



## Watching Gender Through an Austere Lens

Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, eds. *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014. 320 pages.

Reviewed by Lisa Aalders

In *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity* (2014), editors Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker offer a collection of essays that look to a variety of media forms to consider the specific impact of gender in framing the 2007-2008 economic collapse and subsequent recession in an American, British and Irish context. In many ways, *Gendering the Recession* functions as a response to the last collection Negra and Tasker co-edited *Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* by examining how the recession has shaped and reoriented existing postfeminist tropes. Thus, *Gendering the Recession* considers how notions of affluent femininities of self-fashioning and choice are recontextualized in the recession era such that the postfeminist figure becomes “an icon of excess as much as admiration.”<sup>1</sup> By focusing on gender, the anthology’s authors are able to examine how recessionary narratives are informed by gendered imagery that paints austerity as masculine, rational and tough in contrast to the feminized indulgence of the “nanny state.” In such a context, gender equality (along with racial and other equality-based movements) are positioned as “luxur[ies] that can no longer be afforded.”<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, Negra and Tasker argue that popular culture resists any kind of substantial system critique in favour of a narrative that places affected populations in the position of quietly coping. In order to examine such narratives, the essays that make up *Gendering the Recession* examine a variety of media including network television, popular cinema, blogs, vlogs, documentaries, reality television and popular fiction. While the book itself is divided into ten individual chapters (plus the introduction), I will discuss it according to four interrelated themes that I feel best summarize the content of the book: the narrative of endangered masculinity, the role of race in popular recessionary narratives, the rise of blogging as recession-era domestic labour, and the home as a threatening and threatened space.

In the first chapter, Suzanne Leonard examines the crisis of masculinity that emerges in the context of what some journalists referred to the “mancession,” a term intended to highlight men as the primary victims of the economic downturn. In this context, the figure of the man who refuses to grow up (as seen in such films as *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* from 2012) positions men

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<sup>1</sup> Diane Negra and Yvette Tasker, “Introduction: Gender and Recessionary Culture,” in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvette Tasker (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

as simply failing to adjust to their domestic roles as opposed to highlighting any kind of systemic reasons for their “failure.” Leonard argues that such narratives that position women as successful in contrast to their male companions ignore the ways in which women—compounded by intersections of race, class and dis/ability—have disproportionately shouldered the burden of austerity. Moreover, Leonard goes an extra step to consider how these recessionary discourses encourage resentment and hostility towards women. While I would have preferred more engagement with how the recessionary slacker figure can be usefully distinguished from pre-recessionary slackers, Leonard’s chapter works well in setting up questions and issues that will recur throughout the book.

Continuing along this theme of disempowered American masculinity, Sarah Banet-Weiser examines advertising and the idea of “branding” the recession. Her argument principally looks at how recession-era advertising positions the recession as an obstacle to be overcome by individual men fulfilling their own moral and national obligation. In particular, she examines Levi’s Go Forth “Ready to Work” campaign, which launched in 2010 and employed text from Walt Whitman’s “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” to suggest a sense of American optimism, grit and determination in the face of hardship. Banet-Weiser argues the campaign positions consumerism as a means of revitalizing the nation, the economy and the American male. Hannah Hamad’s chapter also considers the relationship of media and consumerism in proposing shallow solutions to harsh economic realities. Hamad’s focus is on reality television and specifically the U.K. program *The Fairy Jobmother*. The show features a reality TV expert by the name of Hayley Taylor—an authoritarian matriarchal figure in the vein of Supernanny’s Jo Frost—whose job it is to coach the chronically unemployed into a state of “job readiness.” As with the Levi’s campaign, *The Fairy Jobmother* places an emphasis on individual responsibility and using consumerism to dig oneself out of the recession (the latter being most apparent during the inevitable makeover sequence). *The Fairy Jobmother* also reveals the threat of emasculation as embodied by the angry audience reactions to Taylor’s matriarchal guise. Both Banet-Weiser and Hamad’s chapters are strong by virtue of the focused examples that they draw on to illustrate neoliberal ideology in the pop cultural sphere. Meanwhile, Hamilton Carroll’s chapter on recession-era print fictions, specifically *The Financial Lives of the Poets* (2009, Jess Walter) and *The Ask* (2010, Sam Lipsyte) is a weaker point in the anthology. Much of this chapter was dedicated to examining how the white-collar male protagonists felt emasculated by their various failures. Unfortunately, it seemed to be covering similar ground as other chapters and therefore felt more forgettable. Carroll’s argument that through the process of narrating their failures the male protagonists are able to claim a tenuous form of success seemed like a promising argument but ultimately required more explanation and evidence.

While many of the chapters briefly touched on matters of race, only two chapters focused on it in greater depth. Isabel Molina-Guzmán’s chapter takes a look at the character of Gloria on the American television show *Modern Family*, locating her within a history of Latina spitfires employed to ease white resentment directed towards Latina/o immigrants in the wake of economic downturn. In doing so, Guzmán contributes to a much-needed discussion on how race amplifies already gendered feelings of resentment. Meanwhile, the concluding chapter by Anikó Imre locates the issue of race in a specifically European context with the U.K. reality show *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (with some additional attention paid to its American incarnation). Imre’s chapter effectively details how the gender politics expressed in the show function to justify the terms of neoliberal inequality. For example, Imre identifies how the giant, “excessive” bridal gown that appears in each episode operates as a potent symbol of feminized waste. In a social-

political context where the “problem” debt-ridden nations of the European Union (Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Ireland) are referred to as GIPSI by mainstream news outlets, Imre demonstrates how narratives of wasteful and excessive spending are both raced and gendered.

Meanwhile, two of the collection’s essays look at the gender politics of blogging and the emergence of self-fashioning as an entrepreneurial venture. Elizabeth Nathanson’s chapter discusses the rise of the “recessionista,” which she describes as “a careful shopper who does not abandon consumer culture altogether in light of the global recession” but rather puts in the time and energy to find the most affordable items.<sup>3</sup> Nathanson examines “everyday girl bloggers” as well as makeup vloggers to think about how these entrepreneurs blur distinctions between life and style, essentially revealing how consumption merges with labour such that the consumer-based quest for “self expression” is transformed into a profitable venture. Along similar lines, Pamela Thoma’s chapter looks at the rise of blogging as feminized domestic labour as depicted in two recession-era chick flicks: Nora Ephron’s *Julie & Julia* (2009) and Ryan Murphy’s *Eat Pray Love* (2010). She considers both films from the makeover narrative they recount and how these texts celebrate an idea of transformation that increases domestic labour for their female subjects and reinvigorates normative gender roles. Although these chapters cover similar ground, they feel more complementary than repetitive in tracing the gendered implications of professional blogging and how it fortifies the already gendered terms of unpaid labour.

Given the centrality of the housing market to the economic downturn, there are two chapters that take a look at the home as a space that is both threatened and threatening. Tim Snelson looks specifically to American horror—with a focus on the *Paranormal Activity* film franchise and the first season of *American Horror Story*—to think about how the home is positioned as a space of “disruption, takeover and abandonment.”<sup>4</sup> The chapter offers an interesting take on how the anxiety of the housing crisis gives new meaning to older “haunted” house horror tropes. However, by also highlighting gender in his examination, Snelson demonstrates how these narratives which may problematize the ideal of the nuclear family nonetheless end up positioning women as the saviours of the endangered home. In doing so, these representations function to reinforce ideas of female domesticity and stewardship over the home. Meanwhile, Sinéad Molony looks at the positioning of the working class Irish home (and by association the working class female body) as a site of “national shame and disruption that troubles ordinary heteronormative domesticity.”<sup>5</sup> In doing so, Molony makes a point of establishing the particular social-political-economic context in which these representations occur. This involves detailing the masculine, anti-authoritarian tone of the “Celtic Tiger” era of free-market expansion that set up the economy for failure. In wake of the economic downturn, Molony remarks on how the same spirit of individualism displaces the burden of responsibility onto the female working-class body. Her examination looks at two documentaries: Ken Wardrop’s *His and Hers* (2009) and Maya Derrington’s *Pyjama Girls* (2010). While the former projects the nostalgic and sentimental image of a middle class, heteronormative Ireland, the latter

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Nathanson, “Dressed for Economic Distress: Blogging and the ‘New’ Pleasures of Fashion,” in *Gendering the Recession*, 139.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Snelson, “The (Re)possession of the American Home: Negative Equity, Gender Inequality, and the Housing Crisis Horror Story,” in *Gendering the Recession*, 161.

<sup>5</sup> Sinéad Molony, “House and Home: Structuring Absences in Post-Celtic Tiger Documentary,” in *Gendering the Recession*, 184.

adopts a condescending gaze towards the failures of working class women and their homes to live up to the middle class ideal. Molony's chapter is strong precisely because of the historical context she takes time to establish and by grounding her arguments in the specifics of Ireland. In this way, I would argue her work demonstrates the value of specificity in approaching questions of media.

Ultimately, *Gendering the Recession* offers engaging research about a topic that is fresh and deserving of attention. By focusing on gender in recession-era media, this collection of essays is able to highlight the ways in which economic narratives are informed by ideas of endangered masculinity, excessive femininity and the like. I think the editors of the collection would agree that there remains much to be said on this topic. Although *Gendering the Recession* exclusively looks at American, British and Irish media, it does not frame it as such. Instead, it rather problematically refers to its corpus as simply "media and culture." In doing so, it positions Western English-based content and context as universal and loses some of the nuance that otherwise propels much of the work. While I do not protest their decision to limit the scope of their project, I do wish they had made a point of addressing it as such and framed their work accordingly. Thus, there is much work to be done about how this topic translates in differing cultural contexts and how the questions that the book raises may be differently posed in these different socio-political contexts.

Likewise, there is a remarkable absence of any discussion of sexuality and how it may affect these gendered narratives. While this may have been a consequence of limiting the scope of their project, it seems to me that many of the works that are discussed rely on an often assumed heteronormative understanding of gender. For example, to what extent does the notion of the "mancession" rest on a heteronormative fantasy of masculinity? How do masculine and feminine queer subjects disrupt or complicate these recessionary narratives? These questions open up space for further research and contemplation of the way that popular media positions gender in recessionary narratives. To that end, *Gendering the Recession* can therefore be seen as a starting point for further examinations of gender and media in the age of austerity. Building on existing discussions of media in the age of neoliberalism,<sup>6</sup> *Gendering the Recession's* focus on gender affords it a meaningful place in film and media scholarship despite its limited focus on an American, British and Irish context.

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<sup>6</sup> I am thinking of books such as Jyotsna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner's *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema: Capital, Culture, and Marxist Critique* (2011), which unlike *Gendering the Recession* examines different global contexts such as Latin America and Asia.

## References

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