

Postfeminist Discourse in *Y: The Last Man*

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Abstract of Thesis

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The sixty issue comic book series *Y: The Last Man* (Brian K. Vaughan & Pia Guerra, 2002-2008) is a graphic narrative depicting the world after a mysterious plague takes the lives of the entire male species except one man: Yorick Brown. The series spans a five-year period during which Yorick and two other lead female characters journey together encountering numerous others along the way who make up a diverse population of women who have survived the plague and its aftereffects.

The series inhabits a unique space in postfeminist media culture as part of the male-dominated medium of comics. The creators are faced with a multitude of opportunities to confront stereotypes, break traditional formulas, step out of comfort zones (whether their own or the readers'), and make potentially bold statements about gender norms, masculinity, sexuality, and feminism. In the following analysis, I present evidence of *Y: The Last Man* as a postfeminist narrative while drawing critical conclusions about its relative success in reimagining contemporary popular discourses about feminism.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The sixty issue comic book series *Y: The Last Man* (Brian K. Vaughan & Pia Guerra, 2002-2008) is a graphic narrative depicting the world after a mysterious plague takes the lives of the entire male species except one man: Yorick Brown. The series spans a five-year period during which Yorick and two other lead female characters journey together encountering numerous others along the way who make up a diverse population of women who have survived the plague and its aftereffects.

The series was originally recommended to me by (primarily male) friends who introduced the series as “feminist” due to the variety of female characters portrayed and the circumstance of the extinction of the male species. Upon investigating the series online, I learned that their readings of *Y: The Last Man* as a feminist series were not in the minority. Online book reviews and blogs written by both male and female readers highlighted a variety of justifications for the feminist label (see: Paul 2002, C. 2004, Wolk 2008, Kidd 2011, McHugh 2011). At the same time, other sources on the web revealed the presence of negative reviews that rejected the alleged feminism of the series, suggesting instead that *Y: The Last Man* was, at best, a cheap attempt at feminism, another example of male-domination, and altogether anti-feminist (see: Fanny 2006, Mickle 2006, Wallace 2009). While the arguments of both positive and negative reviewers are primarily staged in non-academic environments such as personal blogs or pop culture websites, they share many similar critiques with academic feminist scholars investigating and interpreting the emergence of postfeminism in media and popular culture.

The term “postfeminism” is not entirely new, but became widely used at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. Susan Faludi’s 1991 book entitled *Backlash: The*

Undeclared War Against American Women details several 1980s myths that emerged at the time to discredit or refute the cultural and political relevance of feminism and that bear a striking resemblance to the literal premise of *Y: The Last Man*: a “man shortage” and a female “fertility epidemic.” While the scares of the 1980s were far less dramatic than the gender-apocalypse in the comic book series, Faludi argues that these fear tactics led media and popular culture to launch a “backlash” against the women’s movement. In the midst of all of the freedoms that should be celebrated, feminism had “effectively robbed [women] of the one thing upon which the happiness of most women rests – men” (Charen 24). By neglecting to recognize their already achieved equality, the backlash media explained that modern women (inescapably influenced by feminism) were driving themselves toward “burnout” and despair. Soon, broadcasts announced that a younger “postfeminist generation” of women was emerging, a generation that abandoned their mothers’ and grandmothers’ feminist politics in pursuit of a *truly* liberated future.

Faludi’s harsh exposé of postfeminist culture did not evaporate quickly or completely, as perspectives deemed “radical” or “fringe” often do. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra’s perspective on postfeminism, while less inflammatory, similarly emphasizes the “pastness” of feminism. Their in-depth analysis informs a number of scholars’ investigations of media and popular culture, including the majority of my analysis of *Y: The Last Man*. Often through indirect discourse (avoiding the use of the actual term “feminism”) emerge representations of out-dated fringe feminist models in order to illustrate its undesirability and lack of application to the contemporary social and political context of American women’s lives.

However, Tasker and Negra argue that postfeminism's emphasis on the "pastness" of feminism does not simply reveal an anti-feminist stance against all forms and conceptions; "rather it is by virtue of feminism's success that it is seen to have been superseded" (*Interrogating* 5). For example, characters in identified postfeminist texts are allowed and even encouraged to break traditional gendered boundaries and binaries, but only from within a "safe" and socially acceptable context in order to create a separation from feminist politics. This postfeminist narrative trope celebrates women's achievements while simultaneously framing the female characters in traditional rubrics, complicating notions of progressive and regressive (*Interrogating* 22).

In the grey area of perceived "acknowledgement" of feminist successes, scholars begin to divide from one another. Faludi would attest that the "post-ness" of postfeminism implies a complete dismissal of history along with the relevance of current political goals that remain unaccomplished, consequently negating the progressive notion of postfeminism's "appreciation" of feminist success. Other academic feminist voices, such as Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Stacey, present postfeminism as a complex "emerging culture and ideology that simultaneously incorporates, revises and depoliticizes many of the fundamental issues advanced by second-wave feminism" (549). This perspective suggests a potential for progress as well as possible danger in reimagining second-wave feminist politics. Rosalind Gill presents the concept of "entanglement" in postfeminism, bringing feminist and anti-feminist ideas together despite contradiction and clear opposition (162). "Simultaneous contradiction," as a recurring theme in academic interpretations of postfeminism, results in a consequent difficulty for academics to piece together a clear or universally recognized postfeminist ideology.

Gill writes that the conflicting conceptions of postfeminism represent “transformations in feminisms and transformations in media culture – and their mutual relationship” (147). If postfeminism is seen as an evolutionary media culture, as Gill insists, it is crucial for the academic feminist to approach postfeminism as a “critical object – a phenomenon into which scholars of culture should inquire – rather than an analytic perspective” (148). Gill’s elaboration on an inquiry-based approach to postfeminism as a media culture is remarkable:

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. (148)

Postfeminism then, rather than a theory or theoretical frame, is a cultural *space* where contradictory ideologies converge, where the past can be questioned and considered, and where current conceptions of gender can be critically examined and expanded.

Merri Lisa Johnson’s research and writing on third-wave feminist media theory argues that reading popular media as a variation of theory “opens up the possibility of granting media culture a more important role in contemporary conversations about gender and sexuality” (19). Gill suggests that one sign of feminist progress since the 1960s is the prevalence of recognizable feminist ideology in contemporary media and pop culture: “feminist discourses are expressed *within* the media rather than simply being external, independent, critical voices” (emphasis mine, 161). That said, Gill also recognizes and avoids a common mistake of suggesting that mere *presence* is *progressive* and therefore unproblematic. Gill argues that a more accurate and realistic perspective is that “the media

offers contradictory, but nevertheless patterned, constructions” of feminist ideology (161). “Patterned construction” of feminist discourse contains potential for ideological formation (albeit in a variety of directions) because of its repetitious nature, reinforcing feminist discourse “brick by brick” until a foundation is laid in popular media culture.

Gill’s inclusion of the aspect of “contradiction” in popular culture’s feminist discourse is crucial in reading popular media for potential *theory* development. Particularly due to the inconsistent and ever-changing nature of the popular, any *theory* development in popular media and culture is far from the “purity” of theories developed in an academic environment. Johnson points out that each step perceived as *progress* in popular feminist discourse is often “intercut with moments of containment, flashes of stereotypes, plot crutches, and predictable jokes” (19). That said, exclusively dismissive or exposé approaches to popular media and culture neglect the inherent nature of multiplicity and inconsistency, missing the alternative side of those contradictions that potentially include progressive feminist discourse. Third-wave feminist media theory attempts a balancing act between “appreciation and skepticism” that encourages readers to embrace a kind of intellectual pleasure with the knowledge that they consume popular media with active critical eyes (Johnson 19). The *third-wave eyes* Johnson describes are required to be particularly open and speculative upon engaging with media and popular culture that exists within a postfeminist space of complex and contradictory popular feminist discourse.

In addition to the uniquely critical perspective of third-wave feminist media theory, contemporary media and cultural artifacts can be seen as vehicles for critical discourse and commentary. As a dramatic sci-fi comic book series, *Y: The Last Man* can be described as what Mitra C. Emad calls “speculative fiction” that is “full of both scientific hardware and

fantastic imaginings that showcase utopic visions of social change” (956). Douglas Wolk argues, in a Salon.com review of the series, that *Y: The Last Man* functions as a satire (another kind of “speculative fiction”) of patriarchal culture, intentionally placing female characters in traditional or even caricatured “male” roles to demonstrate “assumptions about gender that normally go unspoken and the stereotypes that are common currency, and make points about how strange they are and what perpetuates them” (2008). Wolk concludes that the series actively encourages the following realization (or arguable *utopic vision*): “Before the world can change for real, the stories we tell ourselves about the nature of men and women have to change, too” (2008). The particular stories told in *Y: The Last Man* challenge contemporary conceptions of gender by presenting familiar historical and narrative tropes in an unfamiliar post-apocalyptic setting.

For example, the town of Marrisville, encountered in volume two, initially appears to be a kind of utopia. The town is fully functioning, thriving in fact; a stark contrast to the desolation the three lead characters have witnessed thus far. What sets Marrisville apart from the chaos? One townswoman confronts Yorick’s disbelief:

Lydia: *Hard to believe that helpless little women can get by without your kind, eh?*

Yorick: *Oh, I...I didn't mean any disrespect ma'am. It's just, some of the cities I've been to look like the third act of a Godzilla flick, but this place still seems like Mayberry.*

Lydia: *That's 'cause we've had plenty of experience making do without any men around.* (Vol 2, 44)

Lydia was a teenager when “Rosie the Riveter” emerged as a propaganda icon during WWII to encourage women to join and subsequently *make up* the workforce. She reflects

on her experience, alluding to the current absence of men as a situation for which she is fully prepared: “There was nothing I couldn’t do. Hell, if none of our boys had come home alive, we coulda run this place just fine on our own...better, even” (Vol 2, 44). Lydia’s wartime experience and resulting independence is a familiar American narrative, yet it lacks the equally iconic return to the domestic sphere and baby-boom after the wartime demand for female labor subsided.

The solidarity and structure among the women of Marrisville extends beyond Lydia’s experience and across generations in this community; the women in Marrisville have been living without men for quite some time – as prisoners. Approximately a mile away sits a vacant women’s prison facility. After the plague killed the men and the remaining female guards decided to leave, the warden released the inmates. One former prisoner recounts: “We’ve been taking care of ourselves for years, so this community kinda just fell into place” (Vol 2, 69). Incarceration forced them to form a community among themselves in an effort to develop and retain order. However, the strength and leadership found here proves to be rare as the journey of the three main characters continues. While Marrisville thrived, the rest of the world grew ragged with collapsed male-dominated industries, violent revolutionaries, and desperate communities suffering in poverty. The internal discourse does not suggest that a world without men would be utopic or ideal; nor does it imply that men are the singular hope for survival. Instead, it provokes a variety of considerations about gender inequality and the impact of patriarchal systems around the world. It encourages readers to ask themselves how and why they participate in a number of cultural constructions of gender norms.

In addition to the social and historical trope represented by the town of Marrisville, *Y: The Last Man* also depicts individual characters that possess a metanarrative consciousness within their fictional setting. Said another way, the characters in the series are aware of their participation in a larger history of narrative formulas. Strictly speaking, the instances of note do not directly adhere to the theatrical concept of *breaking the fourth wall* since no character overtly acknowledges their existence within a comic book. However, when a character realizes that she is caught in a traditional narrative trope and proceeds to resist her prescribed role, the illusion of the normativity of prescribed roles is shattered. The fictional setting for revelation of a realistic issue indicates an attempt by the creators to draw attention to a similar issue in reality. In the following example, a ship captain (speaking to Yorick) describes her discontent in her prescribed gender role using literary language as an illustration of her consciousness:

My whole life, I've always been a...a supporting character in somebody else's story. Daughter, student, fuck buddy, first mate, whatever. But when the plague went down, I finally saw a chance to change that. I wanted to be a leader. I wanted to help as many women as I could. I wanted to give them an adventure. (...) And then the last man on earth shows up. (...) Now that you're here, I'm just another crazy bitch fucking up the world you're gonna save. It figures. An entire planet of women and the one guy gets to take the lead. (Vol 6, 92-3)

Such a nod to the potentially problematic title or plot structure of the series could not be clearer. A critical reader can easily see that throughout sixty comic book issues over a span of almost six years, Yorick's existence is the only requirement for him to remain in the title spot among dozens of other stronger, smarter, and more interesting female characters.

Nevertheless, the series goes on; title unchanged. But why challenge the reader in this way? The commentary here does not serve to suggest the dismissal of the story based on the existing “trap” of another male-dominated narrative in a male-dominated medium. Instead, the captain’s monologue uses self- and meta-textual reference (“self” being the comic book series) to demonstrate its internal awareness of those “traps” and formulas in contemporary narratives in order to signal its own divergence toward an alternative narrative with a potentially feminist consciousness and discourse.

In the following chapters, I elaborate on three particular manifestations of feminist and postfeminist discourse in *Y: The Last Man*. First, I identify several major female characters who play key roles in constructing the series as a postfeminist narrative. Their representation and development in specific embodiments as a villain, a prodigal daughter, a role model, and an action hero provide significant support for *Y: The Last Man* as a postfeminist narrative.

Second, I evaluate the only two male characters in the series from within the context of postfeminism. Through a study of their masculinity and characterization, I suggest that they represent two unique and problematic embodiments of *profeminism*. Just as *postfeminism* emerges as a response to second wave feminism, the two male characters attempt to develop an alliance with women in terms of what they perceive to be feminist ideology. Although the two men approach *profeminism* with notably different motivation and intention, their participation in the postfeminist narrative results in a provocative discourse regarding the actual “pastness” of feminism and patriarchy in contemporary culture.

Third, I provide an analysis of the representations of sexuality, gender identity, and sexualized gender performance in several subplots of *Y: The Last Man*. A collection of poignant examples allows me to unpack characters' popular conceptions of female sexuality and its relationship to/with gender identity. In addition, the concept of sexualized gender performance is depicted in two unique scenarios that reveal the limiting commodification of bodies that perform sexual objectification. The representations and revelations woven into *Y: The Last Man* result in a postfeminist comfort-zone of understandings of sexuality and gender with incorporated strands of contemporary and queer feminist discourse pushing against those traditional boundaries.

Y: The Last Man inhabits a unique space in postfeminist media culture as part of the male-dominated medium of comics. The creators are faced with a multitude of opportunities to confront stereotypes, break traditional formulas, step out of comfort zones (whether their own or the readers'), and make potentially bold statements about gender. In the following analysis, I present evidence of *Y: The Last Man* as a potentially progressive postfeminist narrative while drawing critical conclusions about its relative success in reimagining contemporary popular discourses about feminism.

Chapter 2: Female Characters in the Postfeminist Narrative

Among the many female characters in *Y: The Last Man*, several are drawn with particularly recognizable postfeminist aspects and formulas, supporting the identification of the series as a postfeminist narrative. First, the role of *the villains* in such a narrative represents exactly the brand of feminism that postfeminism rejects. In fact, *Y: The Last Man* actively “brands” the villains as fringe, militant, radical, separatist feminists by setting up undeniable cues from popular inflammatory stereotypes while also carefully avoiding direct use of the term “feminism” (to avoid appearing anti-feminist altogether). As a result, the branded feminist villains in *Y: The Last Man* represent one distinctly irredeemable role, the critical and self-conscious, politically engaged and overt “feminist,” in the postfeminist narrative, making room for other characters to inhabit and explore alternative (and markedly positive) post/feminist roles.

For example, the narrative’s *prodigal daughter* is directly related to the villains in that she represents the stages of realizing postfeminism; she joins a militant gang of feminists, suffers damage from her participation, and ultimately returns home, redeemed by her specific rejection of the vilified brand of feminism. *The role model* character demonstrates her ability to thrive beyond feminist politics while taking certain aspects of historical feminist gains for granted. Her achievement is celebrated within traditional rubrics and she remains committed to equality without necessarily engaging with its politics. Lastly, *the action hero* represents an exceptional woman who seems to possess an organic feminism unrelated to political movements or struggles against patriarchy. In the postfeminist tradition of contradiction, the public action hero inevitably and willingly returns to the private sphere to ensure that femininity (over her more traditionally

masculine portrayal) is valued as a commodity while simultaneously being admired for her remarkable achievement and strength as an action hero.

These four embodiments of postfeminist discourse in *Y: The Last Man* provide a wealth of evidence on which to draw conclusions about this particular narrative's conception of female embodiments of masculinity, femininity, and feminist politics.

The Villains

Pat Robertson's battle cry against *the feminists* in 1992 when he rallied against the Equal Rights Amendment is still fresh in American memory. The feminist movement, he intended to reveal, was actually "a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians" (*Robertson Letter*, 1992). His hysterical rant has been modified into a number of variations since then and continues to incite panic and fear for the future of the human race if left in the hands of *feminazis*.

In *Y: The Last Man*, the "Daughters of the Amazon" (typically called "the Amazons") are a militant group of women who celebrate the extinction of men and violently oppose any remaining patriarchal symbols and institutions. In accordance with the Greek mythology of an all-female warrior nation also called "the Amazons", most of the members have ceremonially cut off one of their own breasts and some also use a bow and arrow as a weapon during their various assignments. Their primary mission throughout the series is to destroy any remaining markers of patriarchy: sperm banks, churches, the Washington Monument, and even transmen and cross-dressers.

The leader of the Amazons is a dynamic speaker and master of persuasion named Victoria who is strikingly similar to Valerie Solanas, the separatist feminist who wrote the

SCUM Manifesto in 1968. As an example of the striking parallel, here is an (admittedly tame) excerpt from the *SCUM Manifesto*: “The male is a biological accident: the Y (male) gene is an incomplete X (female) gene, that is, it has an incomplete set of chromosomes” (Solanas 1). In comparison, here is a quotation from one of the members of the Amazons in *Y: The Last Man* regurgitating a similar party line: “The Y-chromosome is an aberration. You’re nothing but a deformed female. A...a monster poisoned by your own hormones” (Vol. 1, 96). While the two share common rhetoric, the fictional Victoria is written in a way that maintains a stronger presence than Solanas’ short-lived movement.

Victoria’s mastery of persuasion is the key to her leadership ability, allowing her to deliver contradictory messages without endangering her presentation of confidence and control. “We’re all equals here,” she declares to the crowd of women despite the fact that she does not display evidence of removal of one of her breasts like her members. She continues, “believe me, I despise barking orders like a patriarch. Rest assured, when the game is over, the queen and the pawn go back into the same box” (Vol. 1, 114). Victoria condemns patriarchal privilege by equating patriarchy with maleness, an equation that falsely disassociates similar power and privilege from femaleness. As a result, Victoria views her own privilege as acceptable, strategic, and unproblematic. The lack of intersectional recognition along with a re-appropriation of patriarchal power can be viewed as a reference to the popular conception of second wave radical feminism: sisterhood for the sake of counter-balancing brotherhood, and militant rejection of all things related to men as an act of rebellion.

J. Bobby Noble refers to the concept of “female masculinity” to describe an effort of women to break away from the construction of the “feminine” due to its inferior location

in gendered hierarchy. Noble argues that, “in many ways female masculinity is as guilty as is heteronormative masculinity of constructing or producing itself in relation to the thing it is compelled not to be – that is, feminine” (xxi). Judith Halberstam suggests that contemporary cultures misidentify female masculinity as a “longing to be and to have a power that is always just out of reach” (9). In line with the popular culture basis of Victoria’s representation as a *feminist villain*, she also embodies these popular conceptions of female masculinity and falls into her own “trap” by resembling the oppressor she claims to fight.

Nonetheless, Victoria continues to defend the use of violence as a strategy while openly identifying it as a characteristic of patriarchy. She offers the following comfort after ordering Hero (our *prodigal daughter*) to shoot and kill a woman seen as uncooperative:

You ended her suffering, Hero. She was still clinging to the old world. You set her free. It’s unfortunate that we had to use violence, but as long as one man is still alive on this planet, we have no choice but to play by their rules. (Vol. 2, 15)

The Prodigal Daughter

Hero, Yorick’s older sister, has a long history of bitter feelings about men. From her childhood memories of feeling inferior to her brother, to her teenage submission to promiscuous sex as a form of affirmation from males, the details of her back-story suggest a deep seated vulnerability that places her in a prime emotional location for recruitment into the Amazons. Weeks into the disaster, starving and desperate, she is approached by members of the Amazons who intend to confiscate her scavenged food, claiming it as property of the Amazons. When she violently resists, Victoria emerges and expresses admiration and sympathy, inviting her to join the Amazons with the promise of food and

safety. Victoria describes their common enemy and the necessity of working together to combat those who support the maintenance and restoration of the oppressor (patriarchy and men). Given the strong textual suggestions of Hero's need for belonging and tendency toward vulnerability, her identification with the Amazons is unsurprising.

Early in her membership, she steps forward to prove her loyalty to the group by leading the mission to confirm a report of a living man. When she realizes that the man they are hunting is her own brother, she becomes conflicted but fights to remain dedicated to the cause. Only after Victoria is shot and killed in Marrisville is she able to begin her disconnect from the Amazons and her move toward recovery from the cult-like feminist brainwashing. Hero periodically continues to see visions of Victoria that force her to wrestle again with her identity and with feminism as a social and political project, but overall, she struggles less when reminded of the strength and independence of the women of Marrisville. Her redemption comes with her rejection of feminism as well as her "return home" to Yorick and the two lead female characters who embody postfeminism in the narrative formula. While she does not spend significant time interacting with *the role model* or *the action hero*, her support in their journey with Yorick proves to be the key to the happiness she sought for so long.

The Role Model

Dr. Allison Mann is an Asian American bioengineer selected by Yorick's mother (U.S. Representative Jennifer Brown) as a crucial member of the team assigned to protect Yorick and develop a solution to overcome the devastation of the plague. Rep. Brown explains her intentions to her son: "We were hoping that she'd help us create the next generation of females, but if she could find out what makes you immune--" (Vol 1, 57).

Despite the inconclusiveness of her suggestion, it is implied that there is hope for the survival of humanity specifically if Allison is able to ensure the regeneration of men.

Rep. Brown's emphasis on Yorick and his mysterious immunity over the fact that Allison is the top scientist in her field who has a personal history with cloning, echoes a theme of biological destiny from Allison's past. Among the scenes included in her backstory (depicted in Issue 47 of the series) are several scenes that assert this concept. In one memory from her childhood, her mother describes a method to prevent moths from infesting closets by using pheromones to exclusively lure the males into the lethal trap. When asked why the trap was not designed to capture the female moths as well, her mother explained, "once all the males die...Mother Nature takes care of the rest" (Vol 8, 102), implying that the female species cannot survive without male participation in reproduction. A later memory with her father mirrors the first, despite a very different context; after learning of his daughter's lesbian sexuality, he submits a grave warning, "remember what they say about the female of the species" (Vol. 8, 112). His statement not only emphasizes his assumed fruitlessness of her lesbian sexuality and lifestyle, but also that heterosexuality more than a normative; it is a necessity for survival.

As a result of her strained relationship with her father, Allison changes her name from Ayuko Matsumori to Allison Mann. It is impossible to ignore the ironic pun of name change ("A. Mann") when considering her special participation in the postfeminist narrative as a role model character who also actively works to restore the male species through her scientific expertise. If the adoption of the surname "Mann" is read as a significant additional aspect of her postfeminism, it could be interpreted as a rejection of the radical feminist identification of "maleness" as the organic source of patriarchal

oppression that remains a conviction despite her father's overt participation in the patriarchal structure.

In a plot twist near the end of the series it is revealed that her father has not only survived the plague, but believes his own cloning success to be the cause of the plague. Through a series of confessions regarding his direct involvement in the failure of Allison's own clone attempt, pseudoscientific explanations of the plague, and apologies for his mistakes (while safely retreating behind his own justification that the nature of maleness is inherently flawed), he concludes that Nature no longer requires that men exist. He intends to "finish what he started" by killing Yorick and then killing himself, allowing women to continue to evolve without men. Allison rejects his logic as flawed and condemns his guise of remorse. As he approaches Yorick to administer a fatal dose of barbiturates, she defies his plan: "Go ahead. But know that I will spend the rest of my natural life working to bring men, even assholes like you, back to this planet" (Vol. 9, 84). Matsumori warns his daughter against attempting to clone a male, insisting that the first cloned female was the very catalyst responsible for the termination of all the men. Allison rebuts: "A girl didn't destroy mankind, you did" (Vol. 9, 85).

Bonnie Dow describes patriarchy as "institutionalized and systemic in a variety of ways," but adds that postfeminism acts as an attempt to "take the political and make it personal, to deny that feminism has a social and political claim to make, asserting instead that woman's fate is entirely in her own hands" (127). In the dramatic sequence of both verbal and physical struggle between father and daughter, she confronts the Patriarch who enacted oppression throughout her development as a daughter and a scientist in a very

personal way. In this case, Allison literally took her fate into her own hands by managing to inject her father with the fatal needle intended for Yorick.

With the success of cloned females, the male role in reproduction is no longer necessary in the survival and growth of humanity after the plague. Her father's haunting warning and disapproval from her youth – "Remember what they say about the female species" – is now meaningless; her potential for reproduction as a lesbian is no longer based on help from a male. Further, Allison's dedication to the restoration of the male species indicates an extension beyond the previous biological destiny they embodied toward a more deeply invested ideological value of men.

The Action Hero

Agent 355, an African American secret agent for a government agency called The Culper Ring, is a remarkable female character in *Y: The Last Man*. While her primary mission throughout the series is to defend and protect Yorick during their journey, the high tensions following the plague result in regular action sequences that demonstrate her action hero status. Her specific participation within the postfeminist narrative, however, is based on the organic qualities she embodies that imply a kind of feminism yet exist separately from its politics. These qualities are present in her individual character as well as the supporting institution, The Culper Ring.

Her entrance into the agency is a key part of her development as a postfeminist action hero. In addition, her identity formation and character development are deeply rooted in her origin story, which begins with the tragic accidental death of her parents and sister, instantly making her an orphan. The Culper Ring became interested in her as a recruit not only because of her lack of family attachment but also because as she developed

into adolescence she adapted to protect herself from violent bullies. An agent from The Culper Ring (who identifies herself as Agent 355 long before our lead character earns the title) explains:

I'm the ninth agent to be awarded the designation 355. The first was a woman who spied for General Washington during the American Revolution. Most historians think George disbanded his little group after the war...but this isn't history, it's her story. For more than two hundred years, female agents of The Culper Ring – and a few brothers – have been secretly kicking ass for their country. Women like you and me were leading men into battle before chicks even had the right to vote. (Vol 7, 108)

Based on the agent's explanation of The Culper Ring, it was both founded *and maintained* by George Washington. The erasure of women from the story was external and relatively unimportant since the agency exists within a very different set of cultural constructions of gender. The allusion to "her story" is a markedly feminist concept, yet there is no direct implication that either The Culper Ring or the agent herself identifies with feminist politics. The elite nature of The Culper Ring implies that it exists in an alternative culture where feminist ideologies are organic and natural, in contrast to a common postfeminist emphasis on the "pastness" of feminism.

When the ninth Agent 355 begins training our action hero, she emphasizes a clear distinction between the role of female agents in The Culper Ring compared to the hypersexualized conception of female spies historically represented in media and popular culture: "We're a lot of things, but we're not whores, kid. The day you get a guy off to save your life is the day you should have died" (Vol 7, 111). There is no room for a Mata Hari

or a Bond Girl in the elite prestige of The Culper Ring; again, it exists beyond popular (anti-feminist) constructions of women and female spies in particular.

Not only does she break the stereotype of the hypersexualized femme fatale, but Agent 355 fills the profile more commonly associated with male intelligence agents: cool, calm, collected, and unconditionally dedicated to the mission. In a stoic confrontation with her own teacher whose defection from The Culper Ring is fueled by an emotional decision to assassinate the President, our leading female character earns her title as the tenth Agent 355 by taking her mentor down and preventing the assassination. With clear control over her emotions (yet not emotionless), Agent 355 is, as Tasker and Negra suggest about postfeminist heroines, “defined by her isolation and exceptional status” (*In Focus* 109). The fact that Agent 355 breaks binary oppositions such as “masculine/rational vs. feminine/emotional” continues to imply feminist undertones within postfeminism while insisting separation from feminist politics.

In her scholarship on contemporary female action heroes Cristina Lucia Stasia expresses discontent with postfeminist characters who have incorporated “safe” conventions of femininity into popular understandings of masculine activity. Unlike the widely admired heroes like Ripley (*Aliens* 1986) or Sarah Connor (*Terminator 2* 1991) who developed a distinctive roughness in their sequel films, contemporary heroines like Lara Croft (*Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* 2001) deliver a feminized and hypersexualized performance while simultaneously being admired for their accomplishment and strength (Stasia 2004).

My concern is that these new female action heroes provide images of an equality that has not been achieved, and that they mitigate their viewers' interests in

exploring inequalities. It is easy to be seduced by images of strong women fighting, but these images capitalise (sic) on a basic belief in feminism evacuated of any consciousness of why girls still need to 'kick ass.' (Stasia 181-2)

Tasker and Negra's description of postfeminism reiterates this trend of celebrating success and achievement of women "within traditionalist ideological rubrics" (*Interrogating* 7). Mizejewski argues that female action heroes rarely raise suspicion or doubt because they are so common and represent an "already marketable product for popular culture" (123). Agent 355 is "polished, buff, and confident in a male milieu" and her expertise remains unquestioned (Mizejewski 122). But a female action hero like Agent 355 is still relatively unique in contemporary culture; when these rare characters do "work," it is largely due to the strategic development of such a nontraditional identity in a way that makes it not only acceptable but desirable.

Despite the emphasis on *The Culper Ring*'s existence separate from overt feminist politics or conventional gender prescriptions, Agent 355 performs a symbolic "return to the feminine" that places her role as an action hero within a traditional rubric. Near the end of the series, after Agent 355 has said goodbye to Yorick she enters a women's clothing store and literally trades in her gun for a dress. She then withdraws to a hotel room (a symbolic private sphere) to watch the sun set by herself. Her new dress is so remarkably uncharacteristic of her action hero role, it seems to function more clearly as a costume of femininity.

Through a twist of fate, Yorick and Agent 355 find themselves together again. It has become clear to both characters that they have strong feelings for one another as well as an unexpected opportunity to pursue romance, but they do not take it. Their dialogue (while

admittedly mostly in Yorick's voice) is ironic and *knowing* on the part of the creators, implying that they realize the cheapness of the formula bringing Yorick and Agent 355 together romantically. "I just don't want to pull a *Moonlighting* and screw up what we have going," Yorick says casually, realizing that Agent 355 rarely follows his pop culture references, "before you ask, it's an old P.I. show with Bruce Willis and Cybill Shepherd. It started sucking as soon as they stopped being all platonic at the end of season three." The meta-textual reference to a similar narrative formula to the one they both inhabit indicates awareness and rejection of such a conclusion. Agent 355 jokingly asks, "You think I'll confuse you with Bruce Willis?" to which Yorick replies, "I'm Cybill, you're Bruce" (Vol 10, 89). The playful nod to Agent 355's action hero status as an attribute that is attractive and admired by Yorick brings the consistency of her markedly feminist (however *organic*) character development back into a more progressive postfeminist discourse. Even in Agent 355's return to the feminine, it is internally presented as a false trope that neglects to work with her character.

Conclusions

The above detailed female character formations in *Y: The Last Man* function as defining elements in the postfeminist narrative. The Amazons' feminist branding allows the term "feminism" to remain unspoken while delivering pointed visions of its embodiment in the activist group. Their leader, Victoria's, reappropriation of patriarchal masculinity helps establish her irredeemable villainy not only in her extreme feminism, but arguably in her active engagement with the unbalanced privilege associated with patriarchy. Hero's developmental journey tracks a familiar narrative of a vulnerable individual who falls in with the wrong crowd, ultimately to retrace her steps home and leave "the feminist

mistake” in the past. As an inspirational model of intelligence and independence, Dr. Allison Mann’s unwavering commitment to the revival of the male species remains despite the number of aspects of her character and lifestyle that demonstrate neither necessity nor attachment to men. Agent 355’s embodiment of heroism is enhanced by her elite status in an organization that claims to exist outside of modern and historical conventions of patriarchal gender norms and binaries. Combined with subplots, interaction with other characters, and an overall context of postfeminist discourse, these characters’ histories and leading roles in *Y: The Last Man* engage readers in identifiable accounts of the manifestations of postfeminism as a cultural phenomenon.

Chapter 3: Male Characters & Profeminism in the Postfeminist Narrative

While the female characters in *Y: The Last Man* fill iconic elemental roles within its postfeminist narrative structure, the male characters develop very differently into roles that engage their individual embodiment of masculinity as well as their profeminist tendencies and motivations. A brief investigation of historic representations of male characters within the comic book medium provides insight into its progressive evolution inevitably applied to the creation of the male characters in *Y: The Last Man*. Bonnie Dow provides an extension through her analysis of the evolving portrayal of male characters in 1970s and 80s sitcom narratives. The eventual development of *profeminist* men in *postfeminist* narratives like *Y: The Last Man* benefit from Richard Schmitt's scholarly deconstruction of three basic paths or motivations that guide male characters toward profeminism. Finally, individual analysis of the two male characters in *Y: The Last Man* will use the historical evidence detailed here as informative context for subsequent conclusions.

Comic Book Masculinity

The representation of male characters in the comic book industry has come under criticism in recent years (following the emergence of the academic field of gender studies) for perpetuating hegemonic codes of masculinity and gender binaries. Superhero comics in particular often present a hypermasculine superhero who embodies a desirable transformation from his average or even feminized male alter ego. Jeffery Brown contends that "superhero comics are one of our culture's clearest illustrations of hypermasculinity and male duality premised on the fear of the unmasculine Other" (31). However, while the industry remains largely male dominated, alternative genres to superhero comics such as underground comix and graphic novels have been recognized for their presentation of a

wider range of masculinities. Brown's scholarship identifies *Milestone* as a superhero comics publisher that has successfully incorporated progressive alternatives into their familiar superhero narratives. Brown describes their method as a *reworking* of popular frameworks and an infusion of "gentler, more responsible, and more cerebral qualities within the codes of dominant masculinity" (41). *Y: The Last Man* involves a similar challenge by presenting two exclusive male characters throughout the series, both of whom are placed in a world where the "balance" of power has been dramatically tipped so that they no longer occupy a position of dominance. The creators use the advantage of this narrative to depict the unique development of the two male characters in their embodiment of masculinity and their path toward profeminism.

Supporting Male Characters in the Postfeminist Narrative

Bonnie Dow's scholarship on male characters in 1970s and 80s sitcoms identifies ideal players in postfeminist ideologies. Lou Grant, the boss on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and Walter Findlay, Bea Arthur's character's husband on *Maude*, are described in her analysis as "characters with humorous foibles and good intentions who were capable of being enlightened, and their genuine affection for the feminist heroines of these shows made them unconvincing patriarchs" (Dow 116). They felt the cultural expectations to be patriarchs and often exuded a hard exterior, but their "soft centers" made these male characters exceptions to the system of patriarchy. The comic relief and levity they performed in the sitcom narratives provided a momentary escape from the serious problems of patriarchal oppression. Dow argues that comedy is a vehicle through which television media can safely explore feminism and suggest light-hearted possibilities for social reform.

In addition, Dow identifies the “sensitive new age guy” or SNAG who often played the role of “love interest” (122). Charming, loveable, sympathetic male characters made it easier for the female characters (and female audiences) to embrace postfeminism and enjoy the advancements of feminism without the obligation of politics.

Development of Male *Profeminism*

These male characters’ sympathies and potential for enlightenment began to develop into an implied alliance with feminist ideology, a *profeminism*. The character Michael, popularly known as “Meathead,” on *All In The Family* is one of the most identifiable political profeminist male characters from 1970s sitcoms. His hippie, SNAG, nontraditional masculinity in the series stood as a stark contrast to Archie’s aggressive conservative display of patriarchal masculinity that characteristically remained unconvincing.

However, as men began to identify as profeminists, not all of them followed Meathead’s liberal path of conviction against hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal systems of oppression. Richard Schmitt identifies several other motivations that lead men to profeminism.

“Self-hatred,” he describes, “is a flight from self not by means of becoming a different self but by means of *pretending* to be a different self” (398). Schmitt suggests that self-hating men often identify themselves as profeminist allies, but do not offer constructive or active support in feminist causes. Often as a response to radical feminism, these men feel guilty and responsible by association (their maleness) and recognize profeminism as a refuge from the consequences of being an inherently flawed male.

Other profeminist men experience self-hatred unrelated to their maleness or radical feminist charges against men. Instead, these men often identify as victims of abuse or oppression. As a consequence of their individual trauma, they feel worthless and vulnerable while also sympathizing and identifying with the feminist movement's dedication to overcoming victimhood. Schmitt suggests that profeminism offers these men an escape from woundedness, but does not typically make them reliable or active allies in feminism. He writes that in both cases, self-hating profeminist men "are on the side of women mostly to meet needs of their own" (398).

The following analysis of Matsumori and Yorick develops a critique of each character's performance of masculinity, in their respective roles in the postfeminist narrative, and their individual approach to profeminism.

Matsumori's Feigned *Profeminism*

Matsumori's claim of profeminism is loaded with contradictions that complicate the interpretation of his motive and goal. First, a surface level reading of his dialogue will be detailed in order to prepare for a deeper critical deconstruction.

Matsumori is introduced in *Y: The Last Man* as the ultimate patriarch. He is an unfaithful husband and an oppressive father. A memory from Allison's childhood depicts her walking in on obvious sexual flirtations between her father and his female colleague, Dr. Ming, suggesting an extramarital affair that is later confirmed. As Allison ages into adolescence, she develops an increasingly negative understanding of her father as a domineering patriarch who continually dismisses her accomplishments as well as her lesbian identity, eventually disowning her completely.

When he resurfaces in the narrative, having mysteriously survived the plague, he introduces Allison to a clone created from her own DNA and offers what appear to be apologies: “From early on, I knew I had failed you as a father, Ayuko. I’d failed you as a **man**...but I never stopped trying” (Vol. 9, 50). He continues, suggesting that his cloning research was based on his desire to right an irreversible mistake he had made as a parent, “I dreamed of having a second chance to raise you **honorably**” (Vol. 9, 63).

Upon learning of Allison’s similar effort to produce a human clone, he develops a reactionary plan to sabotage her potential for success by sending a messenger to secretly administer an abortion inducing drug. Although it requires two separate attempts, his violent interference is eventually successful in terminating her pregnancy. “I have no explanation beyond my own shameful pride,” he says, acknowledging the gravity of his patriarchal desire for dominance (Vol 9, 64). The consequence of his avarice appears far reaching indeed since the simultaneous death of nearly all men also coincided with the successfully delivery of *his* clone. He explains his belief that the successful engineering of asexual reproduction completely erased the necessity for the existence of men.

Matsumori relates that as time passed after the plague, his perspective on the nature and value of men dramatically changed, identifying their historically required role in reproduction as a “necessary evil for the continuation of the species” (Vol 9, 69). More than simply suggesting an unnecessary existence, he seems to indicate an inherently “evil” nature of men. He reflects aloud upon his personal sins:

*Dr. Ming, the woman I loved, died in my arms just a few days after my **wife** arrived. It reminded me what cruel creatures men are. Our bodies tell us to love so*

many, but there's room in our hearts for so few. We're impossibly flawed animals aren't we? (Vol. 9, 73)

Matsumori's repeated expressions of remorse lead him to analyze his behavior in the context of the broader systematic dominance (patriarchy) that encourages subordination of women. Michael Kimmel articulates a common explanation of hegemonic masculinity as a reactive development, a "flight from the feminine" or "flight from women" (185).

Matsumori draws a similar conclusion here: "Ever since I was a little boy, women have terrified me. I suspect this is why my male colleagues and I **marginalized** so many later in life" (Vol. 9, 79). His language indicates a growing understanding of the oppressive impact of dominant masculinity and patriarchy on women as individual characters in his life as well as women in a broader global sense.

With the burden of responsibility on his shoulders, believing he caused the plague, he seeks absolution. Initially, assuming that a literal reversal of his scientific error will satisfy as forgiveness, he insists, "I'm **not** an evil man. I've done terrible things in my life, but this...this was an accident. I vowed to (...) do whatever I could to bring mankind back to the planet" (Vol 9, 73). Matsumori's iteration that he never had malicious intentions represents another attempt to emphasize his changed perspective and behavior. In the same dialogue he offers a shift in focus from his experience or behavior to his observation of women in dominant roles following the plague. "And yet," he adds, "over the last four years, I've watched the women of this country make such remarkable progress without us" (Vol. 9, 73). On a certain level, Matsumori's new appreciation of women and their achievement can be read as a conversion from patriarchal dominance to profeminist alliance or even submission.

“Submission” as an aspect of his profeminist development seems fitting because of his understanding of hierarchies in terms of binaries (if men are no longer dominant, they must now assume the position of submissiveness). In fact, Matsumori enhances that binary further to indicate a necessity to “surrender” completely to the newly realized nature of women. However, the “newness” of his revelation is heavily weighted in the context he perceives to be an epic historical and social misunderstanding that women have not simply always been equal, but actually superior. “We didn’t belong in this world before the plague,” he charges, “and we certainly don’t belong here now” (Vol 9, 73). In this pivotal development of the story, Matsumori is able to provide a scientific explanation why he and Yorick survived the plague. Yet, even with the knowledge of the key to male immunity in hand, he adopts a conviction to end Yorick’s life followed by his own. “Just let me finish what I started,” he insists (Vol 9, 84); this time, it will be for the betterment of womankind. Despite his warning in Allison’s youth that females could never survive without men, he now appears to dive in the opposite direction.

Exposure of the unequivocal extremism that Matsumori’s “profeminism” actually embodies is where my analysis begins to turn. Just as Schmitt explains the self-hating profeminist man’s tendency toward a markedly passive and self-serving alliance with feminism, Matsumori’s intent to *remove* the two remaining male obstacles from women’s path toward complete independence can be read under the surface as an *escape* or *flight from women* disguised as an admirable *surrendering* of his dominant power. Suddenly, given the possibility of a selfish motive, the authenticity of his profeminism is severely undone. Until now, it was possible to place Matsumori in *Y: The Last Man*’s unique postfeminist narrative as an ex-patriarch who has been “converted,” therefore joining

Dow's directory of profeminist male characters. While Schmitt does not go as far as stripping the profeminist label from men whose motives undermine their alleged alliance, revisiting Matsumori's narrative results in strong suggestions of his continued participation in patriarchal traditions and hegemonic codes.

For example, when he describes inheriting the burden of the accidental plague, he says, "I'm **not** an evil man." This claim defends the unintentional nature of the plague, but does not support a complete absence of malice. The abortion he induced on his daughter is the singular reason for his successful clone ahead of her own efforts, an act based entirely on greed and the violent display of superiority.

In the same dialogue, he acknowledges female progress without men, meanwhile pointing out that his patriarchal masculinity is largely based on his "fear" of women. The absence of a community of men with which to construct hegemonic codes of dominance as a "flight from women" makes it necessary to create an alternative escape plan; the murder-suicide he has imagined as a solution erases Yorick's challenging embodiment of nontraditional masculinity while also providing an easy exit from the consequences of his oppressive behavior.

Even after his recognition of the cruel nature of patriarchal oppression, Matsumori continues to talk down to his wife, ordering her to do as she is told, adding, "you've interfered with my relationships long enough" (Vol. 9, 59). Ironically, his unapologetic infidelity pales in comparison with this unsupported sting against his wife. Even his performance of guilt as a "flawed animal" is empty in a context that blames the "nature" of men and refuses to actively correct one's flaws.

Matsumori clings to a privileged assumption of control, explaining that “Ayuko can continue my work” (Vol 9, 73), actively dismissing his daughter’s changed name (a symbolic separation from him) as well as her unquestionable ability to advance bioengineering and genetics research independent of *his work*.

Finally, Yorick rebuts Matsumori’s identification of youthful insecurity leading to a habitual display of dominance over women. Yorick, who performs nontraditional masculinity absent of many of the domineering aspects of patriarchy, rejects Matsumori’s justification, arguing, “we’re supposed to **grow up**, figure out that the best place for all the great women probably isn’t **behind** every great man” (Vol. 9, 79). In this display of uncharacteristic conviction by Yorick, Matsumori’s profeminism is ultimately debunked in motive and authenticity. The act of deconstruction presents a vilified patriarch and profeminist impersonator who exists in the postfeminist narrative as a character for comparison to a potentially progressive and authentic embodiment of profeminism: Yorick, *the last man*.

Yorick’s Profeminist Sympathies

Yorick embodies the formula of Dow’s SNAG character in a postfeminist narrative. His light hearted sense of wit and humor is loaded with clever references to literature as well as popular culture, and in case all other attempts at levity fail, he is accompanied by an adorably distracting pet monkey. A hobby that is revisited throughout the series, he practices as an amateur escape artist and magician, introducing the potential significance of illusion and performance as well as restraint and escape. As he develops, these aspects of his character which appear to be minor or irrelevant resurface in order to provide new levels of depth.

Unlike Matsumori, he lacks characteristic traits of traditional hegemonic masculinity and, despite his likely privilege as a white, middle-class, educated male, does not actively participate in patriarchal dominance and privilege. His nontraditional masculinity sets him apart from Matsumori as well as a range of other absent men easily recalled through cultural memory of constructions and expectations of “real” masculinity. As an extension of his nontraditional masculinity, indications of a natural profeminism or alliance with feminist ideologies are made evident over the course of the series in his condemnation of sexist language and behavior as well as his reverent appreciation of women.

Yorick has an obvious soft spot for confident women who challenge him intellectually, and his heart belongs exclusively to such a woman: his first and only girlfriend, Beth, a graduate student studying abroad at the time of the plague. His journey to reunite with her over the course of the series comes to represent a test of his virtue, given the abundant opportunities for Yorick to abandon his fidelity with other women. In contrast with a stereotypical hypermasculine hetero-male who fantasizes about a world with all the women to himself, Yorick does not revel in his position as the *only* eligible bachelor, nor does he struggle significantly with a demon of temptation. While there *are* occasions of infidelity, they do not define him as much as the constant emphasis on his primary idealistic goal to find her and ultimately live happily ever after.

His idealistic perspective on romance seems to involve an impression that his desires will fall into place when the time is right; a belief that maintains a casual lifestyle that does not actively promote growth and development. Yorick’s limited ambition and post-college unemployment are indicators of this comfortable state of immaturity. In

Ronald Glasberg's work on Archie comic books, he suggests that Archie exists "in a wish fulfillment of eternal youth where he stands at the threshold of a choice he never has to make" (32). Yorick's story begins at a similar threshold moments before the plague during a telephone call with Beth, trying to work up the nerve to propose marriage. When the phone abruptly disconnects before he has the chance, he is unknowingly and involuntarily thrown into a crash course on "growing up" that forces him to face the obstacles of his personal development.

Y: The Last Man pursues a blatantly psychoanalytic approach to address Yorick's nontraditional masculinity and identity formation in depth. In a particularly memorable plot sequence (*Safeword* in Volume 4, Issues 18-20) Yorick undergoes an unconventional intervention, prompted by an alleged display of self-hatred and lack of a will to live. The woman conducting the intervention, Agent 711, is a friend and former colleague of Agent 355 who secretly identified his "damage" and made preparations for the treatment. The method is meant to force him to face wounds of his past and lingering fears to reveal true virtues and motivations based on the connections between sexuality and trauma.

The scene begins with a graphic and highly eroticized display of Agent 711 dressed as a dominatrix while Yorick awakes in bondage, stripped to his underwear. She initiates the procedure by aggressively demeaning him, calling him a "faggot," and forcing him to talk about his sexual experiences, beginning with an unexpected sexual molestation experience from his childhood. Yorick reluctantly describes his memory of an interaction with another boy in the woods, innocently playing and practicing escape techniques. While Yorick attempts to escape the restraints tying him to a tree, the other boy's playful intentions turn and result in taking sexual advantage of Yorick while he is unable to resist

or escape. The trauma of vulnerability, lack of control, and degradation ultimately inform his subsequent development of sexuality, masculinity, and identity.

When pressed further to detail his first sexual experience with a woman, Yorick describes another pivotal sexual moment with Beth, his first and only sexual partner to date, the woman he intends to marry. This repetitious claim of monogamy and fidelity is key; Agent 711's intention is to dig deeper than his surface level motivation for morality and virtue. Yorick eventually reveals his deeply rooted guilt, shame, and disgust toward sex. He describes the morning after his first sexual experience with Beth, catching a glimpse of the tissue he used to clean up before falling asleep next to her. It appeared black and grotesque, covered in flies: "There were dozens of them, feasting on my lust, my depravity...my weakness" (Vol. 4, 41). He saw the flies as a metaphor for the shameful degradation of his sexuality and behavior. Just as he was tied up and molested, he feels similarly trapped and restrained by his sexuality, disgusted and violated by it. Even following a consensual encounter that involved affection instead of force, the vision of the insect infested byproduct of his sexuality reminds him of the damage again. In seeing even consensual intimacy as another failed escape from the degradation of sexuality, he associates all sexual experiences with the trauma of molestation.

In light of these experiences, aspects of Yorick's personality can be seen in a duality. For example, his humor and wit can also serve as a defense mechanism to avoid the gravity of his trauma (or *taking life too seriously*). His virtuous fidelity to Beth can also be read as a defense mechanism to avoid further damage. Yorick's profeminist sympathies are also illuminated by his lingering feelings of woundedness because of sexual

molestation by another male (which he associates with a broader conception of dominant masculinity), a trauma he shares with female victims of sexual assault and rape.

As the intervention continues, the focus shifts from sexuality to mortality. Agent 711 asks, “Ever since the plague killed every other man more than a year ago, why have you constantly put your own life in jeopardy?” (Vol. 4, 55) Yorick denies her accusation, leading Agent 711 to remind him of a number of incidences when he has appeared to “want out.”

Secretly recorded in Agent 355’s journal is a moment when Yorick was faced with a pack of Amazons who he perceives to be undeniably damaged by patriarchal domination, yet reacting to their oppression with a violent ignorance he associates with patriarchy itself. After uncovering his disguised maleness, they attack him. Yorick responds, “If this is your world, I want out. Just go ahead and kill me already!” (Vol. 4, 56) In another recorded example, Yorick is shocked by the violence and aggressive behavior of women congregated at the White House (all wives of deceased male congressmen) to literally fight over a new structure of the government. He expresses disillusionment with the nature of women as he previously understood it, “After all the men died, I thought you guys would be holding hands down at the United Nations or something” (Vol 2, 4). However, his surface tone of nonchalance and sarcasm in this moment at the White House is indicative of genuine negative emotions that he then filters through humor in an attempt to lighten the blow.

He is reminded of the first days after the plague when he left his apartment to search for his male friends only to find them all dead, wondering whether he would want to live if he did not die soon. As he revisits a graphic memory of the gruesome body of a

female cop who had shot herself in the head, he was ironically reminded of the nineteenth century Henrik Isben play *Hedda Gabler* that depicts the life of a German woman overwhelmed by the perils of patriarchy who eventually shoots herself in the head to escape it. He describes the irony of the scene to Agent 711: “This cop just saw the patriarchy **evaporate**—saw every sexist partner who ever hit on her and every scummy crook who called her bitch **die**—and she **still** killed herself” (Vol. 4, 60). He reflects on the gravity of the extreme circumstances as well as his feelings of weakness and hopelessness: “if some tough broad from New York’s finest couldn’t make it in this world, how am I supposed to?” (Vol. 4, 60)

The above examples illustrate a crushed expectation (although illusory) that the absence of men would liberate those oppressed by patriarchy, that an organic utopic society of women would emerge, and that he would no longer experience the pressure to conform to dominant hegemonic codes. On the contrary, certain communities of women were exhibiting violent displays of dominance associated with patriarchal masculinity. Other women were devastated and lost with no more will to survive. And even in the absence of other men to perpetuate stereotypes and hegemonic codes, Yorick felt more than ever before that his nontraditional masculinity was inadequate, particularly for *the last man*.

In a dramatic revelation that concludes the intervention by Agent 711, Yorick has an unexpected vision of Agent 355 that restores his own will to survive. Agent 355 represents an embodiment of an ideal which Yorick had not yet imagined. He recognizes that her personal development and strength has been built without much consideration of gender, compared to Yorick’s focus on *masculine* growth and development due to his

feelings of inadequacy. In realizing her strength independent from constructions of gender, he begins to consider the separation for himself.

Chapter 4: Sexuality & Gender in the Postfeminist Narrative

While sexuality and gender identity have been discussed more thoroughly in my analysis of Yorick than of the main female characters in the series, the series does not lack material for such discourse. The fact that the majority of the characters in *Y: The Last Man* are female presents an opportunity for a number of things to be said about female sexuality, gender identity, and gender performance. With regard to female sexuality, the representations within the series are relatively limited. Yet, within the heterosexual and lesbian sexual depictions are instances that confuse categorization and are therefore worth exploring.

“Guy-Friendly” Lesbianism

Tasker and Negra suggest that postfeminism “absolutely rejects lesbianism in all but its most guy-friendly forms, that is, divested of potentially feminist associations and invested with sexualized glamour” (Interrogating 21). The concept of the male gaze (see: Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure*) and male fetish fantasies of casual lesbian behavior have been a regular object for feminist critique and exposé. However, despite the prevalence of this trend and the academic feminist interest in exposing it, I find it equally important to consider alternative readings of popular representations of lesbian sex in order to fully interpret the circumstances and appropriately apply critique. The focus of the readings should not be based on a pass- or fail-feminism, but on the variety of messages readers inevitably draw from what they consume.

Volume six of the trade paperback printing of the series is entitled “Girl on Girl” and features hypersexualized cover art (by Massimo Carnevale) that suggests a sexual development between Allison and Agent 355. The strong erotic overtones and pop

reference to “guy-friendly” lesbian sex would make many feminist readers cringe and expect to be disgusted, particularly because Agent 355 has not identified herself as either lesbian or bisexual, falling deeper into the stereotypical hetero-male allure of impromptu sexuality regardless of orientation. The alluded sexual encounter between Allison and Agent 355 is predictably spontaneous and mildly graphic. Yet, the scene takes up very few panels and is practically discarded as a plot point when both characters realize that they have made a mistake. On the surface, the example fits easily in the “guy-friendly” category of lesbianism. However, I argue that the brevity and the lackluster plot development as a result seem to indicate avoidance of that trend; the dramatic setup exists as recognition of a “trap” and the uneventful sequence itself devalues the problematic male fantasy as uninteresting and unrealistic. In a way, *Y: The Last Man* is taking the opportunity to debunk popular myths about female sexuality in the absence of men.

Since it has been established that Allison is actually a lesbian, it is not out of a male fantasy that she develops an intimate relationship with a woman named Rose in volume seven. In her intimate scene with Rose, there is even less graphic depiction than in the scene with Agent 355. Could the lack of detail be read as an attempt to make a legitimately lesbian display of sexuality into a more “guy-friendly” exhibition? Allison’s dedication to restoring the male species also adds to the non-threatening nature of Allison’s lesbianism; it is not a political choice. However, it is difficult for me to support a claim that the lack of detail makes something more “friendly.” Instead, I suggest that the lack of detail makes the scene/relationship more sacred and less fetishized. Had their sexual relationship been fully exposed, it would seem more voyeuristic.

A third depiction of a sexual encounter between two women involves a former supermodel named Waverly and a cross dressing “working girl” named Bobbi. The moments after their intimacy are presented from a bird’s eye view. Waverly’s slender body makes a feminine hourglass while Bobbi’s chest is still wrapped tightly in white cloth, her figure equally as feminine despite her disguise. The subsequent panels and dialogue never directly address Waverly’s level of satisfaction, but it can be read through her distancing body language and neglect to comment that her experience with Bobbi was somehow inadequate. The popular portrayal of lesbian sex as “ultimately lacking and [requiring] an imitation of the penis which can never be as good as the ‘real thing’” (Nguyen 678) enforces a heteronormative standard that dismisses and devalues lesbian intimacy. However, given the fact that Waverly sought intimacy with Bobbi who is performing a male role, it is implied that Waverly is heterosexual. The feeling of inadequacy is not judgmental, but circumstantial instead. The absence of men leads Waverly to adapt her sexuality out of what she views as necessity rather than fetishized curiosity. Again, the omission of details of their encounter keeps this example from fully conforming to the sexually glamorous representation.

While evaluating the series for instances that support or contradict the concept of “guy-friendly” sexuality among women, the conviction of some women *toward* heterosexuality offers another potential affirmation of heteronormativity. In volume two Yorick meets a woman in Marrisville named Sonia, a former inmate of a nearby women’s prison. Despite the irony that neither Yorick nor the audience yet realize her status as an ex-prisoner, he notices a pair of women who appear to be a couple and asks Sonia if the all the women in Marrisville are lesbians. She replies frankly, “Yorick, it would take a hell of a lot

more than all the men dying to make me eat **pussy**” (Vol 2, 58). The emphatic crassness of Sonia’s response appears to speak directly for heteronormativity, that lesbianism could *never* replace *real* sex with men. Could it instead be read as a personal sexual preference and less as a defensive statement? In addition, this alternative reading aggressively debunks the “guy-friendly” male fantasy of “girl on girl” sexualized glamour. Sonia’s statement is not a blanket claim of heteronormativity, but a rejection of blanket assumptions about sexuality in general.

Sexualized Gender Performance in the Postfeminist Narrative

Two months after the plague, Yorick (wearing a gas mask to disguise himself) meets Waverly, the former supermodel mentioned previously, now driving a garbage truck and collecting the bodies of dead men from the streets. In the scene, she expresses her discontent with her drastically different situation since the plague:

*I used to have a modeling contract with Wilhelmina, and now I’m a goddamn **garbage** girl. Worst part is, I spent **three grand** on my boob job just before everything happened. Fat lot of good our tits do us now, right?* (Vol 1, 41)

Like the majority of the women in *Y: The Last Man*, Waverly perceives the world as post-gender. The absence of men results in the absence of the male gaze along with affirmation of her sexualized gender performance that previously fueled her career. While she adapts her gender performance to survive as a “garbage girl,” there is an impression of appreciation for her former life. She recognizes the imbalance in gendered hierarchy, the objectification of the male gaze, and the commodification of her body. However, Waverly’s postfeminism at this point in the series is clear: she is a willing participant in the feminine consumer culture while enjoying the illusion that she benefits from feminism

without needing political involvement. She would go back to modeling in a heartbeat if given the opportunity.

Waverly's heterosexuality is a large part of her gender identity. While recounting that she acquired a gun after her boyfriend was murdered, she divulges the details of the story to Yorick: "She was a **tranny**, female to male. We met at one of the funerals. But I guess the Amazons thought she was a **real** guy 'cause they killed her the second they saw her" (Vol 1, 42). Waverly's language with regards to transgender identity is familiar in popular consciousness, though it would be a disservice to dismiss the problematic aspects. She openly recognizes the victim's male gender identity by referring to him as her "boyfriend," only to immediately discredit the statement by emphasizing a conflicted understanding of the "real" sex of a transgendered man. Later, when Waverly encounters Bobbi for the first time and questions the motivation for cross dressing, the transgender discussion is further complicated by Bobbi's identity as a "working girl" in man's clothing.

Yorick first encounters Bobbi while traveling and still disguised due to the impending threat of the Amazons. Nevertheless, Bobbi recognizes Yorick's masculine traits (taking him for a woman dressed in male drag) and asks, "So, you got a girlfriend? Or are you a working girl like me?" Yorick's answer that he is engaged is vague enough to dispel her concern. "Good," she replies in relief, "I was afraid you were gonna take all my customers on this line" (Vol 3, 14). Bobbi identifies several times as a "working girl," suggesting a complicated male/masculine gender performance and a female gender identity. In addition, there is no conclusive history provided to indicate her sexual orientation other than the fact that she comfortably engages sexually with other women. When confronted by a pair of former Amazons (who have yet to completely abandon their

conviction against men as representatives of Patriarchy), Bobbi begs to be released and again refers to her gender performance in contrast to her sex and gender identity: “No! I’m a...a **working girl**. I’ll rip off the stupid goatee if you don’t believe me. I swear, I just dress up like men for other **women**” (Vol 9, 99).

Similar to the sexualized gender performance of Waverly’s modeling career prior to the plague, Bobbi’s performative “work” leads her to offer her sexual body for objectification. In the same scene with the former Amazons, she pleads, “If you let me live, I’ll...I’ll make love to you both. Everybody tells me my equipment feels real. **Almost**. And I’ve been working on my upper body, so I can hold you just as tight as any--” (Vol 9, 100). While her desperate justification is interrupted, it is clear that her gender performance is an act. The direct comparison between her performance and the “real” or authentic male body and sexualized gender performance reveals a stark disconnect between her performance and her identity as a lesbian woman making sacrifices for the sake of commodity and survival.

Waverly, who at this point has become a gravedigger instead of a “garbage girl” collecting corpses, overhears the confrontation between Bobbi and the former Amazons, who are her employees, and steps in to stop the harassment and potential violence. She explains that she hired the former Amazons despite their history of violence and again mentions her boyfriend’s murder, describing him this time as a “post-op female-to-male transsexual” and following up with a question to Bobbi, “Are you...?” (Vol 9, 102). When Bobbi replies that she only cross dresses, Waverly expresses casual disappointment, highlighting again her desire for a partner with a male gender identity – not simply a

performance. Regardless, Waverly continues her introduction and offers Bobbi a steady job.

Bobbi: *I came all the way from Missouri to find myself a **pimp** as good as you.*

Waverly: *Ha, I don't know if I should be insulted or...no, I should be insulted.*

Bobbi: *Seriously? But, you said those two **work** for you. I figured, with the "comfort industry" being so big these days, whenever there are pretty gals roaming **public parks** at night...*

Waverly: *We're not hookers, we're **gravediggers**.* (Vol 9, 102)

Bobbi's misunderstanding results in a dialogue that indicates Waverly's distaste for the commodification of sex. At this point, it is also important to note that she still does not perceive her previous modeling career in the same category. After explaining her arrangement with the government as a gravedigger, the following conversation clarifies Waverly's perspective:

Bobbi: *I take it you weren't in this line of work **before** the gendercide?*

Waverly: *Not even a little.*

Bobbi: *Yeah, 'cause you look like you used to be a **model**.*

Waverly: *I was a **super-model**.* (Vol 9, 103)

The look of longing in the illustration of Waverly's character mirrors the encounter in Volume one with Yorick; discontent for the present ultimately overwrites the fond and seemingly unproblematic memory of her past.

Only several pages later Bobbi explains to Waverly that she does not intend to stay and work with her as a gravedigger, that she prefers return to the familiarity and security of her home and her life as a "working girl." Waverly's emotionally charged response

indicates a dramatic transformation in her value of sexualized gender performance (both Bobbi's prostitution and her own modeling career):

*You're better than that, Bobbi. The days of us selling our tits and ass our **over**.*

*You're smart, ok? Way smarter than me. You have brains and...and **heart** and an annoyingly kind fucking spirit. Me and you finally have a shot to be more than what*

everyone used to see us as. We can be more than just bodies. (Vol 9, 119-120)

While the series does not consistently follow Waverly, she is revisited several times to demonstrate her development. Waverly's previous sense of feeling cheated as a result of the plague (lacking the male gaze to validate her own femininity) and the impression that she would go back to modeling in a heartbeat has evolved into a heightened awareness of objectification and agency.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

Postfeminist discourse emerged most directly in the development of the central female characters identified as the villainous radical “feminist” Amazons and their destructive leader, Victoria; Hero, the prodigal daughter who reinforces the necessity to leave old fringe feminist politics behind; Allison Mann, the role model geneticist dedicated to restoring the male species; and Agent 355, the action hero and inspiration for Yorick’s growth and development.

The inauthenticity of Matsumori’s claimed transformation from an oppressive patriarch to a self-sacrificing profeminist was exposed to demonstrate the stark contrast between a dominant hegemonic masculinity and the nontraditional masculinity of Yorick. They both approach profeminism seeking something for themselves. The postfeminist context highlights their contrast since Matsumori seeks to embrace the radical separatist feminism through his self-sacrifice while Yorick’s profeminist journey is toward a more organic feminism free of political activism or division among people. Yorick’s *conflict* of masculinity is explained within the series through psychoanalytic intervention while the *authenticity* of his nontraditionalism is maintained. This contextual support for his nontraditional masculinity suggests that his trauma is not the *cause*, but rather an obstacle in the path of his more complete development of confidence and strength.

Representations of diverse sexual orientations and gender identity are simultaneously concerning and refreshing in the narrowness typical of popular awareness and the expansion of boundaries even within fairly traditional rubrics. In particular, the language surrounding transgender identity is characteristically postfeminist in its disinterest

in political correctness. On the other hand, the avoidance of typical hetero-male sexual fantasies or essentialist lesbian stereotypes is a clear subversion of popular consciousness.

Vaughan and Guerra create a gender-focused variation on a science fiction apocalyptic scenario that stimulates discourse and challenges current constructions of gender in society. Explicit references to history, pop culture, and stereotypical narrative tropes position the fictional series in a realistic space. A quotation from an interview with Vaughan reinforces this strategy: “Good sci-fi is always about our world rather than some far-flung future” (LA City Beat 2004). *Y: The Last Man* was designed to talk about the time during which it was created, but the incorporation of historical references also presents points for comparison. Similar to Lyotard’s explanation of *postmodernism*, *postfeminism* directly engages with past conceptions about gender and sexuality in often pointed and critical ways to encourage continued reimagination (Lyotard 1999).

Whether or not the series was aware of its feminist and postfeminist discourse is less important than the clear acknowledgement of such in the range of public reactions. In addition, the criticism of inconsistency and contradiction can also be regarded as an accomplishment that mirrors both the constant dynamic of societal conceptions and the critical entanglement of polar ideologies in postfeminist discourse. It is the very inclusion of contradiction that should engage the feminist reader’s *third wave eyes* to look with appreciation and skepticism for the ways *Y: The Last Man* presents feminist discourse.

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