalized sexual difference. For women, that of the needy, emotionally over-wrought, weak, passive, and spineless damsel in distress; and for men, that of the brawny, stoic, emotionally inept Neanderthal solely out to prove his physical strength and masculinity. Flattering, on both ends I'd say.

Because of this exhausting tightrope walk of feminine and masculine that every woman must master if she wants to get (and in the sequel, *Why Men Marry Bitches*, keep) her man, the humorous tone is absolutely essential to the success of the book. Argov appears to be well aware of this, and in fact addresses this boldly in the very first introductory paragraph to the book:

Why Men Love Bitches is a relationship guide for women who are "too nice." The word *bitch* in the title does not take itself too seriously—I'm using the word in a tongue-in-cheek way representative of the humorous tone of this book.³⁴

The Bitch, then, safely within the context of "tongue in cheek," is posited as the figure which allows women to knowingly walk the line between being that traditional flowery feminine figure that appeals to every man's desire to nurture and protect, and being a strong, independent, and fully in control of her life empowered woman. The key lies in *appearing* only *slightly* needy, all the while remaining fully aware you're not in the

³⁴ Sherry Argov, *Why Men Love Bitches*.

slightest bit in need of any man's help. It's a fine line to decipher, so do allow Argov to further instruct you:

Let us conclude this chapter by redefining the word bitch. Think of it as a "term of endearment." A bitch is not a woman who speaks in a harsh tone of voice. It is not a woman who is abrasive or rude. She is polite but clear. She communicates directly with a man, in much the same way men communicate with one another. In this way, it's easier for a man to deal with her than with a woman who waffles or appears too emotional, because the emotionally sensitive type of woman confuses him. The bitch knows what she likes and has an easier time expressing it directly. As a result, she usually gets what she wants. Here are the ten characteristics that define her:

- 1. She maintains her independence.*
- 2. She doesn't pursue him.*
- 3. She is mysterious.*
- 4. She leaves him wanting.*
- 5. She doesn't let him see her sweat.*
- 6. She remains in control of her time.*
- 7. She maintains a sense of humor.*
- 8. She places a high value on herself.*
- 9. She is passionate about something other than him.*
- 10. She treats her body like a finely tuned machine.³⁵*

And there you have it! Simply follow these guidelines, embody all these characteristics, and boom, you're the New and Improved Bitch with happiness and peace secured in any future relationship you choose. Congratulations!

While Argov does advocate admirable traits such as financial independence for women, the debilitating downside lies in the fact that, however excellent her message might be, at the end of the day, this is still a self-help how-to-be-a-Bitch-that-men-find-desirable relationship guide. All the messages about being strong, independent, intelligent and (don't forget still beautiful!), therefore, are solely to be used as a vehicle to getting that man.

³⁵ Sherry Argov, *Why Men Love Bitches*.

Right in line with a guide to being an attractive, desirable Bitch comes the ever so clever diet book *Skinny Bitch* (2005) by unapologetic and “refreshingly” straightforward authors Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin. The appeal of this book lies in its (supposed) humorous and irreverent tone, much along the same lines as *Why Men Love Bitches*. Both books are pitched as tools for women to use to *really* help themselves, without manipulating them like beauty magazines and TV ads for makeup and fad diets do. *Skinny Bitch* presents itself as “A no-nonsense tough-love guide for savvy girls who want to stop eating crap and start looking fabulous!”³⁶ As a #1 *New York Times* bestseller, women clearly bought into this. And in fact, the girl on the cover, by God, *does* look fabulous!

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decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 6

Oh-so-glamorous in her LBD (Little Black Dress for those of you not in the exclusive fashion acronym circle) and silver hoops, sassy with her classic hand on the hip, don't you mess with me you fat fool posture, and so above it all with her pinky-

³⁶ Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin, *Skinny Bitch*.

raised trendy sunglasses-holding hand...who wouldn't want to be this girl? She's clearly confident, assertive, beautiful, and in control of herself and her body...she's a Skinny Bitch!

The problem lies in several places. One, oh, shoot, wait a second, this girl is a drawing. Her torso is barely wider than her upper arm, and I'm pretty sure if that arm was extended, it would be about the length of her entire body. However, her legs have been conveniently cut off, so we'll never know. Two, what is presented as a guide (or rather, a mandated follow-our-lead or you will be a fat pig [one of the authors' favorite descriptions for any one who isn't a Skinny Bitch] complete life-style overhaul) for healthy living, is actually a sneaky push for a wholly Vegan lifestyle.

Julie Klausner, writing for Salon.com, comments on the incredibly demeaning "self-improvement" tactics of Freedman and Barnouin:

Thanks to "Skinny Bitch," women who hate their bodies no longer need rely on their own self-loathing to stoke the flames of what seems like motivation but is actually self-flagellation—penance for the sin of being too fat. . .If you go off the "Skinny Bitch" "diet" and eat a scoop of ice cream instead of a Rice Cream frozen dessert, not only are you off-track, you're morally abhorrent. You're contributing to cruelty against animals, you fat piece of shit.³⁷

Marketed as something empowering and helpful, this is actually an attempt to manipulate women into Vegan lifestyles. A Vegan lifestyle on its own, elected for political and personal reasons, is admirable and perfectly fine, but presenting it as the only way to "stop being a fat pig" is not empowering or liberating to anyone.

Lest we forget, this is a diet book through and through. Though supposed to be clever and ironic, a lot of the "humor" comes across as just flat-out bullying. And because this is a diet book, it relies heavily on the all too socially engrained belief that in

³⁷ Julie Klausner, "Hey, Skinny Bitch!"

order to be truly beautiful and healthy, one needs to be skinny. Only if you are skinny, of course, can you achieve true liberation and empowerment:

This is not a diet. This is a way of life. A way to enjoy food. A way to feel healthy, clean, energized, and pure. It's time to reclaim your mind and body. It's time to strut your skinny ass down the street like you're in an episode of *Charlie's Angels* with some really cool song playing in the background. It's time to prance around in a thong like you rule the world. It's time to get skinny.³⁸

The Bitch in this book, then, is one to be envied, as she (solely based off of her physical appearance), has obtained all that which only liberated and empowered women have: the ability to prance around in a thong, and strut down the street a la one of Charlie's Angels (in and of themselves a postfeminist archetype), because she's SKINNY! Bitch. Barnouin (a former model), and Freedman (a former agent for Ford Models) make no claims of Bitch being a positive term, as the back cover alludes to, "They may be bitches, but they are skinny bitches. And you'll be one too—after you get with the program and start eating right."³⁹ Here, in a step away from Sherry Argov's personality-based definition of the New and Improved Bitch, Barnouin and Freedman seem to define Bitch solely based off of the notion that because she's skinny, she must be a Bitch. This definition of Bitch quietly preys on women's insecurities. It encourages a paranoid and competitive culture of constant surveillance of one's self, and also of those women surrounding you. Argov also plays off of this culture, though to a lesser extent in the number ten characteristic of the New and Improved Bitch:

10. *She treats her body like a finely tuned machine.*
She maintains her appearance and health. A person's self respect is reflected in how he or she maintains physical appearance.⁴⁰

³⁸ Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin, *Skinny Bitch*.

³⁹ Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin, *Skinny Bitch*.

⁴⁰ Sherry Argov, *Why Men Love Bitches*, 23.

In both self-help guides then, we can see a direct connection made between one's physical appearance and self-worth, as well as a prime example of the debilitating self-surveillance and self-monitoring that is now such a large part of postfeminist consumer culture. Both books are firmly planted in the self-help category, a genre riddled with problems in and of itself. This genre perpetuates the cycle of self-monitoring (and when it comes to *Skinny Bitch*, almost self-flagellating) and extreme discipline that, under the guise of celebrating individual empowerment, perpetuates a culture of distrust, suspicion, and competition among women. Like *Skinny Bitch* insinuates, the Capital B Bitch here is the enemy, the competition, the Envied.

Issues of classism also come into play with the self-help genre. Both *Why Men Love Bitches* and *Skinny Bitch*, as well as their subsequent sequels, operate from a very class-biased perspective. On a very superficial level, the assumption that a woman has the type of disposable income that will allow her to purchase a self-help guide is clear. These books, narrowly focused on improving relationships or losing weight, retail for fourteen or fifteen dollars each. It is a classed assumption that women who need them can afford them. More narrowly, the assumption that the primary focus of a woman's life is to learn how to achieve greater success in pursuing (but appearing not to!) a man, or in learning how to rigidly discipline herself so as to lose weight is also classed. These directives are luxuries to which not all women, indeed not even the large majority, have the means to afford. For many, devoting their time, money, and energy to this pursuit is simply not possible.

The problem, then, seems to lie in the fact that this pop culture absorbed and re-appropriated definition of Capital B Bitch is disconnected from any sort of legitimate

feminist movement, particularly from the definition of feminism as “a struggle to end sexist oppression.” Without the politics of feminism behind it, Bitch enters into a different space, one in which it is far too easy to exploit Bitch as solely a catchy marketing device, without fully understanding the problems surrounding this strategy, as well as the underlying assumptions Capital B Bitch makes. Product Group C encompasses those products that come closer to addressing the complexities of Bitch as a term for an empowered woman, while at the same time still having some of the same issues as the less complex products of groups A and B.

Chapter 2.3

Bitch Products: Product Group C

Product Group C: Products That Tie Capital B Bitch More Directly to Feminist

Goals and Thus Provide A More Thorough Exploration of Bitch as Empowering

Getting In Touch With Your Inner Bitch (1994) by Elizabeth Hilt is a tricky one.

I was at first disheartened, upon encountering this in the introduction:

*The Moment of Truth: It had to do with a man. In my case, that phrase can be followed with the addendum, "of course." This is acutely embarrassing to tell you, but I know I must. Here's what happened: I got stood up. . .But I forgave him anyway because he was really cute, and I really liked him. And because no one likes a bitch. How could a nice girl like me stay angry? He asked for another chance and I gave it to him.*⁴¹

No no no, not another guide on how to be a Capital B Bitch solely to finally find success with men! Thankfully, upon further reading, *Getting In Touch With Your Inner Bitch* actually proved to back up embracing the term Bitch as empowering, including directly addressing the act of reclaiming the word, something none of the previously discussed products have fully attempted. Hilt writes:

*Any woman who succeeds at anything is going to be called a bitch. Hillary Clinton? Bitch. Gloria Steinem? Bitch. Barbara Streisand? Bitch. The list goes on and on and...The point is that since we can't avoid it, why don't we embrace it? We've all had this experience: At some point in time, in front of other people, we say what we really think about some issue or person or what-have-you. At some later point in time, someone tells us that, "So-and-so really thought you were a bitch." ...Most of us make sure to be particularly nice to old so-and-so next time we see them. We may even go out of our way to prove that perceiving us as a bitch is not only erroneous, but downright unfair... We retreat. What if we responded by sending so-and-so a thank-you bouquet with a little card that said, "I really appreciate your recognition of my Inner Bitch." What would happen if we stopped being afraid of this one little word?*⁴²

⁴¹ Elizabeth Hilt, *Getting in Touch with Your Inner Bitch*, 15.

⁴² Elizabeth Hilt, *Getting in Touch with Your Inner Bitch*, 29.

Having explicitly posed the thought of the potential that women have, were they not so afraid of being called a bitch, Hilts goes on to discuss all that being in touch with your Inner Bitch (read: having a backbone) provides, including: more pro-women laws, better (and safe) sex lives, voting with your dollars, more female bosses in the workforce, and more truly equitable romantic relationships.

“...And the Men Who Love Her,” is featured as an appendix to the book (in and of itself a promising sign), and features one of the most truly feminist parts of the book. In a move directly against Argov’s lazy reliance on naturalized sexual differences, Hilts describes men who understand and respect women in touch with their Inner Bitch as “Princes.” She elaborates more on this:

A Prince is a real man, i.e., a real human being. Here’s how to recognize a Prince:

- *A Prince really does take full responsibility for his share of raising the kids;*
- *A Prince understands why those ads for beer are offensive (you know the ones I mean);*
- *A Prince never takes it for granted that we’ll do all the cooking;*
- *Conversely, a Prince does not assume that we can’t change a flat tire;*
- *A Prince offers encouragement, rather than advice;*
- *A Prince knows what he knows. And, at the same time, he knows what he doesn’t know. He doesn’t bluster his way through a situation with ever-deepening b.s. In fact, a Prince has a good grasp on just how attractive it really is to be able to say, “I don’t know.”⁴³*

Rather than perpetuating harmful traditional gender role stereotypes for both males and females, as Argov does, Hilts continues on to acknowledge that men are not the only ones negatively impacted by societal gender role construction:

Just as most women have been trained in the ways of Toxic Niceness, men have been trained in the ways of whatever it is they’re suffering from. There are plenty of names for it; pick one. Chances are, if you’ve done your Inner Bitch homework, you won’t need to be cruel about it. The point is to understand the dynamic at work here: Men have been taught behaviors that probably run counter to their true

⁴³ Elizabeth Hilts, *Getting in Touch with Your Inner Bitch*, 29.

natures.⁴⁴

Hilts also challenges the *Skinny Bitch* mantra that to be truly liberated and empowered as a 21st century woman, one must fit into a certain dress size, at whatever cost to your mental and physical health:

*You know those diet books and articles that you've accumulated over the years? Destroy them. Each day, rip out a few pages to burn in the sink as you say, "I am an adult. I choose what I eat." If you don't think you look great, choose to take reasonable action. We all have enough information about how our bodies actually work; use whatever works for you. Most important, just say "I don't think so" to the unrealistic ideal everyone else sets for us. Women are supposed to look like people, not scarecrows.*⁴⁵

Using the mantra "I don't think so" as her base, Hilts sets forth genuinely feminist ideas as a support for claiming that getting in touch with your Inner Bitch is, in fact, empowering and liberating for not only women, but men as well.

Hilts' views on women and politics is headed in the right direction, but not quite as admirable as it could be:

*Who's going to right laws that are good for women? We already know the answer. In light of that answer, we really must do more. "More?" you say. Yes, I say. I'm not talking about taking on another activity, or running for Congress (or even the school board), or doing something that will tip us over into the exhaustion that threatens every one of us. I'm talking about using our Inner Bitch to make a better world. The easiest thing to do is to vote with our dollars. That's right, don't buy those products whose advertising belittles women, insults us, or raises by another notch or two the already unrealistic standards to which we hold ourselves. . . The message will be received. Think of it as taking part in a collective "I don't think so." Imagine the possibilities.*⁴⁶

While encouraging women to vote with their dollars is definitely one effective strategy to make a political statement, I'm curious as to why Hilts isn't "talking about taking on another activity, or running for Congress (or even the school board)." Advocating for the

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Hilts, *Getting in Touch with Your Inner Bitch*, 29.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Hilts, *Getting in Touch with Your Inner Bitch*, 29.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Hilts, *Getting in Touch with Your Inner Bitch*, 72-73.

“collective ‘I don’t think so’” aligns nicely with bell hooks’ view of feminism, but only if women are encouraged to enter into politics themselves.

The publisher of this guide is also noteworthy. Originally an article for the now-defunct women’s humor magazine *Hysteria*, Hilts was contacted by a radio personality after seeing the article, and from there her article spun into the book, also published by Hysteria Publications (since purchased by Sourcebooks). Since the concept of the Inner Bitch as an empowering notion originally came to life in a magazine devoted to humorous takes on women’s issues, it follows naturally that Hilts would set forth genuinely feminist ideas behind the Inner Bitch. It is almost as if Hilts knowingly uses the self-help guide format in order to critique the self-help genre itself.

Another feminist publication that backs up Capital B Bitch with legitimate feminist beliefs is *Bitch: A Feminist Response to Pop Culture*. Established in 1996, this magazine is now the most well-known (depending on who you’re talking to) feature of Bitch Media, an independent non-profit feminist media organization. The origins of *Bitch* are described here:

*The first issue of Bitch was published in January 1996. The founding editors, Lisa Jervis and Andi Zeisler, were totally sick of both their day jobs and their love/hate relationship with pop culture. Inspired by publishing ventures from Ms. and Sassy to Pagan’s Head and Beer Frame, they decided to create a public forum in which to air thoughts and theories on what is all wrong (and the few things that are right) with the way women, gender, and feminist politics are treated in the media. The aim was to use feminism as a lens through which to view pop products—and to offer ways for readers to speak up and talk back to the culture at large.*⁴⁷

⁴⁷ “About the Magazine, Tell me more about the magazine.” *Bitch Magazine: A Feminist Response to Pop Culture*. <<http://bitchmagazine.org/frequently-asked-questions>>.

This aim to “use feminism as a lens through which to view pop products” begs the question of what precisely their definition of feminism is. Later on in the FAQ section of the website, this is expanded upon:

Why does *Bitch* call itself a “feminist response to pop culture?”

Bitch looks at the media and its products through a lens that takes into account the historical and cultural representation of gender in pop culture. Movies, television, news magazines, fashion magazines, blogs, comics, advertising, music, computer games—all are media that have traditionally reflected a narrow vision of what women and girls are and can be, whether it’s the dumb blond, the needy wife, the castrating mother, the “I’m-not-a-feminist-but...” woman, or the heartless man-shunning domestic media mogul (to name but a few). We seek to look at all pop culture through an analytical-yet-witty, sharp-yet-sympathetic lens, as well as to celebrate the feminist culture-makers who are transforming the media with their unique contributions.

Bitch aims to put a lucid, balanced face on feminism for all kinds of folks, including people who aren’t really aware that feminism refers to more than women who don’t want to shave their legs, or simply getting more women into positions of power. Similarly, we encourage people to consider feminism as a necessary part of the broader social justice movement. But using “feminist” as a primary descriptor is risky business, which is why people often ask us...

Do you hate men?

*Not in the least. We are always surprised when people—of all genders—ask this very question. We know that most of the people who ask this are responding chiefly to both the term “bitch” and the word “feminist”—each quite prominent on the magazine’s cover—so we tend to take this reaction with a whopping grain of salt (plus some astonished laughter). Feminism, as many of all [sic] are aware, is a tricky concept for a lot of folks, and there are people in the world who assume that anything pro-woman must necessarily be anti-man. But, we say, there’s a huge difference between criticizing the system of patriarchy (wherein men as a class have power over women as a class) and hating on men in general. So though there may be a *Bitch* article that makes mention of, say, patriarchal approaches to x, y, or z, there is no actual man-hating going on. Promise.*

*Plus, feminism isn’t all about women—it’s about resisting and creating alternatives to systematic oppression.*⁴⁸

⁴⁸ “About the Magazine, Tell me more about the magazine.” *Bitch Magazine: A Feminist Response to Pop Culture*. <<http://bitchmagazine.org/frequently-asked-questions>>.

This definition of feminism fits perfectly with bell hooks' sentiments: that feminism isn't about putting women above men, or any woman above another, but rather, about working against systematic oppression and towards a more balanced society for all.

My analysis is focused primarily on the web version of *Bitch*, which is admittedly different from the original print version, but still has the same purpose: to provide sharp, witty, and critical feminist analysis of pop culture. Organized into different categories of blogs (all located within the main site of bitchmagazine.org), *Bitch* online provides constant, timely analysis of pop culture through blogs such as Social Commentary (dedicated to political and social issues found within pop culture, including the category Race Card that focuses specifically on issues of race/feminism within pop culture), Mad World (focused on gender, advertising, and identity in media culture), and Science and Politics (which mainly focuses on current political events that directly impact feminism's goals). As a sidenote, and to demonstrate the type of unself-conscious humor so prevalent throughout the magazine and website, my favorite feature of all is "Ye Old Douchebag Decree." This feature focuses on, well, douchebags of the day/week/month/what-have-you. Examples include the new Texas-based Former Majority Association for Equality scholarship available only for white males, anti-feminist author Caitlin Flanagan, geoGirl's anti-aging makeup line for preteens, etc, etc.⁴⁹ Fantastic.

Bitch online also allows the organization to include expert guest bloggers, people who will come in with one (or several) posts focusing exclusively on their area of expertise. Through this format, *Bitch* provides a forum in which their online readers are linked directly to innumerable amounts of other feminist blogs, such as Racialious,

⁴⁹ "Ye Olde Douchebag Decree." *Bitch Magazine: A Feminist Response to Pop Culture*. <<http://bitchmagazine.org/search/node/douchebag>>.

Feministing, Deeply Problematic, Crunk Feminist Collective, and Womanist Musings. Online feminist activism is a large part of the feminist movement today, specifically among the younger generations (but not excluding older generations!). The blogosphere is a fascinating example of the way alternative modes of media have allowed women to expand their presence and views, since they have historically struggled to insert themselves into the male-dominated publishing and journalism industries. Bitch Culture expands to the blogosphere as well, with blogs such as smartbitchestrashybooks.com, bitchbuzz.com, and bitchphd.blogspot.com. The list of blogs with Bitch involved goes on and on, and is something I'd definitely like to investigate in the future, but alas, time will not allow the inclusion of said Bitch Blogs in the Bitch Thesis at this moment. Back to Bitch Media.

How does *Bitch: A Feminist Response to Pop Culture*, or Bitch Media as a whole, with its belief in feminism as a struggle to end sexist oppression, fit into Capital B Bitch Culture? Why, right over at the BitchMart of course. Conveniently available online, one can easily order any number of Capital B Bitch products, including Bitch aprons, coffee mugs, tote bags, hats, hoodies, and T-shirts.

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 7

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 8

How do these products, that boldly stamp the word Bitch across a variety of physical merchandise, differ from, say, our dear friend the Bitch Glass back at Urban Outfitters? I'm glad you asked! First, and most importantly, Bitch Media is a non-profit organization. This immediately differentiates these Bitch Products from any of the previous ones we've seen, as the proceeds are not headed towards a capitalist corporation, but rather, back into supporting the feminist mission of an independent non-profit feminist media organization.

Purchasing these specific Bitch Products has a different meaning than any of the other Capital B Bitch Products. *Bitch* products come with an attached mission, one with an explicitly stated, inherently political feminist background. Owning a *Bitch Magazine* mug, or a T-shirt purchased from the online BitchMart that proudly proclaims BITCH across the front makes a deeper statement not just about who you are, but also about what you believe. This is the central difference between Bitch Media Bitch Products, and the other Capital B Bitch Products studied thus far. Also, please note that the T-shirts/hoodies are marketed as UniSex, a major step away from the rest of Capital B Bitch Culture marketed solely towards women.

But why the name? If so attached to truly feminist beliefs and goals, why feel the need to include Bitch at all? I was fortunate enough to receive an Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) grant from Notre Dame to visit the offices of *Bitch* in Portland, OR over Christmas break. I wasn't exactly sure what to expect, but walking into the middle of a staff meeting when I arrived definitely wasn't it. Edith the bulldog loped around while the editors and interns discussed The Bitch List, a round-up of potential story ideas for the upcoming summer issue of *Bitch*. After a few awkward

interactions, I was given a brief tour of the offices. Cozy and eclectic, pretty much what I had imagined for the indie-mag set. Kitchen to my left, and shelves upon shelves of feminist books to my right, I patiently waited for executive director Julie Falk to finish up what seemed to be some sort of financial planning meeting so I could ask her questions about the origin of the name, her views on Bitch Culture, etc. Things I gleaned from our conversation:

- Bitch seemed to be chosen as part of the title because it lends itself well to the snarky humor of the magazine, the type that doesn't take itself too seriously, but at the same time is backed up by legitimate facts and knowledge, hence the 'Feminist Response to Pop Culture' that comes after the colon.
- Most of the readers of *Bitch* are exposed to it in college, which poses interesting questions of the demographics of their readership. Unfortunately, that was one piece of information I was not able to glean.
- The word 'Feminist' on the cover often times seems to be more of a deterrent than the word 'Bitch.'

Not entirely illuminating, but for my purposes of analysis, still useful. From what I gathered, and what I personally believe, Bitch was most likely chosen as part of the title because it's provocative, it's catchy, it makes you want to learn more about the magazine. It sets the reader up for the tone of the publication, and it sends the message that a sharp and critical analysis can be done in a manner that is not so dense and inaccessible as so much feminist theory/analysis often is.

Chapter 3

Bitch: Wrapping it all up with a Pretty Little Bow

From baad bitches black action fantasy heroines to Urban Outfitter dishware, relationship guides, diet books, and critical feminist analyses of contemporary pop culture, lower case b bitch has been turned into Capital B Bitch: co-opted, redefined, reappropriated, embraced, rejected, discussed, analyzed, and utilized in a seemingly infinite number of ways. At the end of the day, what have we learned?

First, the Bitch Products, and Capital B Bitch Culture as a whole, reflect the exhausting process of identity-crafting for contemporary American women. Pushed and pulled in countless ways, women today are bombarded with conflicting messages about how to be feminine yet not too girly, about being strong-willed yet not too masculine, and about being feminist but not too political. Through all my toils, tribulations, and celebrations, I've walked away with four potential readings of Bitch Culture.

Number One: Screw It All.

Maybe American women today are just sick of it. Maybe Bitch Culture is a fed-up response to the tenuous, ambiguous, consistently contradictory, contemporary society otherwise known as pop culture. I can't be this, I can't be that, so screw it all, I'll be a little bit of everything, in the easiest way: a commercially-produced Capital B Bitch.

Elizabeth Wurtzel explores this in her (potentially drug-induced frenzy of a) book, *Bitch*:

In Praise of Difficult Women. As she writes:

The bitch as a role model, as icon and idea, has moments of style and occasions of substance—it at times looks like just the latest mask, a game to play, a chance to dress like something out of a Joan Crawford movie, and to act like something out of *Mommie Dearest*; but quite often it reveals itself to be about genuine anger, disturbance, fear and the kind of female resentment and rage. . . But no one in her right mind wants to end up doing time, no one wants to be moved to Medea-like

acts or gun-crazy jealousy—no one wants to end up a sex kitten in the slammer. What we all want is to cop the cosmetic attitude, we want to be Olivia Newton-John in the last scene of *Grease*, the girl swiveling her foot like a broken record to put out a cigarette with one of her red Candie's slides, the girl with ratted hair, in slinky shiny black pegged pants, the girl in the blue eyeshadow that launched a thousand teenage makeup misfires.⁵⁰

Maybe it's this fine line between the commercially produced "cosmetic attitude" of a Bitch and the latent anger, resentment, and rage of the media-crafted lower case b bitch that drive women to choose the former.

Number Two: Refusal to be Put Down by a Word

Or, perhaps American women are sick and tired of being put-down by one little word, and are, in whatever way they see most fit, reclaiming lower case b bitch. By electing to embrace a historically demeaning word, women are re-defining lower case b bitch and claiming ownership. Jessica Valenti of Feministing.com writes in her work *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters*:

Of course, reclaiming words like "slut," "bitch," and "cunt" doesn't necessarily sit well with everyone. There's the misconception that, somehow, using words that have traditionally been used to disparage women means we're falling in line with sexism. But what young women are really doing is taking the power out of those words by making them our own.⁵¹

In this view, lower case b bitch is but a word, free to be reclaimed and subverted to Capital B Bitch as young women may choose. Reclaiming words on a purely linguistic level, of course, is very different from the appropriated version of Capital B Bitch found in the commercial Bitch Products. Here, as we have seen, it is all too easy for marketers to deploy Bitch as something empowered and strong on its own, detached from any sort of true, political feminist background.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Wurtzel, *Bitch*, 3.

⁵¹ Jessica Valenti, *Full Frontal Feminism*, 173.

Number Three: Trendy and Attractive Feminism!

Maybe women *are* seeking out feminism, but in a way that is far-removed from the media-created butch, non-shaven, man-hatin', bra-burning, and just plain ugly FemiNazi. Maybe this fear of being associated with lower case b bitch aspects of feminism (angry, ugly, bitter, anti-man, the list goes on and on) is what helps drive women to the sassy and witty Capital B Bitch conveniently available for pick-up at your local bookstore or mall. Bitch Products are an easy way to negotiate an identity in a society that tries to make that negotiation as difficult as possible for women, which leads into Number Four...

Number Four: One That Cannot be Controlled is At Least In Control of Own Identity-Crafting.

Within Capital B Bitch Culture, women are encouraged to internalize the feeling that in this crazy messed up world where finding your own identity is so difficult to navigate, the Bitch is one that stands out. She's a BabeInTotalControlOfHerself, she is not controlled by anyone, but rather is free to pick and choose among the pre-selected, pre-crafted, mass-produced Bitch Products to create her own, unique identity.⁵² As noted however, this commercial identity is not attached to any true feminist political movement (with the exception of *Getting in Touch with Your Inner Bitch*, and even more so with *Bitch Magazine*), and also, is not an identity that is accessible to negotiate to women beyond the white, upper-middle class segment.

The fact that there are so many potential interpretations of Bitch Culture is a testament to the importance of this Bitch Thesis. Parts of Bitch Culture are purely

⁵² B.I.T.C.H: Babe In Total Control of Herself.
<<http://www.babeincontrol.com/babeincontrol.html>>.

materialist and anti-feminist, while parts of it are legitimate subversions and critiques attached to an actual feminist political background. All of it is worthy of our attention, as it signifies both the accomplishments and the areas to be improved upon in feminism today. At the end of it all, one cannot be simply pro or anti-Bitch. It's too gray for that kind of stance. A whole-hearted dismissal or embrace of Bitch Culture leaves no room for improvement. Sherryl Kleinman, Matthew B. Ezzell, and A. Corey Frost set forth the idea in their article "The Social Harms of 'Bitch'" that reclaiming lower case b bitch is never possible, and always unknowingly reinforces sexism. They write:

We now come to the belief, held by many women, that they can "reclaim" bitch, using it among themselves in a positive way. To reclaim implies that one had an original claim, one that was taken away by others. But as we pointed out earlier, a "bitch" is a female dog, and the word has been used to dehumanize women for a long time. What is worth "reclaiming"? Significantly, young women who greet each other in a friendly "What's up, bitches?" admit that they also say "she's a bitch" in an unfriendly way. "Reclaiming" has not gone along with women giving up "bitch" to demean other women.⁵³

Fair. I myself have been on all three sides of being called a lower case b bitch in a derogatory way, calling others a lower case b bitch in a derogatory way, but also being called a Capital B Bitch in a complimentary way, as well as calling others Capital B Bitches in a complimentary way. But I take great issue with the either/or mentality with which Kleinman, Ezzell, and Corey Frost approach the reclamation of lower case b bitch. As this Bitch Thesis has shown, Bitch Culture is nuanced and complicated, it doesn't lend itself well to either/or mentalities. And, let us all remember, lower case b bitch was in fact a term originally used (not derogatorily) to refer to the Goddess Artemis-Diana. It was only with the institution of Christian Europe that lower case b bitch began to be used

⁵³ Sherryl Kleinman, Matthew B. Ezzell, and Carey A. Frost, "Social Harms of Bitch," 49-68.

as an insult against women. There are both problems and progress to be found in Bitch Culture, all of which deserve a fair and balanced study.

Laurel A. Sutton also researched the use of lower case b bitch in female to female interactions in her study “Bitches and Skankly Hobags: The Place of Women in Contemporary Slang.” She drew much the same conclusion, that lower case b bitch is used both as a term of endearment among friends as well as a derogatory reference for other women. What’s interesting to me, is that these examples of lower case b bitch vs. Capital B Bitch, though not commodified, fit in perfectly with the postfeminist characteristics of constant self-surveillance and monitoring that help to contribute to a culture of mistrust and competition among women. Capital B Bitch fits into amiable discourses among friends, while at the same time lower case b bitch is used to differentiate friends from enemies among women. Sutton concludes:

I don’t really know why we can call each other *ho*...and *bitch*, as opposed to any other slang terms...[Maybe] when we call each other *bitch* we acknowledge the realities of this man-made world and affirm our ability to survive in it. Without revolution, resistance to and redefinition of long-held concepts of femininity and masculinity can be a long, hard process. Perhaps being a ho or a bitch is a start.⁵⁴

Here, Sutton takes into account more of the complexities associated with the reclamation of historically demeaning words, and looks at both the issues and the potential found within.

My stance on Bitch Culture? It’s a love/hate relationship. In the spirit of full disclosure, I own half of the products I analyzed here. I will say, however, a good amount of the enjoyment they provided me has gone out the window after this year-plus project. I do not think Bitch Culture is all bad, but there is definitely room for improvement,

⁵⁴ Laurel A. Sutton, “Bitches and Skankly Hobags,” 290.

particularly in the commodified Bitch Products. The fact that the identity-negotiating presented through these products is only really available to the white, upper-middle class woman speaks volumes about the continuing race, class, and gender inequalities in American feminism today. As Gill notes:

These themes [the framework for analyzing postfeminist products I have used throughout this Bitch Thesis] coexist with, and are structured by, stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to ‘race’ and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, and disability as well as gender.⁵⁵

However, it is only those Bitch Products of a lower complexity level (Groups A and B) that are truly riddled with these race, class, age, sexuality, and gender issues. Product Group C presents the social possibilities of Bitch Culture, when explicitly attached to a political feminist background. When infused with bell hooks’ “a struggle to end sexist oppression,” Capital B Bitch takes on a whole new meaning. Assert whatever identity you want, reclaim Bitch wholeheartedly, just acknowledge the complexity of doing so, consume actively rather than passively, and absolutely back it all up with true, political advocating for the end of sexist oppression. There I stand. Sorry I’m not sorry.

⁵⁵ Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture,” 149.

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Image Credit: "Slang Pint Glass," Urban Outfitters.

<[http://www.urbanoutfitters.com/urban/catalog/productdetail.jsp?id=14842306b&pushed=A_FURN_DINNERWARE&popId=A_DECORATE&navCount=1044&navAction=poppushpush&itemCount=80&itemdescription=true&parentid=A_FURN_DINNERWARE&startValue=1&sortProperties="+subCategoryPosition,+product.marketingPriority](http://www.urbanoutfitters.com/urban/catalog/productdetail.jsp?id=14842306b&pushed=A_FURN_DINNERWARE&popId=A_DECORATE&navCount=1044&navAction=poppushpush&itemCount=80&itemdescription=true&parentid=A_FURN_DINNERWARE&startValue=1&sortProperties=)>.

Figure 2

Image Credit: "Hidden Meaning Plates Insult Your Dinner Guests." Nerd Approved – Gadgets and Gizmos. Accessed 28 Feb. 2011.

<<http://nerdapproved.com/household/hidden-meaning-plates-insult-your-dinner-guests/>>.

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Image Credit: <<http://thelovelylifestyle.wordpress.com/2010/06/18/christmas-in-july/>>.

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Image Credit: <<http://www.runningwithheels.com/index.php/tag/bitch-wine/>>.

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Image Credit: <<http://epicself.com/nourish/veganism-touted-by-a-bunch-of-skinny-bitches/>>.

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Image Credit: <<http://bitchmagazine.org/support-feminist-media/bitch-coffee-mug-shield>>.

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Image Credit: <<http://bitchmagazine.org/support-feminist-media/unisex-logo-tee>>.

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