Princes, Princesses, and Socialites: Feminism and Class Transgression In Hollywood Romantic Comedies

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ABSTRACT

PRINCES, PRINCESSES, AND SOCIALITES: FEMINISM AND CLASS TRANSGRESSION IN HOLLYWOOD ROMANTIC COMEDIES

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This dissertation explored how characters in romantic comedies negotiate and transgress class boundaries as the films conform to and challenge genre and social expectations, focusing primarily through a feminist lens. Specifically, it addresses the different ways the films negotiate ideas about American identity and economic systems, simultaneously trying to acknowledge problematic elements while upholding social and nationalistic ideals. Feminism has a complicated relationship with Hollywood romantic comedies. While the genre often focuses on issues of interest to women and forefronts female characters and their professional and personal experiences, the denouement generally reinforces heteronormative monogamous relationships above others and the traditional values of the patriarchy. The sorts of class transgressions found in these films are particularly American as they reflect the belief that one's birth need not limit their possibilities or potential and that upward mobility is not only possible but fundamental to the beliefs of the nation.

This exploration focuses on Hollywood films from the early 1930s—which scholars generally identify as the beginning of the modern romantic comedy genre—through the early 2000s. It is organized in periods between the waves of feminism, as they represent perspectives not directly influenced by the gender politics inevitably connected with the waves, although they
can never be fully divorced from the influence of preceding movements. These eras exist within and, sometimes, transcend historical moments of resettling class lines: the interwar, postwar, and postmillennial eras. Specifically, this dissertation explores the Great Depression and *Thirty Day Princess* (1934); postwar containment culture and *Roman Holiday* (1953), *The Swan* (1956), and *The Prince and the Showgirl* (1957); turn-of-the-millennium postfeminism and *Kate and Leopold* (2001); and intersectional feminism and *Something New* (2006). The conclusion addresses recent changes in the romantic comedy genre relative to the #metoo and #timesup movements and the 2016 presidential election and how other factors, such as the popularity of streaming services, further complicate those changes.
PRINCES, PRINCESSES, AND SOCIALITES: FEMINISM AND CLASS
TRANSGRESSION IN HOLLYWOOD ROMANTIC COMEDIES

BY

JUSTINA MARIE CLAYBURN
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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DEDICATION

For Daddy—I miss every conversation we did not get to have.

Love and miss you forever.
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INTRODUCTION
HOLLYWOOD ROMANTIC COMEDY:
GENRE, GENDER, AND CLASS

While the average film viewer may have a general idea of romantic comedy as a genre, the moment film scholars attempt to craft a definition, exceptions to the definition demonstrate its problems and reopen the debate. Genre theorists have found it challenging to establish a master definition for romantic comedy as a genre, in part, as Geoff King writes, “because of the prevalence of both its constituent terms in popular film” (51). Generally, the film industry establishes a genre as a part of its marketing and production techniques, with genre theorists later attempting to use critical terminology to better understand how the genres were culturally determined. As Claire Mortimer contends, “The romcom can be regarded as a hybrid of the romance and comedy genres, featuring a narrative that centres on the progress of a relationship, and being a comedy, resulting in a happy ending. The dynamic of the film rests on the central quest – the pursuit of love – and almost always leads to a successful resolution” (4). Leger Grindon establishes that “[a] distinguishing quality of the romantic comedy is the dual protagonist, the man and woman whose union becomes the principal quest” (12). Celestino Deleyto, rather than focusing on what a romantic comedy is, shifts his focus to what a romantic comedy does: “the genre uses humour and a comic perspective in order to convey ideas which are specific to each individual text and acquire sense within historical and cultural contexts, both those of the production and release of the movies and of their reception and consumption by different audiences” (18). In addition to exploring these definitions, Mortimer, Grindon, Deleyto,
and others address how the elements that constitute the genre and its tropes have changed over the years. Deleyto’s exploration goes beyond simple understanding to exploring films that would not generally be considered a part of the genre as they challenge long-held perspectives on the genre.

Film scholars can trace the history of tropes that have helped establish the critical definition of the Hollywood romantic comedy through the eras alongside broader cultural shifts, often forming cycles of films with similar motifs and stylistics (see Appendix). While scholars do not all agree on what to call the cycles or when they begin and end, Tamar Jeffers McDonald identifies four significant cycles of romantic comedy: the screwball comedy, the sex comedy, the radical comedy, and the neo-traditional comedy. The screwball cycle of the 1930s started with Frank Capra’s “heiress-on-the-run” film, *It Happened One Night* (1934). Screwball comedies generally bring a physical element to the relationships and feature a “screwball” character, usually a madcap and unpredictable heroine paired against a “conventional stiff” hero for her to liberate (Mortimer 21; Grindon 33). These films place heroes and heroines on an even field, having them work side-by-side as partners. Other popular screwball films include *My Man Godfrey* (1936) and *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), although the term was applied to nearly any romantic comedy of this period. In the 1950s, actresses Marilyn Monroe and Doris Day and director Billy Wilder epitomized the sex comedy cycle. More cynical about courtship, these films demonstrate the complicated relationship the 1950s had with female sexuality, simultaneously obsessed with a woman’s sexual purity and eager for easy sexuality. Films of this period include *Sabrina* (1954), *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), and *Pillow Talk* (1959). The radical romantic comedy, also called the nervous comedy, reflects the social and political upheaval of the 1960s combined with a new rating system that offered filmmakers more latitude than before.
Films of this period are self-reflexive and, as such, aware of the era’s changing perspectives on sex—as is seen in films such as *The Graduate* (1967), *Herold and Maude* (1971), and *Annie Hall* (1977). Finally, the late-1980s up through the early-2010s brought about the neo-traditional romantic comedy, also called the resurgence or reaffirmation cycle, which rejected much of what had occurred in the radical romantic comedies. While often traditional in narrative structure, these films show women viewers professional women who do not require economic support from men and have more sexual freedom than women in the previous cycles. Films of this period include *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), *You’ve Got Mail* (1998), and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002).

While many in popular media declared that the romantic comedy was dead after the neo-traditional romantic comedy cycle fell from popularity, there seems to be a desire to reinvigorate the genre in recent years. Jeffers McDonald anticipated some of the features of the subgenre in her discussion of the *hommecom* while Beatriz Oria describes how post-recession romantic comedies have pushed at the edges of what is considered acceptable regarding on whom the romance centers, what appears on screen, and how the story is told. Current romantic comedies are more likely to feature non-White and queer main characters, show more explicit sex, and occasionally appear serially, both in shorter formats such as on television or online, or as a series of films. Films of this cycle include *The Big Sick* (2017), *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), and *Bros* (2022). There is also a secondary cycle of romantic comedies primarily designed for niche television channels and streaming services. These romantic comedies have become hyper-generic in structure and production, relying on shorthand created by tropes and formulae to meet

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1 This term is specifically used by scholar Beatriz Oria. Oria calls them a “cycle” (55); I would be more inclined to identify them as a “cluster” (using Grindon’s differentiation between cycle and cluster), but it is likely too early to truly know.
the strict time requirements set by television. Audiences associate them with the winter holiday season, although they are set and shown year-round. While Hallmark is the largest producer of these wholesome neo-studio-system films, they are far from the only one. Films from this cycle include *A Princess for Christmas* (2011), *Unleashing Mr. Darcy* (2016), and *Dater’s Handbook* (2016), among many, many others.

Historically, critics have undervalued romantic comedies for their formulaic plots and character elements as well as production factors historically associated with the genre. Romantic comedies, as well as other genres such as the gangster film and the Western, came to be known as genre films to indicate this sense of lower quality. Scholars such as Jane Tompkins and Leo Braudy, however, challenge the idea that genre films (or, in Tompkins’s case, genre fiction\(^2\)) are unworthy of study because of audience connection to these genres. Tompkins argues that they offer an insight into the communities that created and consumed the texts. Braudy argues that genre films allow a more significant impact on the viewer in part because of the formulas that earned them the designation in the first place. He asserts, “Genre films, in fact, arouse and complicate feelings about the self and society that more serious films, because of their bias toward the unique, may rarely touch. Within film the pleasures of originality and the pleasures of familiarity are at least equally important” (477-78). He follows, “The genre film lures its audience into a seemingly familiar world, filled with reassuring stereotypes of character, action and plot. But the world may actually be not so lulling, and in some cases, acquiescence in convention will turn out to be bad judgment or even a moral flaw” (481).

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\(^2\) While Tomkins’s scholarship is on genre fiction rather than genre film, her work is essential to the study of early Hollywood because, as Kristen Thompson asserts, the plethora of popular fiction from the mid-nineteenth century not only offered fodder for early films but also offered “popularized versions of traditional rules” of narrative that films could follow (164).
The primary intended audience for the familiar world of romantic comedies is women, which makes the genre a central concern for feminist film scholarship. Scholars and laypeople alike often discuss feminism in terms of waves that rise and fall alongside other historical events. The beginning of the suffragist movement in the United States (what later came to be known as first wave feminism) connects intimately with issues surrounding the nineteenth-century temperance and abolitionist movements in organizations such as the American Equal Rights Associations (AERA) and the Sanitary Commission. With the ratification of the nineteenth amendment in 1920, shortly after the end of World War I, the first wave of feminism had accomplished at least some of its goals. The decades between the first and second waves of feminism offered new challenges and opportunities, with the Great Depression in the 1930s, World War II in the 1940s, and a period of reestablishing the status quo in the 1950s pulling women in and out of the workplace. As with women’s suffrage, the second wave of feminism paralleled other civil rights movements from the Black and queer communities. Some of the major goals of this movement were equal pay, reproductive rights, and the Equal Rights Amendment, which was passed by the 92nd Congress\(^3\) in 1972 and received the endorsement of President Nixon, but failed to receive the necessary approval from the states required to be ratified.\(^4\) Early feminist film theorists such as Molly Haskell, Laura Mulvey, and Marjorie Rosen began challenging ideas about how women were presented on screen during the second wave.

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\(^3\) Passed by the United States House of Representatives on October 12, 1971, and the Senate on March 22, 1972
\(^4\) Interestingly, the final three states required for ratification voted to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment in 2017 (Nevada), 2018 (Illinois), and 2020 (Virginia), although these votes were largely symbolic given that the seven-year limit for ratification was long past. Also, five states—Nebraska (1973), Tennessee (1974), Idaho (1975), Kentucky (1978), and South Dakota (1979)—retroactively voted to withdraw their ratification, although it is unclear if such a move is constitutional.
Third wave feminism becomes more challenging to identify and is further complicated by postfeminism. That these two movements were active at much the same time may explain why third wave feminism struggled to gain traction with a more significant segment of the population. While many point to the Anita Hill testimony as the catalyst for the third wave, the Riot Grrrl movement, along with other subsets of feminism such as ecofeminism and queer liberation, may have seemed too extreme for women raised during the second wave. Conservative and neoliberal politics also sold the myth that the world truly did not need feminism any longer. In much the same way myths of a post-racial society emerged during the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century, American society largely perceived feminism as something that the United States had needed before but had since become obsolete. Post-millennial feminism, called by some a fourth wave, has attempted to become more inclusive of women who struggle to identify with the largely-White early feminist movements. In 1989, Black feminist scholar, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, coined the term “intersectional feminism” to describe all of the factors that are associated with a person’s identity, not just sex, and the ways these factors interact, particularly related to oppression. The #metoo movement of the late 2010s is also an essential factor in post-millennial feminism. While Tarana Burke had introduced the term to the internet back in 2006, actress Alyssa Milano used it in Twitter posts accusing producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment. Milano’s posts sparked a furor of accusations toward high-powered public figures, leading to their removal from their positions and, in some cases, criminal charges.

For many years, books by feminist film scholars such as Molly Haskell, E. Anne Kaplan, Patricia Mellencamp, B. Ruby Rich, and Marjorie Rosen have sought to provide a broad overview of women on the screen, and their treatment and presentation, first on film and then later in scholarship. Rosen’s *Popcorn Venus* (1973) and Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape*
(1974, revised 1987) were both published in the early 1970s, right as “the rhetoric of the women’s movement, then peaking, was at its most romantically utopian” (Haskell vii) and take a decade-by-decade look at film and the histories of both individual actresses and the world at large, particularly as they intersect. Haskell’s book was updated in the late 1980s, adding another decade of films to the analysis. Mellencamp’s *A Fine Romance: Five Ages of Film Feminism* (1995) follows a similar formula but includes theory that emerged alongside Rosen and Haskell in the 1970s. Rich’s *Chick Flicks* (1998) dives even deeper into the theory as it was emerging, paralleling it with her own life and experiences through the 1980s, and draws deep connections with the queer movement as well. Kaplan’s *Feminism and Film* (2000) reader brings together many of the critical texts that have emerged since the 1970s, particularly in conjunction with the major conversations occurring in feminism and film around the turn of the century.

In total, such significant scholarship demonstrates that feminism has a complicated relationship with the Hollywood romantic comedy genre. While the genre often focuses on issues of interest to women and forefronts female characters and their professional and personal experiences, the conclusion generally reinforces heteronormative monogamous relationships above others and the traditional values of the patriarchy. As Deleyto describes, the heteronormative happily ever after ending was the focus of study for many years:

> [N]ot only is the romantic comedy about love and marriage but it always says the same thing about it, it invariably conveys the same conservative message: if the most important convention of the genre is the happy ending and this happy ending usually consists of the consolidation (or at least the more or less certain promise of the consolidation) of a monogamous (and hence patriarchal) heterosexual couple, then it follows that the genre as a whole is conservative because it naturalises, celebrates and reinforces marriage, monogamy and heterosexuality, even against the hard evidence found in contemporary western societies were heterosexual monogamy is in permanent crisis and has become only one option among others. (25)
While the happily ever after ending of the romantic comedy is a significant point of concern for many feminist theorists, recent scholars have focused more attention on what the genre offers beyond these narrative resolutions. Scholars of romantic comedies have recently come to challenge the notion that the patriarchal endings preclude romantic comedies from complex feminist readings. Thomas E. Wartenberg argues, “Works of art, like other cultural products, bear traces of the contradictions of their societies. A film that seeks to subvert the hold of one mode of social domination may inadvertently support that of another. . . . Films do not live up to the ideal of consistency any more than do their human makers” (4). Furthermore, Deleyto argues, “The ending of romantic comedy appears to be so highly conventionalized that it seems critically tendentious to draw so much attention to it, overlooking what makes the genre rich, varied, and, in sum, culturally important” (24-25). Exploring not only the ending but the entirety of each film offers the opportunity to explore the contradictions, not only of the film but potentially the culture at large.

With such contradictions in mind, my dissertation explores how romantic comedies present class boundaries and how the characters negotiate those boundaries. It focuses on films with a significant class separation between the romantic partners, such as between a member of a royal or noble family and a commoner or someone particularly wealthy and someone working class. Wartenberg argues for the “socially critical, hence subversive, potential of the unlikely couple film,” suggesting that “these films question the extent to which hierarchic social relationships are legitimate” and “inevitably raise important questions about a wide range of philosophic issues” (4-5). A significant class difference between the individuals in the relationship, offers the potential to amplify the social message, either through the exaggeration of otherwise minor differences or in the potential impact the relationship has on people not directly
involved. Stephen Sharot argues, “In the cross-class romances of popular culture, the person from the lower class whose love for the upper-class person is genuinely disinterested is most often rewarded by both love and wealth, but the calculating person who seeks to gain wealth by a romantic tie, such as the gold digger, most often fails or is punished in some way” (94). Indeed, often in these films, the member of the higher class has some social or moral failing that the member of the lower class helps them overcome, and thus, they each bring something unique and valuable to the relationship, which balances the distribution of power in the relationship.

The sorts of class transgressions found in these films are particularly American in nature, as they reflect the belief that one’s birth need not limit their possibilities or potential and that upward mobility is not only possible but fundamental to the nation’s beliefs. The absence of an inviolable class system has led some to argue that America does not have a class system. However, Christopher Beach asserts, “In the United States, class is interwoven in a dense social fabric with such determining factors as gender, ethnicity, race, religion, education, and geography” (5). From the earliest days of their foundation, the colonies that would eventually become the United States established themselves as different from their European heritage. Those early colonists sought opportunities and freedoms unavailable to them in their home countries, such as property ownership and religious freedom. The idea that one need not be born of a particular class, only work hard enough, and he\textsuperscript{5} will succeed, became woven into the fabric of the young nation with concepts like “rugged individualism” and “Protestant work ethic.” Stories of young men pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, like those written by dime novelist Horatio Alger, offered fodder for early films and established a narrative design for

\textsuperscript{5} The use of the male “universal” pronoun here is intentional because for far too long in the United States, the “universality” of these ideas was limited to males, particularly wealthy White males.
Hollywood to follow. This narrative emphasized middle-class values and hegemonic capitalism, showing that problems came from bad actors within the capitalist system, not the system itself. However, Beach argues that “the democratic or populist ideology defining America as a classless society – and the closely related ideologies of the American Dream or American success story – is often seen in American literature and film as coming into conflict with real-life situations in which class distinction represents an impediment to social mobility” (11).

Comedy offers a unique opportunity to explore class conflict because, as Beach asserts, “[a]s a genre, comedy examines and critiques social structures – including those of class – and at certain points in history it has served as an important facilitator or mediator of society’s attempts at self-critique” (3). This connection between comedy and social structure becomes particularly relevant to the study of romantic comedies because “[b]y the late 1930s – with the more restrictive post-Production Code limitations on social content – class tensions are largely displaced onto gender tensions” (4), fundamentally connecting the two elements. Beach asserts, “In many of these comedies, a tension exists between an acute awareness of class differences on the one hand, and a desire to smooth over such differences on the other. The prevalence of this tension can be explained . . . by the generic structure of comedy – which encourages a certain degree of social critique but ultimately relies on a more affirmative outcome” (11). In the romantic comedy, this appears as class tensions manifesting as gender tensions with the generic “happy ending” supplying the affirmative outcome. And while the “happy ending” is obligatory, Beach argues, like Deleyto and Wartenberg, if we stop our exploration there, we will miss other ideological complexities in the text. He asserts, “Perhaps . . . what the most interesting comedies provide is a means of envisioning potentially liberating forms of transgression” (10).
My dissertation focuses primarily on romances between a member of a fictional royal family and an average person. These kinds of stories, both in print and on film, are frequently referred to as “Ruritanian Romances.” The term “Ruritanian” comes from Anthony Hope’s *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894), a British novel that centers on the fictional kingdom of Ruritania. Similarly, George Barr McCutcheon’s *Graustark: The Story of a Love Behind a Throne* (1901), an American novel, coined the term “Graustarkian,” which was used somewhat interchangeably with “Ruritanian” in the early twentieth century, particularly in the United States, but fell out of favor after World War II. Nicholas Daly describes a “Ruritania” to be “a small, politically unstable monarchy” (5) “[s]equestered from the tide of progress” (4). These fictional pocket kingdoms often look very familiar to their British or American readers, offering a “distorted and miniaturized reflection” of their homeland or “a refracted version of Britain in which industrialization and the middle classes have not yet made any significant impact” (6). Setting cross-class romantic comedies in this most extreme version of class separation offers filmmakers the greatest opportunity to explore the impact of these relationships partly because of the potential for significant and long-term impact not only on the couple and their families but on whole nations and even the world.

Genres shift relative to outside cultural and historical forces, and my dissertation especially discusses how these changes impact women. While class is centrally important to my approach, I am organizing this study primarily through a historical consideration of periods between waves of feminism, as they represent perspectives not directly influenced by the gender politics inevitably connected with the waves, although they can never be entirely divorced from the influence of preceding movements. In recognizing this history, my dissertation focuses on Hollywood films from the early 1930s, when scholars generally consider the modern romantic
comedy to have begun, through the early 2000s, which generally marks the end of the resurgence or neo-traditional period of romantic comedies. I have specifically selected films released no later than 2008 because the election of President Barack Obama in November of that year marks a critical political moment that greatly impacted not only American culture for the eight years of his presidency but also set in motion events that would lead to the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, which has dramatically impacted feminist conversations. As one of the primary goals of this project is to explore films occurring outside the direct political influence of the waves of feminism, 2008 serves as the ending point in my chapters. In the conclusion, although, I briefly discuss the ways that the genre has changed after the end of the neo-traditional romantic comedy cycle, and the social and political factors as well as changes in the ways audiences watch films, which both reflect and lead to the changes in the genre as a whole.

My dissertation covers three different periods of the romantic comedy, starting with the Studio Era of the 1930s. In my first chapter, I discuss how escapist films such as Marion Gering’s *Thirty Day Princess* reckon with a changing world that has challenged Americans’ beliefs about the self and the nation. The Great Depression significantly strained traditional gender roles and expectations and, subsequently, relationships. Hollywood became intimately connected with changing gender expectations by offering new models for young people to follow and a place they could go to practice these new models. Films like *Thirty Day Princess* take on the broad cultural changes, both by reflecting the reality of the period, such as the challenges that working women faced, even as it projects a new way of thinking for the future. In particular, *Thirty Day Princess* challenges old models of social class and even calls into question American beliefs about independence and capitalism. The film takes a nuanced approach in addressing social class, reinforcing the superiority of American independence and ingenuity over traditional
ideas of European class division. It takes a similarly nuanced approach to addressing the foundation of capitalism that supposedly built this country. While the film ultimately reinforces capitalism, it cannot do so without exposing and condemning exploitations of America’s economic system.

The 1950s had a complicated relationship with sex and sexuality partly because of the number of factors impacting it. The nation was still recovering from World War II and was already under the threat of the Cold War. Americans’ wartime experience had changed the nation, but they sought to return to the status quo, building traditional and contained families, ultimately leading to the Baby Boom. The nation had rallied around ideas of capitalism and social equality through consumption. In my second chapter, I discuss how films of the 1950s demonstrate the impact of Cold War containment on women in complex ways, focusing on three films from some of the most prominent actresses of the era: William Wyler’s *Roman Holiday* (1953), starring Audrey Hepburn; Charles Vidor’s *The Swan* (1956), starring Grace Kelly; and Laurence Olivier’s *The Prince and the Showgirl* (1957), starring Marilyn Monroe. While each of these Ruritanian romantic comedies features a cross-class romance, none of those couples end the film with the heretofore mandatory happily ever after associated with the genre. While America had deemed itself classless, and therefore superior to other nations, these films undermine the credibility of this assertion. Each film demonstrates a different facet of American classlessness and, therefore, superiority. However, ultimately the narratives cannot overcome social class, even to meet near-mandatory generic expectations, thereby challenging the validity of the classless claim.

My third chapter examines the neo-traditional romantic comedies of the late 1990s and early 2000s and their connection to postfeminism, which arose from the belief that the waves of
feminism had done their jobs and there was no longer a need for such a movement. By this time, women had moved into influential positions in both the public and private sectors. However, they were publicly pressured to have it all by also having a successful personal life in the form of marriage and children. These pressures were reflected in neo-traditional romantic comedies as they often show successful working women at the top of their fields but struggling personally. In this tradition, James Mangold’s *Kate and Leopold* (2001), a time-traveling romantic comedy fantasy, offers a different view of both working women and aristocracy than the films explored in previous chapters. Kate (Meg Ryan) is a successful working woman on her way to becoming an executive at her New York marketing firm; however, she has become cynical and unhappy in her personal life. Leopold (Hugh Jackman) holds a title in his own time, but previous generations’ spending and investment habits have left it bankrupt. Leopold must marry a wealthy woman to continue supporting his family. In the end, however, while this film has an ostensibly “happy” ending from the genre’s perspective, with the couple overcoming all odds (and a jump off the Brooklyn Bridge) to be together, the implications of this ending are troubling. By marrying a woman with no family wealth or prospects, Leopold has no resources to finance his dukedom. By leaving the twenty-first century for the nineteenth, Kate is giving up her promotion and any future career prospects. Kate’s abandonment of her position of authority at work undermines any feminist message it once might have had.

There are remarkably few Ruritanian-style royal romantic comedies starring actors of color. This dearth of representation necessitated a shift in focus from royal romantic comedies to other forms of class-based transgression. Therefore, my final chapter discusses how Sanaa Hamri’s *Something New* (written, directed, and produced by Black women) challenges and inverts many stereotypes regarding the Black community in the United States. The perception
persists that if a film’s male and female romantic leads are both Black, it becomes a Black film, thus reducing its marketability. At the same time, there are still concerns regarding the marketability of a film in which one romantic lead is White and the other Black unless, of course, the purpose of the film is to explore the tensions of such a relationship, such as in a film like *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (1967). These conflicting perceptions often place Black romantic leads in relationships with other more acceptable actors of color in films such as *Hitch* (2005), which leads to concerns about Black representation in Hollywood. On the other hand, *Something New* explores the relationship between Kenya (Sanaa Lathan), a successful upper-middle-class Black woman, and Brian (Simon Baker), a White man whose class is much more difficult to interpret. Kenya is an accountant on track to become a partner at her firm; Brian owns his own landscaping business, which he started after leaving a career in advertising. Their racial differences seem to have no impact on Brian, and he challenges Kenya to reject the superficial expectations imposed on a professional Black woman in a primarily White society, such as straightened hair and hair extensions. At the same time, most of the problems in their relationship arise from Brian’s avoidance of discussions about race and that he is largely unsupportive of her worries and frustrations at work. This heavy emphasis on their racial differences is often absent from films such as *Hitch*, which do not address race, even though both lead actors are people of color.

The conclusion addresses trends in romantic comedy in the 2020s. Shifts in how American audiences consume film, alongside clear evidence that America is not as beyond racial or feminist concern as we would like, have caused a bifurcation in the genre. One side pushes boundaries and tells new stories, reflecting some Americans’ desire for social justice, equal rights, and equal representation. The other side demonstrates a return to a very classic
Hollywood way of moviemaking where the plot is even more standardized than other romantic comedies, and they often use the same actors and actresses. These films are popular with conservative evangelical Christians, as they often do not include vulgar language or sex and continue to perpetuate post-feminist perspectives that more mainstream romantic comedies have come to eschew, with women frequently abandoning successful careers in the city for love and marriage in a small town, reinforcing the values of this audience. The split attitudes demonstrated by these incredibly different subgenres reflect the dividedness in the United States that has appeared most clearly in recent elections and political conversations.
CHAPTER 1

“SHE’S A MADCAP PRINCESS, SEE”:
GENDER POLITICS AND NEW DEAL CAPITALISM IN THIRTY DAY PRINCESS (1934)

Film scholars readily accept that issues of class were critical to 1930s Hollywood. Christopher Beach asserts, “Social commentators of the late 1920s and early 1930s saw film as a way of exposing class disparities” (17). These commentators saw “the power of the movies as a socializing and homogenizing influence” (8) for immigrants new to the United States and working-class Americans alike. As a nation of immigrants, the belief in concepts such as the Protestant work ethic, pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps, and, particularly, the ability to rise above one’s station at birth was foundational to the American understanding of self. One way this upward mobility appeared on screen was through cross-class romances, a prevalent trope in the early decades of the twentieth century, reaching a peak during “the worst years of the Depression, and drop[ping] rapidly after 1938” (Sharot 90). This timeline matches the desire, in the early years of the Great Depression, for movie theaters to offer moviegoers an inexpensive and easy escape from their troubles. In the later years of the Depression, as the New Deal offered possibilities and hope, what audiences desired from film changed. Beach argues that “given the generally hostile sentiment toward the wealthy few expressed by both the working class and the increasingly proletarianized middle-class populations that constituted the bulk of theater audiences, any naively positive view of the upper classes would have proved unacceptable to
many if not most, contemporary viewers” (49). However, the consumer culture that had grown during the Roaring Twenties had not entirely disappeared, even during the worst of the Depression, and “[i]t is within this context of growing disparities in wealth and social status and a simultaneous development in the national consumer economy that cross-class interactions – and especially cross-class interactions of a sexual nature – become of central importance to film comedy” (50). It is from this context that the screwball comedy emerged. Stephen Sharot argues that the screwball comedy and its use of the cross-class romance trope “almost invariably involve the retrenchment and reinforcement of gender distinctions, particularly as they related to the place of men and women in the workforce” (98).

This chapter explores the ways popular films of the Great Depression reflected the lives and experiences of Americans of the period and offered them ways to reinterpret the economic and subsequent social challenges of the decade without destroying their belief in the American Dream. In the first section, I explore the film industry’s unique interactions with gender politics during the Great Depression, such as offering young people a place to see relationships play out through models other than those they learned at home or church. It also offered an inexpensive location for young men to take their dates. While the Production Code helped ensure films reinforced traditional American values and ideals, especially related to gender roles, films occasionally used subtext to subvert some of these expectations, demonstrating the complexity of some of the values that the American people believed to be simple and self-evident.

Films in general, and screwball comedies in particular, were eager to show people working during the 1930s. For decades, middle-class women had been moving toward work-for-pay outside the home, while lower-class women had been working outside the home for generations. When men went to fight overseas during the Great War, many women stepped up as
a part of the war effort, assuming all kinds of roles from manual labor factory jobs to skilled office work, only to relinquish those jobs to the men after the war. The economic necessity of the Great Depression sent lower- and middle-class women back in search of work outside the home. Their economic need, however, frequently conflicted with expectations placed on them as wives and mothers, although families often relied on unmarried daughters for extra income, supplementing their father’s earnings. Screwball comedies reinforced how much the New Deal could help the average American achieve their goals of returning to work by showing women at work.

The second part of this chapter explores Marion Gering’s *Thirty Day Princess* (1934) and the ways the film uses its characters to explore ideas about class, nationalism, and capitalism, reinforcing American superiority while simultaneously challenging certain assumptions about capitalism that are so firmly a part of the American myth. *Thirty Day Princess* juxtaposes the Ruritanian Kingdom of Tyronia with the United States of America, regularly positioning even lower-class Americans as superior to those with the highest social status in Europe. Sylvia Sidney’s dual role of Catterina, Princess of Tyronia, and down-and-out American actress, Nancy Lane, directly reveals this juxtaposition. When Porter Madison III (Cary Grant) tells his managing editor to write an editorial “[c]omparing the princess unfavorably with our shop girls as to style, dress, bearing, beauty, intelligence, and, oh, everything” the joke is, of course, that the princess he meets is an American girl. However, regardless of how outwardly similar the American Nancy Lane and the Tyronian Princess Catterina may be, they differ regarding the power over their own lives. While Catterina may be the woman of a higher class, Nancy is the woman who can make decisions for her own life without the pressures of national expectations.
Reflecting American ideas about hegemonic masculinity, *Thirty Day Princess* also juxtaposes the male characters to represent competing ideas of capitalism. While society has long judged American masculinity by their ability to achieve in a capitalist system, the Great Depression laid bare some of the problems with unchecked capitalist ambition. The film works to reconcile these two notions through its two leading male characters: Porter Madison III, the newspaper publisher who uses his influence to help his fellow man; and Richard Gresham (Edward Arnold), the international banker who wields his position and influence only when it benefits him. Throughout the film, Madison is well-meaning and generous, while Gresham takes advantage of those around him to achieve his end goals. Ultimately the film rewards Madison’s superior form of capitalism over Gresham’s toxic version, thus reinforcing the importance of the capitalist system without glorifying those who use it to harm others.

**Love, Sex, and Commerce in 1930s Moviegoing**

During the Great Depression, the capitalism inherent to the film industry interacted with gender politics in some unique ways. Not only did going to the movies offer people a relatively inexpensive source of entertainment and escape from the reality of the situation, if only briefly, it also reinforced traditional values and ideals, particularly those related to sex and gender. According to Susan Ware, “For many Americans in the 1930s the diversions of popular culture and amusement were just as absorbing as the latest unemployment figures or the profusion of alphabet agencies in Washington. Popular culture and entertainment distracted Americans from the hard times all around them” (*Holding their Own* xvi). Despite the hard times and tightening

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6 Ware asserts, “For many families, the 10¢ for a weekly movie was as important an item in their budget as bread or milk” (*Holding their Own* 178).
budgets, film attendance remained high throughout the Depression, although some studios did feel the pressure of the struggling economy. Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s election in 1932 and the subsequent introduction of New Deal policies and agencies such as the National Recovery Administration (NRA) breathed new life into the struggling studios.

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the industry had seen the emergence of an ideal filmgoer in the minds of the studios, generally young, female, and, of course, White. This ideal woman, or film fan, also reflected a growing interest in celebrities. Magazines such as *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (later called *Motion Picture Magazine*) and *Photoplay* offered moviegoers an inside look at the stars’ lives, loves, clothes, cars, and pets. They also included “advice columns on etiquette, romance, and beauty: as well as advice on appearance, romance, and etiquette” (Fuller 145). This access allowed young film fans to turn to Hollywood for advice on how to wear their makeup and hair and to find what was in fashion—some even went so far as to try to imitate the walks of actresses such as Greta Garbo, “both admiring the actresses and placing themselves in a woman’s position in the film—a simultaneous detachment and involvement with on-screen role playing” (189). It was not the only trend-setting these young women admired; Ware asserts, “Many young girls noticed the movie stars were practically the only women who could be assertive in earned large amounts of money, yet still keep the respect even adulation of society” (*Holding their Own* 179-80).

White young women were not the only moviegoers. Movie theaters were popular in Black communities; however, Black moviegoers found access to theaters problematic due to segregation, particularly in the South. Southern theaters tended to provide separate spaces for

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7 Ware reports that “between 60 and 90 million Americans attended movies each week during the 1930s” (*Holding their Own* 178).
Black audiences, generally balconies, which included a separate entrance. Black moviegoers, particularly those of the middle class, found this insulting, which led to an increase in the popularity of Black movie theaters, some of which were Black-owned, although the majority were White-owned but had Black management. At their height, there were approximately two hundred Black theaters across the country, although the South was significantly underrepresented given the Black population in these states. In 1929, William Henry Jones of Howard University published *Recreation and Amusement among Negroes in Washington, DC*, which included a chapter on the movie theaters in Washington, DC. He saw the potential for significant cultural change through theaters, arguing, “The theater stands in a class by itself as an institution which brings the remote phases of culture into the immediate social life of a community” (107). He continues, “[The theater] is perhaps, one of the most destructive forces to bigotry and conservatism which operates in human life” (108). He identified fifteen theaters in Washington, DC, open to Black moviegoers and categorized them based on various features, including the type of entertainment shown, kind of ownership and management, and the class of people who attended. He frequently noted Negro management, ownership, and stockholders, seating arrangements and methods of audience segregation as well as the types of entertainment available at the theaters, including one location that “[d]uring a portion of the year 1926-27 featured monthly a Negro production” (114).8

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8 Similarly, segregation in Texas created the need for Mexican American movie theaters, beginning in the silent film era. Silent films proved quite universal as there was little language barrier to overcome, and what English text did appear on screen was translated into Spanish by employees at the theaters. These theaters also brought some films from Spanish-speaking countries to the United States. At the same time, Japanese and Chinese Americans in the West, as they sought to limit the American influence on their culture, created a few theaters of their own. Unfortunately, bringing films from Asia was difficult and costly, and these theaters ultimately showed the films alongside the same American films as the rest of the country (Fuller 38-40).
Given the identity of the ideal film fan, community leaders grew concerned about the impact that moviegoing might have on the morality of young people, particularly young couples. During this period, films and movie theaters had a two-fold relationship with young people and dating. First, the films instructed young people about what to expect from dating and how to act. Just as film reinforced other traditional values, it taught young people how to behave with members of the opposite sex, “replacing the traditional institutions of family, church, and community” (Ware 179). Young women turned to the screen to learn what to expect when interacting with members of the opposite sex. In 1933, Herbert Blumer and Philip Hauser of the University of Chicago published research arguing that the content of films of the period had the potential to have a significant adverse effect on young people, particularly leading young women to engage in inappropriate sexual behavior. One young woman told the researchers, “I could hardly sit in my seat when I saw this young girl and boy sitting under a tree expressing their love in congratulations to each other; Especially when their eyes would meet, they would sure charm me. . . . The movies that excite me and make me fall into my lover’s arms are passionate or love plays. They give you just what you are craving for: Love” (82). Another young woman, identified by the researcher as fourteen years old, said, “When I do see a romantic love picture like that I can’t wait until I get old enough to do things like that. Of course, I’m young now, only a kid. Of course, I go out with fellows 24 or 25 who have brains and the dough” (82). It was not just young women who experienced this phenomenon, however. Other research conducted by Blumer identified one young man who would “[o]ften leave a show with the desire to find a girl and engage in sexual intercourse. I have never satisfied this desire, however, as I never seem to

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9 Many young women pointed specifically to Rudolph Valentino, and particularly the film *The Sheik* (1921), as an early source of sexual awareness.
have the courage that I have when I am watching the picture” (qtd in Fuller 189). In some places, those concerned about the moral implications of the theater started church or community shows, allowing them to censor what was shown in their town more carefully.

The second, albeit connected, role that theater played for young people and dating was by offering a location for the dating. As many of the accounts from Blumer and Hauser’s book revealed, the theater was where many early dating and sexual experiences occurred. Instruction manuals such as Elizabeth Eldridge’s *Co-Ediquette: Poise and Popularity for Every Girl* (1936) warned young women about what boys might expect on dates. According to Mary McComb, “Generally, men were expected to pay for their date’s entertainment, transportation, and meals. Women were expected to repay men with varying levels of sexual favors, usually a chaste kiss goodnight” (45), although further intimacies were less uncommon than they had been in previous generations. One young man told Blumer and Hauser,

> I would go to a sex picture but I would always have a girl with me. Whenever I would see the lover on the screen began making love to the heroine I would put one arm around my girl (we always say in the back of the theater so that nobody would be around us), and with the other hand I would make advances to her. She’d begin to get aroused, and if it happened to be during the early part of the afternoon and not many people within the show, I would have sexual relations with her on the floor between the last two rows of seats. (74)

Ware reports, “One-half of the male [college] students and one-quarter of the female had had premarital sex. For college women, their sexual partners were usually their fiancés: love, and a clear commitment to matrimony, justified the intimacy” (63).

The increasingly active sex lives of young people served as an interesting contrast to those of adults. In previous generations, men connected their sense of self-worth to their ability to work, earn money, and provide for their families. The Great Depression eroded that ability and began to show the cracks in the capitalist system that American men had come to expect and had
built their identity around. David Lugowski asserts, “Men who had internalized the American Dream and its success myth—men who had equated their manhood with material gain and their ability to be providers for their families—were now wondering about the feasibility of the U.S. capitalist enterprise” (4). This crisis of masculinity impacted how others saw them as well. Since the late nineteenth century, the New Woman had been eroding the sense of the unique prerogative of men to earn and support as she continued her education, got a job, and lived independently. As the Depression went on, more and more men lost their jobs. Their wives then went to work to earn what they could to try to keep the family afloat. This shift in gender roles led to a social backlash as some inferred that women must be to blame for male unemployment. Ware reports, “Sketchy evidence suggests that due to the tensions of hard times, sex within marriage decreased. One woman observed, ‘They’re not men anymore, if you know what I mean.’ Fear of pregnancy was a major factor, but feelings of inadequacy on the part of the male and lack of respect for the unemployed man from his wife also played roles” (Holding their Own 8).

This crisis of masculinity was different for unmarried couples than dating ones because, as McComb argues, “dates became a cultural site where participants could workout issues associated with abundance, scarcity, and pecuniary problems without confronting the grim reality of a national economic depression. This commodified and sexualized dating scene became legitimized through its depiction in the mass media” (45). She argues that young people, whose shift to adulthood—a career and a marriage and family with all the trimmings—was delayed by the economic realities of the decade, formed an ersatz relationship marketplace, where traditionally capitalist exchanges could play out in the arena of dating as opposed to finance. McComb asserts,
Women not only rewarded men with sexual favors, but young females in the 1930s and early 1940s fashioned themselves into commodified beings who existed in a heterosexual marketplace of exchange. . . . Even if the national economic marketplace was in disarray, young men could partake in the dating marketplace and have their pick from a bounty of female “goods.” Young women who circulated in the dating marketplace and participated in the world of exchange in a passive and non-threatening manner helped to assuage the crisis in masculinity, reaffirming traditional gender roles, and replenish a sense of abundance. (45)

Unlike their married counterparts, single young people found ways to reaffirm the gender roles they had been acculturated into, avoiding the sense of rejection and dejection that plagued married couples.

While the media romanticized dating and young relationships, the introduction and enforcement of the Production Code limited what could be shown on a movie screen. While the Code was put in place in 1930, it was not regularly enforced until 1934. Mae West’s She Done Him Wrong (1933) significantly influenced the decision to strictly enforce the Production Code. West’s overt sensuality, particularly combined with the infamous, and often misquoted, line, “Why don’t you come up some time and see me?” provoked a significant backlash from the Catholic Church and the Episcopalian Committee on Motion Pictures. While ultimately much of the focus of the Production Code (sometimes called the Hays Code after Will H. Hays, former Postmaster General turned Chairman of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) surrounded sex and sexuality, the Code was not limited to those things; it also included guidelines about miscegenation and ridicule of clergy and called for crimes and criminals to be appropriately punished, among other things.10

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10 For more information on the Code under Hays, I recommend checking out Gregory Black’s Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies.
Despite the increased enforcement of the Production Code, some surprisingly subversive, even queerly coded, content appeared on screen, though most of these were released before the Production Code was heavily enforced. In fact, Richard Barrios argues that the second half of 1930 serves a vital role in queer representation on screen with the production of *Morocco* (1930), *The Office Wife* (1930), *Just Imagine* (1930), and *Little Caesar* (1931). Similarly, Lugowski argues, “Hollywood is at its most queer from the early 1932 to mid-1934, a period that corresponds to the worst years of the Depression” (12). Films of this time generally demonstrate queerness not through explicit same-sex pairings—although some moments of this did slip through, such as *Wonder Bar* (1934) and its infamous boys will be boys scene—but through allusion and gender performance. Hollywood often portrayed queer men as fussy pansies, sissies who sometimes wore lipstick and rouge or cross-dressed and who used double entendre when they could get away with it, often with a particular vocal intonation. Conversely, there was a more extensive range of how lesbians were portrayed: “At her most overt, the lesbian was clad in a mannishly tailored suit (often a tuxedo), her hair slicked back or cut in a short bob. She sometimes sported a monocle and cigarette holder (or cigar!) and invariably possessed a deep alto voice and a haughty, aggressive attitude toward men, work, or any business at hand” (Lugowski 4). Society saw queer men and women as a threat to life as Americans knew it. Michael Kimmel argues, “Gender arrangements were now so fragile, it seems, that ‘even a glimpse of an alternative might endanger them’” (148). Society interpreted queerness by men as a failure to achieve proper masculinity, generally attributed to some lack on the part of the parents (145-48). However, society interpreted queerness by women as a threat, further challenging the already fragile position of masculinity during the Depression. If a man was no longer required to
work and support his wife and was also not required sexually, there might no longer be a role for him in society.

While the Production Code ensured that homosexuality on the screen was primarily limited to subtext, that was not always the case in the real world. Contemporary scholars such as Katherine Davis (1929) and Phillis Blanchard and Carolyn Manasses (1930) found that among college-aged women, it was not uncommon to experience at least “intense emotional relations with other women” (qtd. in Ware, *Holding their Own* 64) although far fewer indicated that the relationship moved beyond the emotional into the physical. Furthermore, most identified that they had outgrown the behavior. In previous decades women who remained unmarried by choice could live respectable lives that included professional or academic careers or commitment to social reform as well as close fulfilling relationships, romantic or otherwise, with other women. The twenties and thirties were increasingly fixated with “intimate heterosexual relationships,” and this fixation led to significant suspicion of anything considered other, be it celibacy or homosexuality (Ware 65). According to Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen, the consensus of the period was that “[i]f heterosexual relations were normal and healthy, then women who lack such experiences became, by inference, deviant. If latent homosexuality lurked in the recesses of all psyches, then the same-sex friendships and networks that had underlain and supported the variegated activities of single women in earlier decades must be suspect” (13).

**Screwball Romantic Comedy and Working Women**

In this period defined by an increased preoccupation with heterosexual romantic relationships and domestic economic uncertainty, Hollywood focused on drawing women to the theaters. Lugowski argues that during the Great Depression, “the cinema of the era, unlike
today’s, whose most powerful audience is young men aged sixteen to twenty-four, was patronized to a much larger extent by adult women” (4), making this a key target demographic for film studios. The emphasis on films for women, paired with the Production Code and the new sense of hope the New Deal breathed into the American people, converged in 1934, offering the perfect setting for a new genre: the screwball comedy.

Unlike romantic comedies earlier in the decade that focused heavily on escapism and avoided showing the economic reality of the time, screwball comedies are clearly set in the then-present of the Great Depression and center around characters who work to navigate the new expectations placed on them by the wide-spread economic difficulty. Grindon argues, “The battle of the sexes highlighted gender as the conflict central to the cycle, and divisions of wealth and power created an undercurrent” (34). The films explore American society through the metaphor of romantic relationships. This relationship is usually combative, with fast-talking and witty conversation and physical slap-stick comedy serving as weapons of combat. Jeffers McDonald asserts, “With most screwball comedies neither side actually wins, the film ending instead with a benevolent draw in which both parties are reconciled” (23). The reality found in screwball comedy was a significant change from earlier romantic comedies. Romantic comedies from the early years of the Depression tended to be particularly escapist as “hard times were banished from the romantic comedies of this era. Wealthy lovers meet in elegant surroundings, frequently in Europe or else in New York City” (Grindon 28). The worlds established in these films more closely imitated the Roaring Twenties than the challenges of the thirties, particularly for women. The relative wealth of the 1920s, particularly when paired with new technologies made possible by electricity, had changed the day-to-day course of the lives of many women, particularly in urban areas. Rather than making their own clothes, women turned to ready-made clothes like
those the Sears Catalog offered. Pre-packaged food became more readily available. Cleaner gas
stoves replaced wood and coal-burning ones.

Pre-screwball romantic comedies offered a reminder of better times and a few moments of respite from the worries of the Great Depression, and “women in these films displayed a remarkable freedom with no fear of financial consequences” (Grindon 28). There had long been a stereotype about women working for pin money, a term that minimized their efforts from meaningfully supporting their families to an infantilized desire for baubles. However, after the Great War, “[t]he emphasis on economic independence and the personal rewards derived from employment fell within the bounds of individualistic, private ethos of the 1920s” (Scharf 26) and paired with feminist efforts challenged old ideas about work, particularly for single women of the decade with mixed results. This New Woman attitude appears in the heroines of films such as Laughter (1930), Platinum Blonde (1931), Private Lives (1931), and Design for a Living (1933), not to mention Mae West films like I’m No Angel (1933) and She Done Him Wrong. The plots of these films often feature infidelity and complicated romantic entanglements. Further, the heroines know what they want and are unafraid to go after it.

Once the New Deal was in place, it became safe for Hollywood to include some of the harsh realities of the Depression in the romantic comedy, albeit with a tone of optimism. Scholars generally point to Frank Capra’s It Happened One Night (1934) as the first screwball comedy, alongside Howard Hawks’s 20th Century (1934). Other screwball comedies, such as Bringing Up Baby (1938), brought a physical often slap-stick element to the relationships and were “generally childlike in their playfulness, but also suggest[ed] the sexuality confined beneath the surface” (Grindon 35). These romances featured a screwball character, usually the heroine, who was a free-spirited, “assertive, self-reliant, and intelligent,” paired against “a conventional
stiff... who would eventually be liberated by contact with the beloved” (32-33). The films generally inverted social norms—particularly norms associated with class and social structure—asserting that the perspective generally understood as inferior is actually superior and has more to offer than the traditionally superior perspective. Additionally, the films emphasize everything not being as it seems through masquerade and role-play.

Women at work were a common feature in films of the Great Depression, especially in screwball comedies. Grindon argues that while there were relatively few financial consequences for women in pre-New Deal romantic comedies, in screwball comedies, women not only worried about their finances but worked a variety of jobs (28, 33). While more than a few heiresses still appeared on screen, like Ellie in *It Happened One Night*, women in screwball comedies held jobs such as model (*20th Century*), waitress and actress (*Cain and Mabel*, 1936), author (*Theodora Goes Wild*, 1936), academic assistant (*Bringing up Baby*), reporter (*His Girl Friday*, 1940), and singer (*Ball of Fire*, 1941). Second wave feminist film scholars such as Marjorie Rosen argue that women worked far more on the screen than in the outside world. However, research produced in the decades following the publication of Rosen’s *Popcorn Venus* in 1973 suggests that the reality may be more complex than that. Research conducted by scholars such as Ware, Scharf, and Laura Hapke in the eighties and nineties, and Katrina Srigley more recently, suggest that women may have been working at the time but the work may have looked different than in later decades. The most significant challenge scholars face in accurately determining the frequency and types of work women did in the 1920s and 1930s is that there was significant variation based on a wide range of factors such as location, race, marital status, socioeconomic status, and whether the employment was full- or part-time. Scholars find it challenging to accurately interpret records of the period, as those gathering statistics were more likely to
identify a woman as a homemaker than unemployed, regardless of whether she wanted or needed outside employment. It was socially acceptable for a single woman to work outside the home, helping to raise money for her parents and siblings. However, once a woman was married, particularly once she had had children, society saw her place as being in the home as a wife and mother. The Great Depression, however, shifted social priorities, and it does not appear to have been uncommon for a married woman, even one with children, to have worked at least part-time or short-term outside the home, particularly if her husband had lost his job.

Throughout the later decades of the nineteenth century, more and more women of all classes moved to careers outside of the home, despite concerns that “physical labor would cause irreparable damage to female reproductive organs” and work in business could lead to “nervous collapse” (Scharf 12, 13). Women often chose careers that extended from charity work previously done through benevolence societies and other charitable social organizations. Careers like social work, nursing, and librarianship, moved from the realm of volunteerism and the privacy of the home into more public spheres, now offering the opportunity for pay. Similarly, society came to see clerical office jobs as an extension of the woman’s role in the home, offering a positive feminine atmosphere to office spaces, with some going so far as to suggest that a woman secretary was similar to a wife to her boss’s role as husband, and “in direct imitation of marriage, in which the wife derives her social status from her husband, the private secretary achieved her exalted position through the man to whom her services were indispensable” (Scharf 98). Interestingly, during the Great Depression, female clerical workers found that their employers focused less on skills and abilities and more on appearance, personality, and the “‘ability to take orders and to conform, to stress her willingness to adapt herself and be contented with a small wage’” (qtd in Scharf 101).
Many films of the Great Depression reflect these employment trends for women. Harlan Thompson’s *Kiss and Make Up* (1934) demonstrates the relationship between Cary Grant’s Dr. Maurice Lamar, a cosmetic surgeon, and his secretary, Anne (Helen Mack). At first, Lamar does not see all of the value in his plain secretary and focuses on the external beauty of others until he realizes that external beauty is not all that matters. Journalism as a career frequently appeared in films of this period. In addition to Clark Gable’s Peter Warne in *It Happened One Night*, films such as *Big Brown Eyes* (1936), *Wedding Present* (1936), and *His Girl Friday* (1940) have journalist heroines. In reality, women in journalism served a vital role in the reception of Roosevelt’s New Deal. Ware reports, “Women were not just to study these new programs—they were to perpetuate the mood of social reform. Signing on as a Reporter became a woman’s patriotic duty” (*Beyond Suffrage* 71). One job that was more friendly toward married women was retail work as salesclerks. Married women found this a good option primarily because it offered part-time hours, allowing them to spend time at home with their children. Store proprietors appreciated that female customers liked to receive recommendations from other women, wives, and mothers. This career appears in Ernst Lubitsch’s *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), which shows women working in a store alongside male colleagues. The film’s heroine, Klara Novak (Margaret Sullavan), even makes a sale that the hero, Alfred Kralik (James Stewart), the store’s top salesman, cannot because of her unique perspective as a woman.

One film that meets many of the expectations of the screwball comedy, but scholars rarely explore, is Marion Gering’s *Thirty Day Princess* (1934).11 Famous screwball writer and director Preston Sturges earns a writing credit in this Cary Grant and Sylvia Sidney vehicle,

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11 Little is written on *Thirty Day Princess* aside from general biographical references. Interestingly, the documentary *The Automat* (2021), which looks at the history of the automat, highlighted scenes from *Thirty Day Princess* set in the automat where the detectives first find Nancy.
although Sturges claimed in his autobiography, “not much of my work was used” (277). Arriving in theaters only three months after *It Happened One Night*,¹² *Thirty Day Princess* is too early to have been heavily influenced by the famous and influential Academy Award-winning film, although it undoubtedly reacts to many of the same external factors, such as the New Deal, and shares many of the features, such as reliance on masquerade, the inversion of social norms, and fast-talking wordplay.

Womanhood and Class in *Thirty Day Princess* (1934)

In *Thirty Day Princess*, a chance meeting between King Anatol XII of Tyronia (Henry Stephenson) and international banker Richard M. Gresham (Edward Arnold) leads to an American tour for the king’s daughter, Princess Catterina (Sylvia Sidney), until the princess catches the mumps just as she arrives on American shores. Thinking fast, Gresham decides that he must track down a lookalike in New York City and finds the perfect girl in out-of-work actress Nancy Lane (also played by Sydney). At the same time, newspaper publisher Porter Madison III (Cary Grant) is determined to prove that Gresham is trying to exploit hard-working Americans and that the princess is a poor excuse for a woman compared to even the lowest-class American girl. Instead, Madison finds himself infatuated with the woman he meets, and she is equally taken with him. Nancy and Gresham find that maintaining the princess’s secret proves difficult as one of Madison’s reporters (Ray Walker) goes on the case looking for the missing Nancy Lane and one of Nancy’s former co-stars (George Baxter) identifies her as the princess when she is out for dinner. The reporter and actor band together, along with Catterina’s

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bumbling fiancé, Nicholaus (Vince Barnett), to prove that something is rotten in the state of New York. However, just in time for the tour to end, Catterina recovers enough to thank not only the men who made the tour possible but also her double. Ultimately, Madison discovers that he fell in love not with the unattainable princess but with her American lookalike.

In addition to being an early screwball comedy, *Thirty Day Princess* shares many features with Ruritanian romances. Taronia, the kingdom at the center of *Thirty Day Princess*’s conflict, fits Nicholas Daly’s description of a “Ruritania” as “a small, politically unstable monarchy,” (5) “sequestered from the tide of progress” (4). The film’s early scenes emphasize the kingdom’s traditional values, lack of modern conveniences, and unspoiled resources. In a moment of filmic irony, the banker Gresham tells the king that most Americans would not know that Taronia exists but instead “would probably think it was a mythical kingdom.” Despite the scenes in Taronia reflecting an Old World pre-industrialized charm, *Thirty Day Princess* is most certainly set in the 1930s and after the Great War. The king wears a Tyrolean hat, which Gresham recommends that he abandon before considering a trip to the United States, likely due to its association with the nations that made up the Central Powers, America’s enemy in the conflict. There is also the suggestion of political instability typical of the Ruritanian romance, as King Anatol cannot leave his kingdom because he is concerned about the stability of his position: “If I went out, they might not let me in again.”

Even as *Thirty Day Princess* asserts itself as a Ruritanian romance, it also subverts the genre as the characters demonstrate a desire to escape the boundaries of the past. King Anatol wishes to provide more for his citizens than they currently have, offering Taronia’s resources in

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13 The term Graustarkian served a similar purpose in the United States in the early twentieth century but started to fall out of favor after World War II.
exchange for hot water, electricity, and the telephone, thus transforming finances into a pivotal plot point. Daly argues, “Just as Ruritania itself is imagined as a pocket kingdom that escapes the rising tide of modernity, so too do its princes and princesses stand outside the quotidian world of pence or cents. To be such an individual—or to fall in love with one—is, perhaps, to be removed not simply from the everyday but from capitalism itself” (11). The context of this film, as a sort of proto-screwball comedy, insists that “pence or cents” be front and center to the experiences of the characters living in a world where costs are high and jobs are scarce. The film insists that money builds buildings and offers electricity to even the poorest citizens of a nation, regardless of whether that nation is a democracy or a monarchy.

Both the screwball comedy and Ruritanian romance include themes such as the masquerade, mistaken identity, and doubleness. Thirty Day Princess’s premise relies on the characters’ interchangeability, particularly the female ones. Gresham first suggests that the king serves as the “front” for his kingdom based on his personality, telling him, “You’d roll them in the aisles.” For Gresham, however, Catterina’s feminine attractiveness will be a suitable substitute for her father’s personality when it is clear her father cannot leave. Catterina can serve as her father’s substitute because she is not serving any other significant function in the kingdom at the time; when we see her in Taronia, she is on her way to see a movie at the cinema. No one seems concerned for her safety as she rides her bicycle down the street. She has no apparent guards or entourage, even though she is the crown princess. From what we see on the screen, the only value Catterina seems to serve to her kingdom comes from her attractiveness and marriageability. While the latter offers connections through an advantageous marriage to Count Nicholaus, Gresham determines that the former will make her “[t]he perfect front” to “make America conscious that [Taronia] exist[s].”
The narrative and cinematic importance of Catterina’s beauty becomes even more evident once Catterina falls ill. Baron Passeria, a member of Catterina’s entourage, suggests he can take her place on the tour. Gresham tells him, “Your legs aren’t the right shape. What we need is a princess.” In her foundational work on the male gaze, Laura Mulvey argues, “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (837). Gresham does not require an authentic spokesperson for Taronia; instead, he requires an attractive spokesperson that will allow him to convince the American public to support his foreign bonds, someone pretty upon whom the Americans can gaze. Passeria has neither the personality of the king nor the to-be-looked-at-ness of the princess. Presumably, despite his stuffiness and insistence on propriety, the title of baron would also not be sufficiently regal for American audiences who, according to Gresham, “love pomp . . . , [u]niforms, costumes, plumes, and palaces.” Rather than selecting a less-than-ideal but authentic Taronian representative, Gresham chooses to maintain the optics, replacing Catterina with Nancy, and no one, including Catterina’s fiancé, can tell that the change has occurred. Catterina’s entire identity, apart from her native language, is adopted by a stranger in only a few days, challenging the unique value of the crown princess.

Nancy’s own identity is flexible as well. As an actress, Nancy easily slips in and out of many roles, not only her role as the princess. When she first appears on screen, she is looking at her press book. The camera pans over a review of one of her performances, and her name, misspelled as Miss Nancy Blane, has been corrected by hand over the top, eliminating even a stable identity associated with her name. Further, her career does not seem stable either; in addition to struggling to afford housing and living expenses, suggesting that she does not have
regular work, the reviews in the press book damn with faint praise. One says that in the role of the maid, she “remembered her lines well,” while the other lumps her in with the other supporting cast members, describing them as “pleasing.” We also see her begging fellow actor Donald to help her find work by mentioning her when he goes to auditions. When Gresham first offers her role of the princess, Nancy asks, “What do I do, double for her in the dangerous scenes?” believing that the role is not a lead role but an opportunity to stunt-double for another actress by doing the things deemed too dangerous for a leading actress.

Nancy’s flexibility does not only exist in her work as an actress. When Nancy goes to Madison’s newspaper office, she does so by playing an exaggerated version of herself. The Nancy who eats Madison’s lunch, snaps her gum, and plans to move back to Idaho is not really Nancy. In this scene, she plays a caricature of what Madison and his employees expect of a young woman from the Midwest who has come to the big city to find her break, and the narrative she spins fits with the experiences of such women at the time. Ware reports that during the Great Depression, women from rural communities, once sent to the cities to earn money to send back home, “were often forced to return to rural life because they could no longer be self-sufficient in the cities” (Holding their Own 11). The caricature Nancy creates of herself is so different from the one she plays as the princess that even Madison, sitting at the table with her for a second meal in a matter of days, is unable to identify her as the woman he has been escorting around New York City.

Despite its farcical storyline, Thirty Day Princess clearly demonstrates the potential dangers for a young woman living alone in the city during the Great Depression. The first scene occurs when Gresham’s detectives pull Nancy from the streets. No one takes notice of her fear as the men follow her from the automat and into the alley. The film later reveals that Nancy is not
alone but that the detectives brought twenty-six other women to Gresham on the chance that they may be workable duplicates of the princess. If the other women’s experiences resembled Nancy’s, which is likely given the instructions the detectives received—“Bring her back in a bag if you have to”—twenty-seven women were pulled from the streets of New York City without anyone noticing they were gone. No one seems to realize that Nancy has gone missing until several days later when Kirk, a reporter from Madison’s newspaper, is looking for a story and accidentally uncovers her disappearance. Nancy’s landlady has no idea she has gone missing, although she fears the worst when asked about her tenant. Finally, at the end of the film, Gresham forces Nancy into an embrace, telling her that if he were not married, he would have her for his own.

The women Srigley interviewed for *Breadwinning Daughters* share similar experiences about the dangers of living and working in big cities. She reports, “City space was perceived as one of the greatest threats to women, physically and morally” (88). These threats occurred in all spheres, public, private, and work, and because of cultural expectations on women, they were often at least partially blamed for their own harassment and assaults, even their own murders. Srigley reports, “Distinctions between good and bad girls were well worn by the 1930s. Judges, social workers, police, and others who reflected upon the relationship between danger and immorality for working girls in the Depression drew upon narratives of women as both victim and problem” (83-84). It did not take much for a young woman’s reputation to be tarnished. Because of these concerns, in 1935, Toronto’s *Evening Telegraph* reported on women’s hesitancy to report crimes to the police: “Women interviewed by the paper ‘claim[ed that] reporting to the police was futile and embarrassing.’ One girl suggested that ‘most girls just take that sort of thing as a problem of the modern world. You expected to have to watch for the odd
man of the objectionable sort’” (91). Srigley reports, “sometimes the workplace was a source of
danger and harassment, particularly in a decade when many women could ill afford to lose their
jobs” (95). The women she interviewed recalled being sexually harassed by employers and
supervisors with little recourse, as reporting the harassment would likely impact their own
reputations. Sometimes the only hope a woman had was to work somewhere she could rely on
the other women she worked with to understand and support her, intervening when possible.

Notably, despite their vastly different social stations, the film conflates Nancy and
Catterina. One way this appears is through jokes and wordplay, generally made at Madison’s
expense. Before he meets the princess, Madison tells his managing editor that he wants the paper
to print an article “[c]omparing the princess unfavorably with our shop girls as to style, dress,
bearing, beauty, intelligence, and, oh, everything,” with the joke being that the woman they
would be comparing to “our shop girls” is in truth an American herself. When Nancy and
Madison share a meal, he asks her if she enjoys hunting, and for a moment, she forgets herself,
responding, “Yes. I’ve spent most of my life hunting for job…bies.” When Madison responds
that he has never heard of a jobbie, she replies, “A rare animal. Very hard to find in America.”
Later, as the princess and Madison declare their love to one another, she says, “It wouldn’t be
fair to you… If I give up my title, I would be nothing. You would still be Porter Madison III.
You wouldn’t want to marry beneath you.” While he assumes she is referring to the potential
consequences of abdication, she is really talking about what will happen when her job as a
princess ends after the tour. She will be abandoning a role, while his identity will remain stable.

At various points, even Nancy and Catterina seem to have trouble separating their two
identities, and it is sometimes easy to see why. Early in the film, when Nancy is working with
Baron Passeria on her Taronian accent, he informs her that rather than introducing herself with
words, “I am…,” she should say, “We are…,” phrasing that again that plays with the doubleness of her experience. While on one level, it is simply the formal use of the majestic plural, it also reinforces the identity multiple people are taking on and, indeed, Nancy’s multiple identities. When looking at the early press coverage addressing the princess’s arrival in New York City, Nancy comments on how good she looks in the photo. Gresham reminds her that she is not the woman in the photo, as it is from before Catterina took ill. She is not the only one who claims the actions of the other as her own. Later, when they finally meet in person and Nancy tells Catterina that she went alone to Madison’s apartment, Catterina replies, “I’ve always wanted to go to a man’s apartment. Now I’ve been. Tell me, was he in pajamas?” Catterina takes on Nancy’s actions as though she was the one to do them, not only the public activities that were a part of the public record but also the private activities.

Furthermore, Princess Catterina and Nancy are proxies for their home nations throughout Thirty Day Princess, at least from Hollywood’s perspective. In addition to serving as a literal front for her kingdom in their bid to borrow money from the people of America, Catterina is trapped by the old-world traditions of Europe. Despite being a member of the royal family, the highest of the high class, her position as princess places expectations on her rather than freeing her. While she is royal, her kingdom is not wealthy. Ultimately, her most significant points of value, her royal title and appearance, are worth less than Gresham initially believed, as Nancy easily replaces her. On the other hand, Nancy has struck out on her own to make a career for herself in the big city. Like her home country, she is independent and looks for creative solutions to her problems. Even as she takes on the role of princess, she does things that the princess, limited by expectations placed on her, would not do, such as visiting a single man’s apartment—a single man wearing pajamas, no less. Films of this period, limited though they were by the
Production Code, generally allowed European women to demonstrate more sexuality than American women. However, Thirty Day Princess does not follow this paradigm. Because of her title, Catterina is stifled by others’ expectations of how she should behave. With Nancy as a heroine, Thirty Day Princess resembles an American Graustarkian romance more closely than a European Ruritanian one. Later Graustarkian novels, such as Beverly of Graustark (1904), have much more active New Woman heroines, and “it’s the feisty and athletic American Girl who is put through her paces rather than the manly hero. She is a go-getting American type who earns her Prince” (Daly 87). Through Nancy, Thirty Day Princess perpetuates the American version of the nineteenth-century prince and princess formula in its celebration of American womanhood.

Toxic Capitalism in Thirty Day Princess (1934)

Just as Thirty Day Princess establishes Nancy and Catterina as substitutes for larger ideas in the film, the film also establishes Madison and Gresham as foils against one another not only as individuals but as competing aspects of larger ideas of capitalism. Both men have successful careers in their fields and are flourishing despite the economic turmoil around them. While the men are not directly in competition for business, as Gresham is in international banking and Madison is in the newspaper business, their relationship is clearly antagonistic. Madison calls Gresham a “crook,” a “windbag,” and a “wolf” who is “gorged with the blood of the poor,” arguing that there is no way the Taronian bonds can be legitimate if Gresham is backing them. Gresham calls Madison a “fathead” and insults his intelligence for believing the princess ruse, which is ironic given the need to convince not only Madison but the whole country that Nancy is the princess if he is to keep the charade going. At the end of the film, he gives Nancy a gaudy medal from a local lodge—The Badge of the Imperial Potentate of the Sons and Daughters of the
African Star—for her to offer to Madison “for his devoted services to Your Royal Highness” in hopes that it will embarrass him. Each man seeks to undermine the other, both personally and professionally.

The versions of capitalism represented by the men show capitalism at its most optimistic—a New Deal populism and most toxic—internationalist and greedy. Madison uses his newspaper to support the lower-income neighborhoods and help bring the amenities King Anatol admired in the film’s opening scenes. He also seeks to warn his readers about investing what little money they do have in foreign bonds that may never see dividends. Madison takes pride not only in the power of his newspaper but in what his newspaper can do for those less fortunate than himself. He is aware of the power and influence that come with his role as publisher, but it is a power that he wields for the betterment of the American people, not just himself. When he tours New York City with the princess, she points out tenement housing, and he tells her, “All these new tenements were started through a campaign in my paper.” When she replies, “That is what my father wants to do with the money. Make the living nice for the poor people,” he realizes the potential for the bonds. When he next speaks to his managing editor, he says, “Taronia’s entitled to a break. It’s an honest little country,” backing away from his previous objections to the bonds, regardless of who is associated with them.

Madison’s initial concerns about foreign bonds during this period are not unreasonable. Barry Eichengreen reports, “Approximately two-thirds of foreign securities held by American investors fell into default over the course of the Depression decade” (“U.S. Capital Market” 242). In the years following the Great War, the United States shifted from being in debt to other nations to being a creditor. Because of this new status, America tended to take on more risky loans than other creditor nations. Further, those loans tended to have less oversight from
governmental agencies and often came from private banks, like J.P. Morgan and Co., rather than have government backing (Eichengreen, “Historical Research”). There were particular concerns about offering loans to nations that had been heavily impacted by the fighting during the Great War, as “it was not clear that the nations of this region possessed the resources to service additional external debt” (“U.S. Capital Market” 239). Gresham considers this uncertainty in his assessment of whether Taronia can handle the debt, quickly identifying the kingdom’s natural resources that could be used to help pay off the debt. Madison refers to the bonds as “foreign flypaper,” reflecting concerns about what could happen again if the world descended into another war. A series of sometimes conflicting alliances complicated the Great War. The United States stayed out of the European conflict for most of the war, but ultimately, financial concerns determined which side America supported. Madison’s metaphor of flypaper could suggest concerns about again becoming financially invested in foreign matters, particularly when so many problems at home still require solutions.

Gresham understands the reputation international bankers have earned in this period, as other nations faced similar economic challenges in the interwar period. In contrast to Madison’s apparent concern for the American people and his use of his influence and financial success for the good of others, Gresham’s capitalism feels much more predatory. When the king first identifies him in the open scenes of the film, he says, “Not so loud. We don’t boast about being bankers these days. We’re all in the doghouse.” However, being “in the doghouse” does not stop him from taking advantage of Taronia’s needs. When he asks Anatol how much money would be needed to upgrade the infrastructure of Taronia, the king tells him five million dollars.\textsuperscript{14} Gresham says that more than that is needed to even bother loaning and says it would need to be

\textsuperscript{14} Equivalent to more than $112 million in 2023
for at least fifty million dollars to even be worth it. While the film does not hash out the details, such as interest or a timeline for repayment, those discussions are unnecessary to identify the connection between a larger loan and larger interest payments, leading to a more considerable burden on the Taronian people. While the Taronian people could use the money Gresham offers even more updates to Taronian infrastructure, those changes may be more than Taronia wants or needs.

The ways Gresham demonstrates his wealth further reinforce his toxic capitalism. He hosts a party for the newly arrived princess and serves his guests drinks in crystal worth $18,000. The display of wealth appears in stark contrast to the first moments where we see Nancy. She tells her landlady she cannot afford to pay her rent because she only has seventeen cents. A few scenes later, she cannot afford a sufficient meal at the automat and eventually steals a turkey dinner with all the trimmings. The film is sure to reinforce, however, the fragility of Gresham’s wealth, as it is destroyed in only moments. Nancy offers toasts to the long list of ancestors – which she was forced to memorize as part of her princess training – and, after each toast, tosses the piece of crystal over her shoulder. The others with whom she had been toasting follow suit, shattering all the expensive crystal before Gresham’s eyes.

Another sign of Gresham’s toxic capitalism occurs when Catterina falls sick. When he tells Baron Passeria he will find another princess, the baron replies, “In Taronia, we do not manufacture princesses like you manufacture the automobile.” This line is somewhat ironic, as kingdoms are generally the only place that princesses can be made, so to speak. It is also evocative of Henry Ford’s moving assembly line production of the Model T and the famous

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15 Equivalent to more than $405,000 in 2023
16 Equivalent to $3.83 in 2023
quote, “Any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants so long as it is black” (Ford and Crowther 72). Ford’s method of manufacture relies on each unit being the same as the one before. This suggestion of uniformity becomes even more apparent when Gresham speaks to forty private detectives dressed in nearly identical black suits and ties, wearing bowler hats and smoking cigars. Upon receiving their assignment, they move in unison to find the princess, operating as almost one unit rather than as individuals. Ultimately, these detectives find twenty-seven princesses, “including the cross-eyed one.” In “Works of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” one of the foundational interwar critiques of capitalism, Walter Benjamin explores how capitalism uses technology to reproduce art on a massive scale and thus alters the very art recreated. He argues, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (3). While the princess is not a work of art, the characters in the film discuss her in a way that objectifies her. The baron is sure of her uniqueness when he declares that she cannot be manufactured. Gresham relies on the fact that she is not unique, invoking American ingenuity and savvy to find her double. He orders reprints of her photographs as part of his quest to find her likeness. These photographs become instrumental when Nancy is abducted, as the detectives who find her carefully examine the photographs to be sure they have found the right person. Despite this, Gresham could not simply use the Nancy-duplicate without the Catterina-original to achieve his purpose because “[t]he presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (3). If there were not a princess for him to have brought with him in the first place, the charade would not work.17

17 The importance of the Catterina-original comes up in the film. As Madison and his reporter argue about whether the princess is who she says she is, Madison asks, “Besides, who came in on the boat?” as proof that the princess must be real.
Gresham also seeks to manipulate art at the end of the film when he attempts to get Nancy to give the gaudy award to Madison. Benjamin argues, “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition” (6). Gresham has acquired the Badge of the Imperial Potentate of the Sons and Daughters of the African Star from a local lodge and intends for Nancy to present it to Madison “for his devoted services to Your Royal Highness.” Gresham attempts to imitate the value of orders bestowed by royalty while simultaneously undermining that value. By presenting Madison with a false order, a rather large and gaudy one, presented by an imposter no less, he seeks to embarrass Madison with something unattractive and devoid of value. His trick is unsuccessful, however. Instead, the narrative, and Princess Catterina, reward Madison with his superior interpretation of a New Deal capitalism, and Gresham’s trick is turned around on him. Catterina, having returned to her position for the final event of the tour, awards Gresham with The Order of Carlos Magnus of the Third Class, telling him that he “deserve[s] it” as she drapes the large, gaudy medallion around his neck. She then gives Madison the Gold Cross of Taronia, First Class, an award with actual value, both ceremonially and aesthetically.

Conclusion

The screwball comedy, and the challenging of assumptions about class, continued through the rest of the Great Depression and into 1940 and 1941, with the last screwball comedy generally being understood to be Preston Sturgis’s *The Palm Beach Story* from 1942. The exploration and questioning of class so common in the later thirties disappeared with the onset of World War II. As the war effort began in earnest, there was no longer the option for films to suggest anything other than a unified nation working together for a common cause. One way this
unification occurred was with the United States Office of War Information’s (OWI) opening a Motion Picture Bureau that asked studios to send scripts to them as well as the Production Code Administration. Whereas the Production Code Administration was concerned that films did not violate the morals of the nation, “the OWI was guided by a progressive political interest in the international reputation of the United States…. Thus, the OWI sought to eradicate misinformation about various racial groups, national and international” (Scott 42). This eradication mainly took the form of pushing to improve Black representation on the screen in a manner that the Production Code had not allowed before. These changes were not without their problems; in their effort to present American democracy at its most ideal, most films eliminated depictions of stateside racism and suppressed films that showed America in any negative light. However, the OWI pushed producers to focus their attention on attacking fascist ideology as opposed to racial characteristics, recommendations that the production companies took to avoid appearing unsupportive of the war effort.

World War II ushered in its own cluster of films reflective of the anxiety that surrounded couples during wartime. Grindon asserts, “[R]ather than soliciting laugh from the union of the couple, the war separated men from women, husbands from wives, sweethearts from each other by drafting young men and shifting them abroad in a life-threatening endeavor” (38). Some films did maintain the humor, however. George Stevens’s The More the Merrier (1943) even has some madcap elements to it and is listed as a screwball comedy by some. It is a story of the housing shortage in Washington, DC, as the city has become overrun with new government employees and men for deployment. When an advisor on the housing crisis finds himself a victim of the situation himself, he must convince a young woman to sublet her apartment so he will have a place to sleep. Dudley Nicholas’s Government Girl (1943) tells another story of housing gone
wrong when an engineer finds himself without a room in a DC hotel and ends up in the middle of
a chaotic wedding and a tangle of governmental bureaucracy. In real life, women entered the
workplace during wartime to fill spots left vacant by men who had been drafted. Despite this,
many romantic screwball films of this period, such as The Major and the Minor (1942) and The
Miracle of Morgan’s Creek (1944), reinforced the traditional positions of men as breadwinners
and the woman’s place in the home.

The war continued to have an impact on romantic comedies in the second half of the
1940s, with what Grindon calls the “post-war cluster” as couples were reunited but also changed
by their experiences, and “these films were haunted by separation, loss, and death” (Grindon 43).
International politics continued to play a role, particularly related to the Cold War and the House
UnAmerican Activities Committee hearings. Films in this cluster, such as Roman Holiday
(1953), took audiences back to Europe, while others, such as A Foreign Affair (1948) and I Was
a Male War Bride (1949), reaffirmed that American women were preferable to any the men may
have met while in Europe. Despite the postwar desire to reaffirm the status quo for Americans,
cross-class romance continued as a theme in Hollywood romantic comedies of the 1950s,
although now with themes far removed from the New Deal politics of the interwar era.
When then Vice President Richard Nixon visited the Soviet Union in 1959, he did so championing the ideals of American superiority through capitalism, demonstrated, at least in part, in the form of the modern family. For both the United States and the Soviet Union, family and gender relations were a form of propaganda aimed at both their own citizens and the enemy. Elaine Tyler May asserts, “For Nixon, American superiority rested on the ideal of the suburban home, complete with modern appliances and distinct gender roles for family members. He proclaimed that the ‘model’ home, with a male breadwinner and a full-time female homemaker, adorned with a wide array of consumer goods, represented the essence of American freedom” (16). The ability of a family not only to survive, but to thrive, on a single income was a piece of this, as “[c]onsumerism was not an end in itself; it was a means for achieving individuality, leisure, and upward mobility” (18). The Soviets, on the other hand, championed equal rights for women to work and contribute to their families and the nation. The president of the US Chamber of Commerce, Eric Johnston, argued, “‘Russian women, like women in all undeveloped countries, have always done the . . . hardest work’” (qtd in May 19). This sentiment conveniently ignores all the women of lower classes and the vast majority of Black women and other women of color in the United States who had long had to work outside the home to support their families. The image of the American family that Nixon and those with him on tour perpetuated
has had a long-lasting impact on American culture. This kind of Cold War containment culture
produced and perpetuated the façade about the period that informs the twenty-first-century
understanding of America in the fifties.¹⁸

The 1930s and ‘40s had proven challenging for American families. While the United
States Library of Congress argues that the mobilization effort for World War II was ultimately
what brought the Great Depression in the United States to an end, R. Burton Palmer argues,
“[T]he wholesale conversion to a wartime economy had posed a serious challenge to traditional
social values (and especially gender roles), altering the understanding many had of society and
their place in it” (2). Like with the Great War only a few decades earlier, women stepped into the
workplace, particularly in manufacturing. Marjorie Rosen reports, “[B]y 1943 more than
4,000,000 women were employed in munitions work alone. An additional 15,000,000 joined the
labor force, doing such formerly masculine jobs as coal mining, operating mechanical hoists and
cranes, swinging sledges, sorting ore, greasing machines, and firing and cleaning anti-aircraft
guns” (201).¹⁹ One of the enduring icons of the period is that of Rosie the Riveter and her
exclamation, “We can do it!” While at the beginning of the war, women “expressed their intent
to work only temporarily until the veterans had returned home,” by the end of the war, things had
changed, and “more common was the overriding conviction that even dull factory tasks were
preferable to returning to the insulating responsibilities of housework and childcare” (206).

¹⁸ Throughout this chapter, I differentiate the specifics of events from January 1, 1950, to December 31, 1959, from
the historical and cultural period popularly associated with the decade. As Steven Cohen asserts, “[T]he actual
demarcations of any momentous historical era do not follow the calendar…. Historically, the fifties began with the
United States’ emergence at the center of global politics in the world economy after World War Two” (ix)
significantly before 1950. As Cohen does in Masked Men, I differentiate between cultural period and the specific
decade by using “fifties” to refer to the former and “1950s” to the latter.
¹⁹ Rosen adds, “[T]he industrial world was shocked—and occasionally dismayed—that women, now 36 percent of
the labor force, worked faster than men, required less supervision, had fewer industrial accidents, and did less
damage to tools and materials” (201-202).
However, the Cold War followed close on the heels of World War II, and familial consensus became an essential part of the American domestic containment agenda.

This chapter explores 1950s American domestic containment agenda’s influence on the family as the nation sought to reinvent itself in the wake of decades of disruption from war and economic depression. May asserts, “The yearning for family stability gained momentum after the powerful ideology of domesticity was imprinted on everyday life. Ironically, traditional gender roles became a central figure of the ‘modern’ middle-class home” (20). World War II played a significant role in forming this new American middle class, as the American government offered returning members of the military significant financial benefits such as a special home loan guaranty and access to funds to attend college, university, or other job training. 20 These financial incentives had a cyclical effect: not only did veterans have new access to property ownership and college, but because of more access to higher education, they now qualified for new and better-paying jobs, which gave them access to more funds to maintain their new homes. Consequently, many families did not require multiple incomes to support their lifestyles, eliminating the need for wives to seek external employment.

The world wars of the first half of the twentieth century also established the United States as a global superpower. The rise of a second superpower, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), in the wake of World War II challenged that sense of supremacy, which greatly concerned the US government, particularly as the USSR demonstrated that it, too, was nuclear-capable. During this standoff between two nuclear superpowers, which came to be known as the

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20 According to the National World War II Museum website, “In 1947, World War II veterans accounted for nearly half of all college admissions and half of all World War II veterans participated in some form of education or job training with the benefits.”
Cold War, the US developed the policy of containment. Alan Nadel asserts, “The story of containment had derived its logic from the rigid major premise that the world was divided into two monolithic camps, one dedicated to promoting the inextricable combination of capitalism, democracy and (Judeo-Christian) religion, and one seeking to destroy that ideological amalgamation by any means” (3). While the term officially refers to US foreign policy from the late-1940s through the mid-1960s, it also influenced a broader cultural shift toward containment and maintenance of this idea of an American way of life. According to Nadel, to the extent that corporate production and biological reproduction, military deployment and industrial technology, televised hearings and filmed teleplays, the cult of domesticity and fetishizing of domestic security, the arms race and atoms for peace all contributed to the containment of communism, the disparate acts performed in the name of these practices joined the legible agenda of American history as aspects of containment culture. (3)

These disparate acts combined to form an attitude where anything other than conformity was potentially seditious; therefore, putting forward the appropriate appearance was paramount.

The second part of this chapter addresses the influence of domestic containment on the film industry. This influence was both indirect, as filmmakers sought to balance social acceptability with providing new and fresh entertainment that would keep moviegoers coming back for more, and direct through the American government’s anticommunist efforts such as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the McCarthy hearings. Many in Hollywood were concerned about being labeled a communist or communist sympathizer or having a film rejected because it might suggest such sympathies. The Production Code Administration (PCA) still held some sway over the industry as well, although that authority was waning. Romances of the period had to be careful to avoid sexual explicitness, but at the same time, with the rise of mainstream discourse about sex, popular American culture came to expect
more explicit sexuality. This chapter specifically explores three Ruritanian romantic comedies made during the sex comedy romantic comedy cycle in the 1950s, *Roman Holiday* (William Wyler 1953), *The Swan* (Charles Vidor 1956), and *The Prince and the Showgirl* (Laurence Olivier 1957). Each film features a commoner in a relationship with a royal of a Ruritanian nation and concludes with the commoner leaving the relationship at the conclusion. This departure from the standard expectation of the romantic comedy structure offers significant exploration opportunities. Some scholars downplay the potential social importance of genre films because of their frequent use of generic conventions. Celestino Deleyto and Thomas Wartenberg argue that films that deviate from conventions are ripe for meaning-making and social commentary, even when the narratives otherwise follow generic norms. This chapter reflects on the messages the unconventional ending of these films presents in light of domestic containment, particularly given the potential influence of the actresses who serve as the female leads: Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, and Marilyn Monroe, respectively. In particular, Monroe’s image found itself productively challenged in *The Prince and the Showgirl* as her character, Elsie, simultaneously relies on expectations of Monroe’s persona, and challenges assumptions made about the character based on those expectations. These women all served as cinematic icons of the time, and their films were likely to have a broad reach thanks to their stardom. However, despite the similarities between these films, scholars have yet to read them alongside one another, particularly not in terms of the ways they engage with containment culture.
The family created a practical sphere of influence for the US government to weaponize during the Cold War as part of domestic containment. During World War II, the home was glorified as what Steven Cohen calls “an idealized representation of the nation itself” (53). The disruption to the family that occurred because of the war allowed those serving overseas and remaining at home to idealize the family they were missing and temporarily forget its faults, thus establishing the restored family as a goal to look toward in challenging moments. Those remaining stateside clung to the promise of a family made whole by returning husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers. This idealization continued after the war and appeared in media depictions of the family we still see from the fifties, such as in television shows like *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963). Cohen argues, “The uniformity of home life in popular representations of domesticity conveyed the unity and coherence that the US society itself lacked” (54).

The role of the husband and father was particularly important following World War II. Rachel Devlin asserts, “The return of soldiers after World War II prompted widespread discussion about the place of men in the American family” (7). While for much of American history, emphasis had been placed on the individual, the post-war climate placed more emphasis on the idea of the community and the concept of the social ethic. William H. Whyte defined social ethic as the belief that “[m]an exists as a unit of society. Of himself, he is isolated, meaningless; only as he collaborates with others does he become worthwhile, for by sublimating himself in the group, he helps to produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts” (7-8).
they found themselves once again as a part of a unit of another kind, the family. However, American society at this point was changing, as was marriage and the family. Jessica Weiss argues that while earlier generations had seen marriage and the accompanying home life as “signifying the end of youth,” the fifties saw marriage as “a new path to adulthood” (17). Peter Biskind asserts, “The millions of American men who were coming back from Europe and the Pacific in 1945 found, to the surprise of many, that man’s place was in the home. Home was more than a pipe, slippers, and a warm bed” (250). Rather than being out on the frontier, away from the stifling and confining presence of women and civilization, men now found the home had become “the seat of the family, the domestic version of the group” that was now in a privileged position (251).

Homeownership increased significantly in the 1950s, which was often attributed, both then and now, to hard work and careful money management on the part of the homeowners who “stood on their own two feet” (Coontz 94). However, Stephanie Coontz asserts, “The 1950s suburban family. . . was far more dependent on government handouts than any so-called underclass in recent U.S. history” (94). She cites statistics that approximately 40% of American men between twenty and twenty-four qualified for GI benefits, including educational benefits and special conditions for loans to build new single-family homes.21 Federal assistance further supported the new suburbs by funding research that led to new technology to build the houses, and the Interstate Highway Act funded new highways to connect those suburbs (Coontz 94-98). A college education offered better employment and higher wages, which could lead to a bigger house and even more amenities. These opportunities allowed for social mobility that would have

21 Clifford E. Clark reports on surveys of new homebuyers in 1950 that found “[n]early half of the homebuyers were veterans of World War II” (185).
been only a dream for many Americans in earlier decades. The perfect family who had kept a man motivated while serving overseas was now only a few purchases away.

Many scholars argue that there was a socially projected mentality, which was reinforced by television, that postwar America was classless. May asserts, “Consumerism provided a means for assimilation into the American way of life: classless, homogenous, and family centered” (172). Similarly, Biskind asserts, “The miracle of economy, the seemingly endless flow of consumer goods, the constant technological innovation, ironically promised to realize Marx’s dream of a harmonious, classless society, not in the Soviet Union, but right in the heart of capitalist America” (14). Social class was sublimated into consumerism, where one had only to buy the next, newest, latest, and greatest home appliance or car to demonstrate how they fit in with the American dream and ideal. Coontz argues, “The 1950s family, supposedly the peak of tradition, was in many ways simply the ‘wrapper’ for an extension of commodity production to new areas of life, an extension that paved the way for the commercialization of love and sex so often blamed on the 1960s” (230). The idea of keeping up with the Joneses further fueled consumerism, as there was always the need for something new just beyond the horizon. Consumerism also emphasized the “centrality of material possessions to their marital and family satisfaction” and “went far beyond the mere purchases of goods and services. It included important cultural values, demonstrated success and social mobility, and defined lifestyles. It also provided the most vivid symbol of the American way of life: the affluent suburban home” (May 179, 181).

For the White middle-class family in the fifties, the father’s function was, first and foremost, financial. In the vast majority of families, especially families with children, the father was the sole breadwinner and responsible for supporting his family in all the ways that society
deemed necessary, such as maintaining a lifestyle, or at least the appearance of a lifestyle, that matched the social consumerist expectations. Cohen argues that “the enormous growth of the American middle class was perceived as the great social accomplishment of postwar life, and the male breadwinner personified that democratic achievement in his domesticity” (56). While gender roles were still generally socially prescribed, and women in middle-class families were almost always homemakers, the fifties saw increasing sexual equity. In the wake of World War II and the ever-present potential for nuclear war with the Soviet Union, young people in these marriages were far too aware of the fleetingness of youth and the fragility of life. Throughout this period, couples were encouraged to marry young, even before they were ready to be fully financially independent. Weiss asserts, “Early marriages rarely began on a secure financial footing” and those wives who worked generally “define[d] their employment in terms of family need,” with “brides of student grooms revers[ing] accepted marital roles by breadwinning while their husband studied” as they served as “the cornerstone of the family income” (28). However, such gendered reversals generally occurred only before having children. Once children came along, the expectation was that most middle-class women would stay home to care for the growing family.

Both at the time and now, television and the media perpetuated the popular image of women in the fifties as homemakers and housewives. Marilyn Yalom asserts, “Television, Hollywood, and advertisements catered to the fantasy of the beautifully dressed, perfectly coiffed, nonharried housewife. After all, with the many labor-saving appliances and packaged foods available in the postwar years, housekeeping was supposed to be practically effortless” (359). This image did not reflect reality for most, even within the middle class. Television’s influence on the perceptions of the American home and family also impacted self-perceptions of
the period. Yalom argues, “Higher standards of household cleanliness and personal attractiveness, promoted by TV, the women’s magazines, domestic advice literature, and consumer ads gave homemakers more to do and worry about” (359). Further, the White, middle-class, stay-at-home mother was not a universal experience. Activist Assata Shakur relates her experience as a young Black girl during the period in her autobiography:

Why didn’t my mother have freshly baked cookies ready when i came home from school? Why didn’t we live in a house with a backyard and a front yard instead of an ole apartment? I remember looking at my mother as she cleaned the house in her old raggedy housecoat with her hair in curlers. “How disgusting,” i would think. Why didn’t she clean the house in high heels and shirtwaist dresses like they did on television? . . . I had very little sympathy for my mother. It never occurred to me that she worked all day, went to school at night, cooked, cleaned, washed and ironed, raised two children, and, in her “spare” time, graded tests and papers and wrote her thesis. I was furious with her because she wasn’t like Donna Reed. (49-50, use of i in original)

These popular images existed in addition to the social expectations of women as the moral backbone of the family. Biskind asserts, “Women were charged with no less than the task of transmitting the values of the civilization” (267). May claims, “Experts called upon women to embrace domesticity in service to the nation, in the same spirit they had come to the country’s aid by taking wartime jobs. To meet the challenge of the postwar era, women were to marshall ‘[sic] their energies into a ‘New Family Types for the Space Age’” (102), which included “preparing” their homes for a nuclear attack” (104) and “fortifying” the home as a place of security amid the cold war” (105). At the same time, however, conflicting concerns arose regarding the potential impact such an influence could have on children, particularly male children. Cohen discusses the anxieties that arose after World War II that spending so much time with women while men were away at war had produced “a generation of sissies” (52). These

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22 According to Cohen, a consultant to the surgeon general of the US Army, “attributed the unmanliness of those rejected by the military to their mothers’ overprotectiveness” (165). He also asserts that political pundit Philip Wylie
perspectives reinforced the importance of an active father figure in the family as a “psychological leader” (52).

Sexual practices were also in flux during the fifties. Biskind describes the period as “popularly known as the Dark Ages of sexual ideology, a time when sex roles were polarized into incompatible stereotypes, a time when men were men and women were women, and never the twain did meet, except in the missionary position” (262). Heike Bauer and Matt Cook report, “Histories of sexuality, literature and social change have often located the 1950s as the beginning or end of analysis, the place to stop an examination of the war years, or to start on the 1960s in the social, sexual and cultural changes that are seen to mark that later decade” (2). However, the fifties also engaged in a sort of popular Freudianism—less focused on the details of Freud’s theories and more interested in the broadest, and most titillating, understanding of them—and saw the release of the Kinsey reports on human sexual behavior—the report on men was released in 1948, followed by the report on women in 1953. Kinsey’s reports challenged the beliefs of the nation, “mak[ing] it difficult to determine what the ‘norms’ actually were in postwar America. Widely expressed values represented the ideal, while documented sexual behavior indicated the reality” (May 115). According to May, there was some “‘sexual liberalism,’” which allowed for some premarital sexual experience, and “a heightened expectation for erotic fulfillment in marriage, and an explosion of sexual images in the media. At the same time, the taboos against premarital intercourse, homosexuality, and other forms of nonprocreative sex remained central tenets of sexual morality” (116). A primary function and goal of marriage and the family remained to have children. Coontz asserts, “Children provided tangible results of a successful

“blam[ed] mothers for virtually every characterological flaw among American men. Mom was a ‘destroying’ angel who ruled her man by wiles and manipulation, and a cultural disease, ‘megaloid Momworship,’ ruled the land with narcissistic glee” (165).
marriage and family life; they gave evidence of responsibility and patriotism, and achievement” (160). While the baby boom had initially started before the end of World War II, it is more closely associated with the fifties and the sense of pronatalism—the belief in the benefits of having large families with several children. According to May, “Childlessness was considered deviant, selfish, and pitiable” (137). The benefits of a family were not just ascribed to women: “Fatherhood became a new badge of masculinity and meaning for the postwar man” (146).

Whereas in the past, society would have interpreted asking for help as a weakness, in the fifties, it became acceptable to ask for help in becoming a good father.

Biskind describes the different types of roles parents had in raising their children: “Mothers disciplined and educated children while men spoiled them” (270). This particularly describes fathers’ relationships with their daughters, especially as the daughters became teenagers. While the father’s role was always focused on consumerism, this tendency increased even further with teenage daughters. While a daughter would likely have gone to her mother in prewar decades for fashion advice, postwar images shifted this responsibility to the father. Devlin argues, “In the popular imagination, the ‘teenage girl’ was both a product of the father-daughter relationship and a testament to it. She stood as both reason and rationale for men’s commitment to higher standards of living” as “[a] father’s love and attentive devotion could be expressed through shared consumerism” (81, 83). Devlin argues, “Teen girls emerged as a powerful figure in the 1940s” (83). This influence was reflected in the media and “played a powerful role in the cultural economy of the era” (83). The relationship that fifties fathers had with their teenage daughters and the daughters’ physical appearance was twofold. Devlin asserts, “Fathers were called upon both to stem the tide of adolescent forms of sexualized self-presentation and to lend authoritative approval to it. At times they said ‘no’ to certain shades of
nail polish or revealing clothes, and at times they capitulated to aspects of female teen culture they found troubling or simply irritating” (83). She argues that this “both allowed for and neutralized the sexual meaning of a range of colors and styles from bright red lipstick to cocktail dresses. These things became acceptable for adolescent girls because of, rather than in spite of, the fact of paternal mediation in the 1940s and 1950s” (83).

Physical appearance and its relationship with consumerism gained importance with teenage girls at the time because, as May asserts, “[d]ating, a ritual that first emerged in the 1920s, had become an integral part of the youth culture by the 1950s” (101). Dating started at early ages for these young women. May reports that girls as young as fourteen were sometimes referred to as “Late Daters” and could find advice on charm, social skills, and poise from Ladies Home Journal. Rosen reports that “girls wore lipstick and nylons at twelve, when co-ed parties and kissing games became de rigueur” (307), and Susan Douglas reports that girls as young as twelve spent their weekly allowance on their appearance by buying “lipstick, Phisohex, [and] size 30AA stretch bras” (Girls 25). Most young people of both sexes began dating between the ages of fourteen and sixteen and usually dated more than one person before getting engaged. While reports of sexual intercourse prior to marriage were not uncommon, particularly with their future spouse, May reports that “most couples ‘held the line’ until marriage” (120). According to Coontz, “‘Heavy petting’ became the norm of dating in this period” (43) and was “sanctioned so long as one didn’t go ‘too far’ (though this was an elastic and ambiguous prohibition)” (45). Generally, it was the young woman’s responsibility to preserve boundaries and those young women who did fall pregnant lacked options. Coontz reports, “The main reason that teenage sexual behavior did not result in many more illegitimate births during this period was that the age
of marriage dropped sharply. Young people were not taught how to ‘say no’—they were simply handed wedding rings” (44).

The idealized family of the fifties that still pervades the popular imagination remains specifically middle-class and White, and even then, the idealized family eluded many. Coontz reports that significant percentages of marriages in the 1950s were unhappy, including one statistic that indicated less than one-third of couples were “happily or very happily married” (41), and ultimately, up to one-third of the marriages that began in the 1950s ended in divorce. For some, reality went beyond mere unhappiness. Coontz reports that, for many children, family life “was not so much a matter of being protected from the harsh realities of the outside world as preventing the outside world from learning the harsh realities of family life” (37). She then asserts, “Beneath the polished facades of many ‘ideal’ families, suburban as well as urban, was violence, terror, or simply grinding misery that only occasionally came to light” (38). “Wife battering was not even considered a ‘real’ crime by most” (38), and even psychiatrists often considered physical and sexual abuse by a husband the wife’s fault. Even incest was attributed to “female ‘sex delinquency’” (39). However, surface appearances could conceal much of what was truly happening in some fifties’ homes, and everyone was expected to keep up the appearance of normalcy.

The images of the 1950s that pervade the popular consciousness are very White, and May argues, “[I]t was the values of the white middle class that shaped the dominant political and economic institutions that affected all Americans” (13). However, Coontz asserts, “[C]ontrary to the all-white lineup of the television networks and the streets of suburbia, the 1950s saw major transformation in the ethnic composition of America” (31). Further, the ever-present Whiteness of fifties television may be overstated. While the TV images that influence modern perceptions
of the fifties are almost exclusively White, Thomas Doherty argues that this is because of the nature of recorded television versus what was shown live; the programs that often demonstrated this integration were rarely recorded or syndicated and thus have not had the influence on later popular memory. Doherty argues, “Traditionally, Hollywood had relegated African American performers to separate and unequal screen space as restricted as a Jim Crow lavatory. On television, variety show hosts such as Ted Mack, Arthur Godfrey, and Ed Sullivan showcased African American dancers, singers, and actors in a casual manner that radiated good fellowship” (72). Introducing television sets into American homes showed Black people to those with no other exposure to people of a different race.

The nation’s leadership tried to reduce blatant discrimination during World War II and in the postwar era, and Black Americans won important desegregation battles in the Supreme Court in the 1950s. Brown v. Board of Education brought an official end to racial segregation in American public schools. That precedent led to the determination that bussing laws in Alabama were also unconstitutional.23 While income inequality remained an issue, during this time, Black students enrolled in college in more significant numbers, particularly at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), thanks, in part, to the United Negro College Fund. Further, a Black business class emerged during this period, as many Black families moved into neighborhoods with other Black families. While the long-term consequences of this have proven

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23 The case that settled this, Browder v. Gayle, was brought before a US District Court panel, which ruled on 5 June 1956 that the state bussing laws were unconstitutional. The US Supreme Court upheld this decision on 13 November 1956 and then reaffirmed it on 17 December 1956 when the Supreme Court rejected city and state appeals to reconsider. For more information on this, I recommend checking out The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University and the Montgomery Bus Boycott entries in their King Encyclopedia, particularly the entry on Browder v. Gayle.
harmful, “working class youth could see real possibilities for economic mobility” at the time (Coontz 324).

In total, the image of domestic containment during the fifties encompasses multiple areas of American society, all of which emphasized the importance of the family to the nation’s success. The return from war shifted ideas about hegemonic masculinity and the importance of existing within a community, a unified family, rather than being alone. Similarly, families became essential to creating a society that reinforced the nation’s values. Every family member served a specialized role, strengthening the family, therefore, the nation. The postwar economic boom offered significant opportunities for consumerist behavior, which made it easy to demonstrate the success of capitalism and the consumerist way of life. This consumerist attitude even navigated shifting gender expectations by offering many women opportunities to enter and remain in the workforce under certain circumstances, all to meet a family’s financial needs. This capitalist financial success offered the illusion, if not the reality, of the classlessness that America had always claimed, at least on the surface, and for those groups most influentially and culturally visible; it also supported the fight against communism. Seeming to achieve through capitalist means what socialists and communists had been fighting for reinforced American superiority and validated their efforts to spread democracy and capitalism to the rest of the world.

Hollywood Containment

While Hollywood had always been primarily focused on profit, it has also always been engaged in the political realm, despite arguments to the contrary, and the fifties were no exception. Doherty asserts, “During the war, moviegoers learned to appreciate cinema for what it
was: a powerful delivery system for ideology. Schooled in celluloid persuasion, postwar Americans looked upon the screen with more sophisticated eyes and discerned bright-lined messages and hidden agenda in even the most escapist motion picture fare” (21). From the PCA to the HUAC, many entities were invested in the kinds of messages the movies were sending. As Biskind asserts,

In the fifties, [movies] taught us how to dress for a rumble or a board meeting, how far to go on the first date, what to think about Martians, or closer to home, Jews, blacks, and homosexuals. It taught girls whether they should have husbands or careers, boys whether to pursue work or pleasure. They told us what was right and what was wrong, what was good and what was bad; they defined our problems and suggested solutions. (2)

He adds, “Whatever the genre, they share a preoccupation with the pressing issues of the day—conformity, dissent, minorities, delinquency, and sex roles. All reflect the particular constraints of the fifties cultural and political climate” (3-4). Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood argue that Hollywood worked particularly hard to promote the concept of the American Dream by demonstrating American capitalist economic success and consumerism. They assert, “In the 1950s especially, American films reveled in the material pleasures associated with the postwar U.S. economic boom, presenting their nation as a new classless consumer democracy” (99).

Romances of the period were no exception. As Robert Shandley states, “[A]t the point in history where American isolationism had ended for good and the United States took a dominant role in the postwar world order, America imagined itself young and in love in Europe” (xiii). Shaw and Youngblood assert that despite not directly being about the Cold War, Roman Holiday and other films like it “showed the west to be modern, glamorous, full of opportunity and fun” in contrast to the “cosseted and emotionally imprisoned European monarchy” (100).

During the fifties, the sex comedy rose to prominence as the primary manifestation of the romantic comedy of the period and arrived at the junction of all that was occurring culturally
during the 1950s. Jeffers McDonald identifies three specific events in 1953 that heavily influenced the development of the subgenre: the publication of Alfred Kinsey’s report on Sexual Behavior in the Human Female, which identified that a significant number of women had sexual experiences outside the confines of marriage; the publication of the first Playboy magazine; and the release of the film The Moon is Blue (Otto Preminger 1953), which “contained the first use of use of the word ‘virgin’ in a legitimate, non-pornographic film, since the imposition of the Production Code” (40-42). The PCA denied The Moon is Blue a seal of approval, but Preminger released it anyway, and it proved successful, partly because “it was the first major film to advertise its own independence and thereby generate audience interest” (42). Jeffers McDonald also identifies the film’s success as a factor in the decline of the PCA’s power.

The name sex comedy may be misleading, however. According to Leger Grindon, “[T]he sex comedy builds its plot around the prospect of sex and discusses it blatantly, but sex rarely takes place, and never on screen. The attempts at seduction generally fail, finally leading to the thwarted seducer agreeing to wed” (47). Jeffers McDonald suggests that these romantic comedies “could in fact be called ‘Battle of the Sexes comedies’ since this more accurately encapsulates their dynamic” (44). The sex comedy leaves behind the courtship from the screwball comedy in favor of seduction as the film’s primary focus. Jeffers McDonald asserts, “The sex comedy pits woman against man in an elemental battle of wits, in which the goal of both is sex. Only the timing and legitimacy of this differs from gender to gender, with women wanting sex after, and men before or without, marriage” (38). Grindon argues, “The sex comedy portrayed a cynical view of courtship as seduction in which sex was a commodity to be

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24 In The Hollywood Romantic Comedy, Grindon actually calls the section of the book focused on this cycle “Comedies of Seduction” as opposed to “Sex Comedies” (45).
exchanged. The man and woman each maneuver for advantage. The man sought sex without any commitment, while the woman bargained for the economic security represented by marriage” (47). Films such as *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953), *Sabrina* (1954), *Some Like it Hot* (1959), *Lover Come Back* (1961), *That Touch of Mink* (1962), *Come Blow Your Horn* (1963), and *Sex and the Single Girl* (1964), among others, are generally understood to be sex comedies.

Sex comedies of the period both reflected and perpetuated the conflicting social limitations placed on men and women in the fifties. Claire Mortimer argues, “The heroine of the sex comedy emerged out of the tension between the reality and the fantasy of femininity that was prevalent in America. On the one hand she is capable of desire, yet on the other she yearns for the domestic idyll of marriage and all that it entails, in terms of husband, children, house, and consumer goods” (26). She also argues, “The 1950s romantic comedies displayed this disparate attitude toward women,” which separated women into “two opposing archetypes, the virgin and the whore” (27). Further, Jeffers McDonald asserts, “These two patterns observable within the sex comedy—that the good girl, not the sexually available one, gets the man, and that marriage is inevitably the end of the story (and hence of any freedom, wit, humour, spontaneity and sexiness occurring within it)—clearly relate to the contemporary assumptions of the society producing these films” (47), which, according to Mortimer proves the same for either type of woman: “Ultimately, both archetypes have the same aim, an aim which reinforces the status quo, placing the woman very much in the home” (27).

Scholars consider *Pillow Talk* (1959) a quintessential sex comedy of the period. In addition to starring two actors frequently associated with sex comedies, Rock Hudson and Doris Day, Jeffers McDonald argues that it “manages to blend the energy of its subgenre, derived from the antagonism between the main characters, with a romantic tone more often employed in the
mainstream romantic comedies” (51). In the film, interior decorator Jan (Doris Day) and playboy and composer Brad (Rock Hudson) share a party line, much to Jan’s frustration, as Brad frequently has the line tied up, talking with his conquests. When they meet through a mutual acquaintance, Brad pretends to be Rex Stetson, a wealthy rancher from Texas, and through that persona begins to woo Jan. When the truth is revealed, Brad struggles to get Jan to forgive him and eventually turns his bachelor pad over to her decorating skills to prove that he had changed his ways. Nadel asserts, “Pillow Talk reflects concern with the possibility of personal fulfillment that anticipates the 1960s” (141). The genre’s insistence on coupling threatens both Jan’s and Brad’s autonomy. Both characters seek sexual fulfillment, but while social mores allow Brad to express this desire outside of a committed relationship, Jan can do so only after Brad has declared his commitment to her and their relationship. However, this commitment also threatens both their goals and desires. Brad must now limit his sexual availability to Jan, which destroys his identity as a playboy, while Jan’s livelihood and identity as a professional, working woman come under threat from the implications of marriage and the children that will inevitably follow.

This chapter explores three Ruritanian romances of the 1950s, which feature royal cross-class romances that do not end in the obligatory “happily ever after” typically associated with the genre. Instead, each film ends with the commoner walking away from the relationship, bowing to the differences that separate the lovers. Roman Holiday, The Swan, and The Prince and the Showgirl include endings that uphold the status quo, even to the point of rejecting the near-mandatory conclusion typically associated with romances of this kind. Each rejects the traditional happily ever after of the cross-class couple in a Ruritanian romance in favor of maintaining class boundaries. Two films, Roman Holiday and The Prince and the Showgirl, end with no marriage couplings at all, just images of the lone commoner walking away from the site
of their romance. However, *The Swan* ends with the commoner leaving the princess he knows
will never be happy with him, offering room for the princess to marry the prince her family has
pursued for years. The socially appropriate relationship is founded not on passion or even
friendship but rather on obligation. By rejecting the standard ending, these films reflect
America’s conflicted relationship with social class under containment. Even as these films
reinforce American superiority and the strengths of America’s classless system over European
stodginess, the ending demonstrates that these beliefs can only go so far. All three films present
ideas about the superiority of American perspectives on social class and reinforce American
exceptionalism before undercutting the beliefs they just espoused by rejecting the relationships
that would demonstrate the fullest belief in those systems.

After two world wars and with the onset of the Cold War, the types of kingdoms
traditionally featured in Ruritanian romances had fundamentally changed. Nicholas Daly asserts
that after the wars, Europe was “radically redrawn” as smaller kingdoms were transformed into
larger nation-states until, ultimately, “Europe was effectively split in two” (149-50). He argues,
“For decades to come the binary division demarcated by the iron curtain would elide older
national and imperial alignments, and not just in Europe, shaping the fates of nations as well as
the minutiae of everyday life for countless individuals” (150) as the opening of this chapter
described. Daly argues that postwar Ruritanian stories generally took one of two forms:
metaphor and nostalgia. While in some films, such as *Call Me Madam* (1953), *The Mouse that
European lands began to be deployed in comic approaches to the anxieties of the era” (157), *The
Swan* and *The Prince and the Showgirl* rely on nostalgia. Both *The Swan* and *The Prince and the
Showgirl* are set in the years leading up to World War I, 1910 and 1911, respectively, and this
allows them to comment on the events of the previous half-century through the lens of 1950s ideologies. Daly asserts, “Ruritanian fantasies that conjured up romantic adventure in the exotic, semi-feudal corners of Europe could scarcely hope to thrive against such a geopolitical backdrop, except as pure nostalgia” (153).

Because of their settings, *The Swan* and *The Prince and the Showgirl* look back at the prewar era when complicated alliances built on marriage and common interest entangled nations. *The Swan* adapts the 1920 play, *A hattyú*, by Hungarian playwright Ferenc Molnár,25 and *The Prince and the Showgirl* adapts the 1953 play, *The Sleeping Prince*, by Terence Rattigan, a Brit. In *The Swan*, the discussion of alliances runs just below the plot’s surface: the prince has been traveling across Europe under the auspices of searching for the princess who will be the best alliance for him personally and for his kingdom. The anticipated alliance, the story’s focus, will restore a family whose legacy was destroyed by Napoleon. Conversely, *The Prince and the Showgirl* possesses the insights earned by forty years—and two world wars—of hindsight and regularly nods to those insights. The plot is heavily influenced by the kinds of infighting in the Baltic states that precipitated the opening events of World War I: one of the main characters is plotting against another with the help of Kaiser Bill, another asks, “Who cares about Balkan revolutions? You have them all the time,” and a third describes an earlier coronation as having included “[s]hots going off like bombs and the sky black with infernal machines. Happily, no fatalities, except in the crowd.” These films treat Europe, as remembered in Ruritanian fiction, as a relic of the past and one that the audience should be glad society has moved beyond. *Roman Holiday* looks into this new world of a more unified Western Europe with close ties to the United States.

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25 Molnár is also credited as a writer for the musical *Carousel*, based on his play *Lilom*. 
Roman Holiday

Roman Holiday tells the story of Princess Ann (Audrey Hepburn), the future ruler of an unnamed Ruritanian country, who is traveling Europe on a postwar goodwill tour. While in Rome, she becomes overwhelmed with the pace of her public appearances and, under the influences of a soporific, sneaks out of the embassy and falls asleep on a bench. Down-on-his-luck reporter Joe Bradley (Gregory Peck) finds her and takes her back to his apartment to sleep it off, not realizing her identity until the next day when he sees her picture. While sure he will be able to use their encounter to get a scoop on the princess and improve his fortunes, Ann, assuming the name Anya, uses this time away from her attendants and responsibilities to see Rome her own way. She and Joe visit tourist attractions around the city, with Joe’s photojournalist buddy, Irving (Eddie Albert), taking pictures along the way. Ann also uses her newfound freedom to engage in activities she could never do as a princess, like chopping her hair short and going dancing at a public party. During their time together, Ann and Joe fall in love, while both are keeping (or believe they are keeping) an important secret about their identity from the other. They also know that their time together cannot last. In the end, Joe must take Ann back to the embassy, and Ann must return to her royal duties. An event at the embassy offers them one last chance to meet one another in their true identities, Joe as reporter and Ann as princess, before they both must walk away with only their memories and Irving’s photos as reminders of their Roman holiday.

In many ways, Roman Holiday exemplifies the twentieth-century Ruritanian romance, particularly in its use of the royalty in disguise trope. Although in the beginning, the disguise is unintentional, as Ann has been drugged and simply cannot tell Joe who she is, she finds that she
enjoys her time as a regular citizen and takes some time to herself, intentionally continuing her accidental disguise, a disguise that works quite well. Throughout the film, Ann, in the guise of Anya, can see the sights in Rome mostly unbothered because she does not carry the trappings of royalty, such as her fancy dress and retinue of attendants. Even the barber who cuts her hair, who is up close and personal with her, does not realize her true identity but instead helps her further disguise herself. Further, Joe, a man whose job it is to keep up on current events and who is scheduled to meet the princess the next day, does not recognize her until after she has spent the night in his apartment, even though she offered several clues, such as asking him to help her undress. The lack of external symbols of her social position and class reinforces their superficiality, which would likely have resonated with an American audience who believed a better life was only a simple purchase away. However, even as the film reinforces how easily class can be faked, it undermines the benefits of a higher class: while Ann asks for a nightgown with pink roses on it, she sleeps just as well, perhaps better, in Joe’s pajamas, free of both the trappings and the responsibilities of her station.

Wyler regularly parallels Princess Ann’s tour of Europe and Anya’s tour of Rome, reinforcing both the rigidness of Ann’s royal experience and the egalitarianism of the world offered by the average Joe. While Ann visits Buckingham Palace, a place known for its formality and immovable guards, Anya and Joe tour Rome on a Vespa, enjoying the freedom traveling on such a vehicle offers. Where Ann visits the new International Aid building, a place designed by the powerful to help those whom the war left in need, Anya and the former G.I. Joe visit a makeshift war memorial created by the everyday people of Rome to commemorate their survival despite the war. Ann meets with foreign dignitaries, the people with whom she will be expected to work in her future role as queen, while Anya and Joe meet the everyday citizens, like those
she will serve. The most direct example of this paralleling appears in the film’s opening and closing. The film’s beginning shows Ann greeting a procession of dignitaries from around the world. Ann stands at a podium, and the long line of dignitaries approach her in groups of one or two, where an attendant introduces them before Ann greets them in their own language. The final scene echoes this process, not with the rich and powerful, but instead with the reporters from around the world who have been covering her tour. She has agreed to meet with the reporters in lieu of the interview opportunity they missed because of her illness, the excuse given for her absence. After speaking with the reporters briefly, Ann declares, “I would now like to meet some of the ladies and gentlemen of the press.” Rather than the reporters approaching her one-by-one, as did the dignitaries, Ann steps down from the podium, bringing herself to their level. Rather than being introduced by a royal attendant, each reporter introduces themselves, addressing the princess directly. Once again, she greets these reporters in their language, shaking their hands as she did with the dignitaries. She stands closer to and is more intimate with the reporters because of the authenticity of her experiences in Rome with Joe. These parallels further undermine the separation between classes as Anya can experience many of the same things as Ann, just more closely and in some ways more authentically, without the pomp and circumstance of a royal tour. Moreover, most of what makes the difference is the clothes and other trappings that connect her to her royal identity.

However, even as *Roman Holiday* uses the trappings of status to eliminate the separations between social classes, the plot reinforces the necessity of that separation. Ann’s time with Joe is bookended by wearing some of his most intimate clothes, first his pajamas and then his robe. Ann’s comfort with the average life and the superficiality of what separates Ann and Anya become apparent in the final scene in Joe’s apartment. When Ann exits Joe’s bathroom, wearing
his robe, Joe asks if her clothes were ruined, and she replies, “No, they’ll be dry in a minute.”

This discussion of her clothes reinforces the temporariness of their time together, as they are almost dry so that she can put them back on again. Like the space of Joe’s apartment, the robe she wears is transitional and temporary, a transition between the past day and the rest of Ann’s life. When Joe tells her that his robe suits her, “You should always wear my clothes,” he recognizes her comfort in the commoner role. Rather than responding to his comment, Ann offers to cook for him, a most domestic activity, and a somewhat surprising one given her background, although wholly appropriate for a woman of the period. However, the temporary nature of Joe’s bachelor apartment hinders their moment of domesticity, as Joe’s apartment lacks a kitchen. Then “The American Hour from Rome” radio program cutting in with an announcement about Princess Ann breaks the sense of intimacy of the moment, reminding them both of how short their time is together. While Ann shuts the radio off and declares, “The news can wait for tomorrow,” it is too late. They both know that she must take off his robe and put back on her own attire, her own identity. Ann declares that she must go, but he steps in her way, embracing her, and kissing her cheek and forehead. Ann then says she must “go and get dressed,” leaving behind this space where she can be someone other than her title.

While nothing in the scene suggests actual sexual activity, it marks a moment of lost innocence, a consummation of sorts, a shifting from childhood innocence into a more matriarchal role. When Ann returns to the embassy, she does so not as a timid young royal but as the future queen. When pressed for details on her whereabouts, she refuses to give them. When the ambassador reminds her of her duties, she states, “I trust you will not find it necessary to use that word again. Were I not completely aware of my duty to my family and my country I would not have come back tonight or, indeed, ever again.” Her experiences of falling in love with Joe have
served her “path to adulthood” (Weiss 17), an adulthood that requires no milk and crackers before bed. Just as Ann’s offer to cook for Joe demonstrates one aspect of the fifties’ expectations for a traditional wife, her decision to return to her royal position represents her shift to monarchical mother. When Ann hears that her people are concerned for her well-being, she recognizes that she must return. She then returns to her kingdom to “transmit” to her people “the values of the civilization” (Biskind 267).

While reinforcing the responsibilities of wife and mother, the ending undermines all that the film has been arguing about the superficiality of social class in favor of maintaining the status quo. Joe cannot bring Ann down to his social situation, and Ann cannot bring Joe up to hers. The holiday nature of their relationship reinforces that it exists separate from the rest of the world. This separation reinforces the separation of what American society was saying about itself.

While the film allows Ann and Joe to see one another for who they truly are, the public nature of the event means their final moments together can hold nothing of the intimacy of their holiday together. They can share only public words and secret glances. The holiday is over. Only after watching Princess Ann walk away with her retinue does Joe turn and walk through the empty embassy alone.

The Swan

The Swan tells the story of the love triangle between Princess Alexandra (Grace Kelly), Prince Albert (Alec Guinness), and Dr. Nicholas Agi (Louis Jourdan). Set in 1910, Princess Alexandra’s family has hoped for years that Prince Albert would settle down to marry and select Alexandra to be his bride. While they wait, however, Dr. Nicholas Agi, Alexandra’s brother’s tutor, falls in love with the princess. When Albert eventually comes to call, he barely notices
Alexandra. The family then develops a plan for the princess to make him jealous by pretending she is in love with the tutor. Ironically, while Alexandra actually finds herself falling in love with the tutor, Albert barely acknowledges the subterfuge until Dr. Agi challenges him and his social position in a conversation after a royal ball. The confrontation leaves the entire family upset, but it solidifies in Alexandra’s mind that she should reject a royal marriage and instead marry Dr. Agi. However, just as Alexandra is packing her bags to leave with Dr. Agi, the tutor is preparing to leave without her. After a brief confrontation, Alexandra watches her love drive away, and Prince Albert approaches her. He tells her that while they may not have a passionate marriage, he understands her in a way that others do not. They then return to the palace and, presumably, their rightful stations in life.

The 1956 version of *The Swan* was not the first time Molnár’s play had been adapted into a studio film; it had also been released twice before, once as a silent film (Dimitri Buchowetzki 1925), and again under the title *One Romantic Night* (Paul L. Stein 1930). A few significant differences appear between *One Romantic Night* and the 1956 version of *The Swan*, particularly regarding the relationship between Prince Albert and Princess Alexandra. In *One Romantic Night*, after learning that the tutor is leaving her, Alexandra (Lillian Gish, in her first speaking role) receives another blow in the form of a telegram stating that the emperor has commanded that Albert (Rod La Rocque) marry someone else. However, the prince comes to her window, and they devise a plan to elope to South America, ignoring the emperor’s command and risking Albert’s title. Once Albert and Alexandra have left, her uncle (O.P. Heggie) informs her mother (Marie Dressler) that the princess named in the telegram does not exist; however, “there’s only one thing more romantic than a tutor and that is a prince who is about to lose his throne.”

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26 In Buchowetzki’s version, Alexandra actually ends the film with the tutor rather than Albert.
scene is incredibly different from how it appears in *The Swan*, where, after Alexandra watches
the professor ride away, she and Albert speak on the terrace, and he argues that, in many ways,
they are the same before he leads her inside.

In *The Swan*, Guinness’s Albert is far from an ideal romantic partner, despite being a prince. The film infantilizes Albert. He behaves childishly. He does not take on responsibility, instead relying on his aides to pay attention to important things for him. He spends more time playing with Alexandra’s brothers than he does with the adults and does not care that he inconveniences others. When he first arrives—in the middle of the night—he sleeps not only through lunch but also through dinner and then eats in his rooms while the family has been delaying their meals, waiting for him to dine. When the family expects him to dance at the ball, he instead plays with the band, which is inappropriate for both his age and social position. He even seems overly attached to his mother, the queen (Agnes Moorehead), which, in the fifties, was a clear sign that she was overly involved in his life and often signified homosexual tendencies. Like the princes in the other adaptations, “he’s been all over Europe, looked at every Princess and turned down every one of them”; however, unlike the princes from previous versions, he does not seem to avoid marriage so he can continue a life of womanizing and partying. Instead, he seems genuinely uninterested in marriage, despite knowing he must carry on the royal line. At times he is clearly more aware of everything than his actions suggest, but this only reinforces that his behavior demonstrates apathy rather than ignorance.

The final scene of *The Swan* mostly clearly demonstrates that Guinness’s Albert is not a romantic as La Rocque’s is in *One Romantic Night*. While La Rocque’s Albert opens the film flirting with women at a raucous party, Guiness’s Albert never appears with any women. While La Rocque’s Albert changes his ways after meeting Alexandra, even abandoning Nina, a woman
to whom he had made promises in the film’s opening, Guinness’s Albert simply succumbs to royal expectations. The filmmakers’ decision to forgo the traditional cross-culture coupling in favor of one that reinforces the status quo, especially in light of these changes to the hero, was intentional. While the homogamous ending appears in Molnár’s play, the filmmakers did consider changing it for *The Swan* to be more in line with other cross-class romances. In a *Los Angeles Times* article, Philip K. Scheuer reports that Vidor “watched the Princess Margaret-Peter Townsend romance with more than ordinary interest: ‘If they had wed, we would have thought very seriously of changing our ending. However, by not marrying a commoner, the Princess made our ‘Swan’ a new, modern story! Now they can’t say it’s old-fashioned.’” Vidor’s perspective is interesting, given the sufficient contemporary precedent for the opposite ending, a precedent even more closely connected to the film: Grace Kelly’s marriage to Prince Ranier III of Monaco, which Scheuer also mentions. Ultimately, the filmmakers even took advantage of this marriage and premiered on the same day as the couple’s civil ceremony.

The rejection of Albert as a romantic hero who must woo Alexandra in favor of a practical marriage, almost of convenience for the greater good, creates a much more cynical film than previous iterations. This cynicism perhaps speaks to a serious American cultural concern in the fifties about how many children were being born in the baby boom and the kinds of families who were having children. This concern was particularly centered around college-educated women and inaccurate reports that they were having children at lower rates than so-called inferior groups. May asserts,

> These sentiments echoed elitist and nativist attitudes that fueled the eugenics movement popularized by Theodore Roosevelt in the early years of the century. At that time, proponents of eugenics urged the “better” classes, meaning white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, to reproduce at a rate equal to or higher than the “lower orders.” They feared that white native-born Americans were committing “race suicide.” After World War II,
these concerns fed the controversy surrounding new educational and emplacement opportunities for women. (139)

The film’s insistence on the right kind of partner over the romantic partner reflects this social concern about the kinds of people women met as they entered the world.

With this in mind, it seems particularly relevant that a tutor interlopes on the hopes for a homogamous marriage between Alexandra and Albert. While Dr. Agi has primarily been hired to tutor Alexandra’s brothers, he also practices fencing—a rather unsubtle phallic metaphor—with Alexandra. Later, he teaches her about the stars, his actual area of expertise, once Alexandra has been convinced by her family to show him affection. She is, in part, enchanted with him because of the knowledge he offers. Dr. Agi is not an American, however, he espouses American perspectives about social class. The invitation to the ball, along with Alexandra’s attention and eventual honesty about the role her family intends for him to play, gives Dr. Agi the courage to confront the prince and the other members of the royal family. He tells them,

> In astronomy, I’ve learned that . . . [o]ne should never despise even the smallest specks in the universe, those little specks in the sky. Each of them is an immense world of its own. . . . I’m sure it’s difficult for the rulers of this earth to appreciate. They speak of their ten million population or their army of two millions. It never occurs to them that each single one of all those millions is a sovereign world. A world that is not to be destroyed.

Dr. Agi recognizes that the royal family’s position does not inherently mean they have moral superiority and that he is, in many ways, their equal. The situation the family has placed him in, with no thought to how this may impact him, demonstrates the ways their social superiority has prevented them from recognizing the value of those who are socially inferior.

Albert simultaneously seems to appreciate that the professor does not defer to his social betters at that moment and resents it, replying, “For twenty years, I’ve been waiting for a turn of voice like that. At last a man who talks to me as an equal. . . . And such candor, delightful. I’m
having an unforgettable evening.” Ultimately, however, the film rejects the argument for equality by reaffirming the relationship between those of the same class. Albert calls Dr. Agi an “insolent upstart” and “a snob of the worst kind—the upside-down variety. Just an ill-bred astronomer who hopes to hitch his peasant cart to a star and drag you down with him into the mud.” This attitude and a belief that Albert’s assessment is correct even if Alexandra disagrees, are central to why Dr. Agi eventually leaves without Alexandra. Despite the genre’s general belief that cross-class romance elevates the member of the lower class, ultimately, the characters in *The Swan* reject the premise.

In the end, the film reaffirms the traditional family, the importance of women to marriage, and the importance of marriage to men settling into adulthood. Both Alexandra and Albert must succumb to the social ethic: Alexandra by leaving behind the idea of love with Dr. Agi and Albert by accepting his role as the future king. While on the surface, Alexandra seems to be the protagonist, her importance ultimately rests in what she can do for the kingdom, how she will serve, as American women of the fifties did, as a moral backbone for her family and the kingdom her husband will eventually rule. Further, Alexandra represents the conduit through which Albert achieves true maturity. Biskind asserts that women were “priestesses of principle, keepers of the flame, custodians of conscience, . . . agents of social control. They defined and confirmed the value systems embodied in the narrative, cultureized or civilized men who, as rebels, delinquents, revenge heroes, Alcoholics, sickies, bad dads, old-fashioned pioneers and capitalists, or even bachelors, were outside society” (267). While Albert has been immature, thoughtless, and led around by the machinations of others, in the final scenes, because of Alexandra’s influence, he does eventually settle down and take the lead for the first time in the film. As they exit the balcony and the film, presumably as a couple, Albert finally seems
prepared to assume the role he had avoided. Because of his experiences with Alexandra, he is prepared to take over the reign.

*The Prince and the Showgirl*

*The Prince and the Showgirl* tells the story of an actress, Elsie Marina (Marilyn Monroe), who meets the Prince Regent of Carpathia (Laurence Olivier), a Balkan nation, at the coronation celebration for King George V in 1911. The prince regent wants to spend a no-strings-attached romantic night with Elsie, but she is far more resistant and frustrating than he expects. Instead of a simple sexual encounter, Elsie gets drunk and falls asleep in a spare bedroom in the embassy. The following day, as she prepares to leave, Elsie is waylaid by multiple members of the royal family and is eventually pulled into the coronation festivities attended by only the most elite of European society. During her time with these royals, she helps stop a coup and reunites the prince regent with his son, the king (Jeremy Spenser), who will become ruler in only eighteen months. In the light of the morning after the coronation, the prince regent makes plans for Elise to join him in Carpathia. However, on some level, they both know that their brief interlude has been just that and that they will likely never see one another again, no matter their plans. In the end, Elsie walks out of the Carpathian embassy alone, with only her medals of service to Carpathia and her memories.

Marilyn Monroe and her persona in the fifties presented a different perspective on women than the maternal ideal that was such a large part of containment culture. Molly Haskell argues that Marilyn Monroe’s persona and the characters she played tended to suggest “a pinup fantasy of the other woman” and “a masturbatory fantasy that gave satisfaction and demanded nothing else in return” (254). Her roles, like Lorelei Lee in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) and
Pola Debevoise in *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953), positioned her as a gold-digger while also solidifying her identity as a sex symbol. This perspective was furthered by her presence on the cover of the first issue of *Playboy*. By the time she starred in *The Prince and the Showgirl*, she was attempting to change perspectives about her. However, like Elsie Marina, Monroe was still underestimated throughout the production.

In *The Prince and the Showgirl*, the European characters express opinions reflective of the American position in the world prior to World War I; the prince regent, in particular, describes them as “children” in matters of diplomacy or, as he puts it, “[a] steam traction engine in Hampton Court maze.” He treats Elsie as though she could not possibly understand the nuances of political conversation, and thus it is safe to have secretive political conversations around her because he assumes she is simply pretty and not intelligent. However, the prince regent’s assessment of Americans’ lack of sophistication ends up causing him problems. He ignores her when she explains that she uses a stage name, Elsie Marina. “My dad was a Marine. My real name is Elsa Stolzenburg,” both a first name and a surname implying Germanic roots. When the prince regent orders that no outgoing calls can be placed from his son or from his son’s rooms to keep his son from conspiring with allies, the king simply asks Elsie to place the call from him from a different room and then takes over once the call has connected. He speaks with his ally in German, a language he knows the phone operator, his father’s spy, does not speak. However, neither the king nor the prince regent knows Elsie speaks German. Immediately after the call concludes, Elsie tells the king that she understood his plot against his father, explaining,

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27 Monroe did not pose for the issue, nor was she paid by Hugh Hefner, the magazine’s founder. Hefner purchased the pictures of Monroe that had been taken by a pinup photographer in 1949, before her rise to fame, when she needed funds (she was paid $50 for the pictures). By the time the first issue of *Playboy* was published, Monroe was on her way to becoming a star, and Hefner used that fame to promote his new magazine.
“I was born in Milwaukee,” a city with a significant German population. However, rather than going immediately to the prince regent with her information, she encourages father and son to reconcile, pushing them to develop their relationship.

In addition to encouraging the prince regent and king to reconcile, she actively works to assist in the reconciliation. Elise and the young king work together throughout the coronation ball to compose a statement and a series of conditions to which he would like his father to agree. The king asks Elsie to present the terms to the prince regent: “He wants a motorcycle, and he wants to be allowed to ride it anywhere in Carpathia. It seems reasonable enough to me. Let’s see, what else did he want? Oh, I remember. He wants a general election. . . . General elections are good things. They’re democratic.” If the prince regent agrees to those terms, the king will “reject utterly the overtures lately made to me by certain persons that I assume the powers of government before the appointed time. I do hereby adjure all citizens of the realm to unite loyally and wholeheartedly under the regency of my father, the Grand Duke Charles for the settled peace of the kingdom.” Ultimately, the prince regent agrees. Elsie’s interference on behalf of democracy serves to reconcile father and son and preserve the Carpathian Kingdom, at least for a while. Like Ann and Alexandra, and many women of the fifties, Elsie takes on the responsibility of “transmitting the values of the civilization” (267), principally democracy.

Some scholars, such as Marjory Rosen and Molly Haskell, have argued that Monroe’s performance in The Prince and the Showgirl simply replicates roles she had played so many times before, if not a version of her own public persona. Rosen asserts, “Suffice it to say that her pre-stardom films, prime-stardom films, and independent justification-of-seriousness films (The Prince and the Showgirl, 1957; The Misfits, 1961) varied no more than the heart scan of a thrombosis victim. Almost entirely she played the delicious dumb blonde with both heart and
head as soft as a cotton boll” (286). Similarly, Haskell asserts that in The Prince and the Showgirl, Monroe’s “image as sexpot... was treated almost in the abstract, that is, was accepted, unquestioned, as her identity” (256). These arguments miss an essential aspect of the role, particularly in terms of how the role relates to Monroe’s own identity. Elsie Marina is clearly savvier than anyone gives her credit for being. For example, while Elsie regularly fails to address His Grand Ducal Highness correctly, she never uses the epithet that causes him to go into a rage, “Serene,” a mistake several other characters make throughout the film. She is told, “Your host is correctly addressed as Your Grand Ducal Highness or sir. As a prince of Hungary before his marriage to the queen of Carpathia he is correctly entitled to the appellation of Imperial and Royal. At that time, by his own request Serene Highness was continued until he became regent.” She finds all the information overwhelming, and she calls him “His Highness,” “Your Regency,” “Your Grand Ducal,” “Your Grand Highness,” and “My Darling Grand Duke,” but never uses “Serene,” despite the lack of full context for why she should not do so. If Monroe’s performance of Elsie is simply a version of her own persona, a performance that she played daily, it cannot be ignored that Elsie is a woman who has learned to move as efficiently as possible in a world in which she has little control. Even if she seems flighty, Elise is always careful with what she says. Throughout the role, it can be challenging to know how much Elsie really understands because she has found that the dumb chorus girl and understudy is precisely what people expect of her and playing that role keeps her safe. If Elsie is so much like Marilyn, is it not reasonable to assume that Marilyn, too, found life much easier when others underestimated her, at least early in her career? In discussing Monroe and who she has become in popular culture after her death, Haskell says, “Women, particularly, have become contrite over their previous hostility to Monroe, canonizing her as a martyr to male chauvinism, which is
mostly what she was” (254). Haskell then asks, “Who was she, this breathless, blonde, supplicating symbol of sexuality, the lips anxiously offering themselves as the surrogate orifice, the whisper unconsciously expressing trepidation? And who made her what she was?” (254).

While Monroe’s persona and the characters she played tended to suggest “a pinup fantasy of the other woman” and “a masturbatory fantasy that gave satisfaction and demanded nothing in return” (Haskell 254), in The Prince and the Showgirl, she transcends that role. When Elsie agrees to have dinner with the prince regent, she expects a large party. She immediately tries to get out of the dinner when she realizes the truth, telling Northbrook, the Foreign Office agent who is assisting the prince regent during his stay in London:

ELSIE. I know all about harmless little tête-à-tête suppers. I’ve had to fight my way out of quite a few. “Champagne?” and “I hope you like caviar. Something cold because we don’t want servants around. It’s more fun serving ourselves, don’t you think?” And then after supper, “Miss Marina, you must be tired. Why don’t you put your feet up on this nice sofa?” No, I know every move.

NORTHBROOK. Aren’t you confusing this with a private room at Romano’s?
ELSIE. What’s the difference, except the longer run from the sofa to the door? And there’s no evidence a duke can’t run just as fast as the next man.

Throughout the evening, Elsie’s predictions stand true, as the prince regent alternates between attempting to seduce her—following the script Elsie described almost line-for-line—and ignoring her. Elsie, however, proves to be good at thinking on her feet and avoids the seduction, much to the exasperation of the prince regent. The American perspectives of class equity, of which the prince regent was so dismissive, are what save Elsie from unwanted attention from the prince regent. Elsie’s American perspectives, particularly those borne of American Puritanism related to sex and sexuality, influence the ways she interacts with other members of the Carpathian royal family. The following day, Elsie worries that the dowager queen, the prince
regent’s mother-in-law, will be angry to see her, filling the role the dowager queen’s daughter would once have filled. The prince regent takes the time to assure her that his wife is long dead and that the dowager queen does not begrudge him time with other women. Rather than the homewrecking woman, like “The Girl” in Seven Year Itch (1955) or even in her own life with the rumored affair with John F. Kennedy, Monroe’s character in The Prince and the Showgirl is the feminine maternal ideal who saves the family and the kingdom from utter destruction. At her suggestion, the prince regent rethinks how he behaves toward his son and starts to treat him with affection. She is the one who pushes the king to try to negotiate with his father, even going so far as to help him with his conditions and to write his statement of support with his father. However, the family is reunified—and, importantly, headed for democracy—her work is done and she is no longer needed.

When Elsie and the prince regent first dine together, he is frequently interrupted to deal with pressing political matters, and in many ways, she is treated like the interruption as he ignores her and even unintentionally insults her and her national identity. In the end, despite the vital role she has played in reconciling father and son, really the whole Carpathian kingdom, and despite statements from the prince regent that he wants her to join them immediately, the needs of the kingdom interrupt their goodbyes and plans for the future, and they both know they always will. Rather than becoming an interloper to a family and a whole kingdom, Elsie says, “This morning it’s up to me to be the grown-up one, isn’t it?” and walks away figuratively and literally. Like Gregory Peck in Roman Holiday, Elsie walks out of the embassy alone, her retreating figure the last image before the credits roll.

The absence of a happily ever after for the cross-class couples in these films does not represent the filmmakers’ failure to understand the genre’s expectations but instead suggests
alternative priorities in terms of messaging. Instead, the violation of these expectations
demonstrates discomfort on the filmmakers’ part with the issues of class being interrogated in the
films. While each of the films regularly pushes against the idea that the royalty that appears on
screen are superior to others, i.e., lower-class characters, and generally does so explicitly—such
as in Professor Agi’s confrontation with Albert about the ways that royalty treats their subjects or
Elsie’s assertions that men are men regardless of their titles—the films still cannot find a way to
overcome the class barrier and offer the cross-class couples a future. Therefore, these cross-class
relationships must represent something other than American ideas about class and classlessness.

As important as ideas about social class are to these films and the decade, the emphasis
on gender roles and the importance of the mother in ensuring a nation’s future are more
important to the message they send. Despite Ann’s desire to abandon her position for true love
and domestic bliss, she cannot abandon her responsibilities to her kingdom and her people.
Similarly, in The Swan, a continued relationship between Alexandra and Professor Agi would
demonstrate Alexandra’s rejection of the needs of her family and, even more importantly, her
nation to satisfy her own desires. Instead, she must remain as separate from them as a swan so
the prince can fulfill his responsibilities at her expense. Finally, in The Prince and The Showgirl,
once Elsie has served her purpose of unifying the family and supporting the fledgling
democracy, she must walk away alone. She has fulfilled the wifely and maternal role expected of
an American woman to “transmit the values of civilization” (Biskind 276) and democracy, but
within the fifties containment culture, the nation must always come before the individual,
regardless of any individual’s desires.
Conclusion

As the 1950s drew to a close, social changes were already coming, threatening the placid containment that masked dissatisfaction. The 1960s and ‘70s were decades of significant disruption for the United States. Women, whose numbers had been steadily increasing in the workplace throughout the fifties, again began a concerted effort to be seen as equal to men under the law, and it was during this period that what came to be known as second wave feminism anchored its roots. The Civil Rights Movement that began in the fifties continued its effort for equal treatment and was followed by other minority groups seeking their own liberation movements. Protests against police action in Vietnam, yet another American effort in the name of spreading democracy and fighting communism, arose across the nation. The Hippie movement, drug culture, suspicion of the government, and rejection of the sexual mores of previous generations led to the summer of love in 1967.

Films of the 1960s and ‘70s followed the cultural changes. The Production Code Administration, now called the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), replaced its seal of approval with a rating system that recognized not all films were made for all audiences and allowed for more explicit content that might be appropriate for adult audiences. Romantic comedies of the period took advantage of these new rules and the social and political upheaval. These films, known as radical or nervous romantic comedies, tended to be self-reflexive, offering new perspectives on stories from previous romantic comedy cycles. They tended to be particularly aware of the changing perspectives on sex and explicitly included much of the sex that was avoided or only hinted at in previous eras, as is seen in films such as *The Graduate* (1967), *Herold and Maude* (1971), and *Annie Hall* (1977). It was not until the early days of the
neo-traditional cycle in the 1980s and ‘90s that romantic comedies once again began to explore
issues of social class in films such as *Pretty Woman* (1990). Variations of the Ruritanian
romantic comedy did not begin to appear again until the late-1990s and into the early 2000s, with
films such as *The Beautician and the Beast* (1997) and *The Prince and Me* (2004). In my next
chapter, I examine the reappearance of the Ruritanian romantic comedy relative to neoliberal
politics in the United States and the influence of third wave and postfeminism on the reemerging
subgenre.
CHAPTER 3

“AS WITH ALL COMEDIES, THE MOST RIDICULOUS THING IMAGINABLE: [THEY] FELL IN LOVE”: FEMINISM AND COMMODIFICATION IN JAMES MANGOLD’S KATE AND LEOPOLD (2001)

The director’s cut of James Mangold’s Kate and Leopold (2001) introduces heroine Kate McKay (Meg Ryan) during a test screening for the fictional romantic comedy Love for Sale. Kate rolls her eyes at the ending and leaves the theater rather than listening to the feedback. When the audience reaction is tepid at best, and Kate and some studio executives suggest changes, particularly to the unlikable heroine, the director (played by James Mangold himself) pushes back. He asks Kate, “What, excuse me, you’ve never made a mistake in your life? You have no flaws? You’ve never slept with the wrong guy?” to which Kate replies, in a moment of brilliant filmic irony, “I’m not the protagonist in a major motion picture.” The director then tells Kate, “You people, with your tests. You are sucking the life out of American cinema.” As Kate and her assistant Darci (Natasha Lyonne) take a cab after the screening, Darci suggests that the director might be correct and that what they do is “crass, cold.” Kate argues, “We find out what regular people think, and we pass on their wisdom.”

These scenes serve as a lovely moment of introduction, not only to Kate as a character but to some of the film’s central themes as both narrative and cultural product. Kate and the director argue about the film’s value from two different perspectives about what gives a work of art value. While the director finds the value in his art to come from telling an authentic story, even if that story might not resonate with a large audience, Kate looks for value in the ability to
commodify the film to the largest audience. Interestingly, those who only ever saw the film’s theatrical release have never seen the scene I just described for reasons entirely based on what test audiences have told filmmakers over the years. The scene was cut for time because romantic comedies are not longer than two hours (Mangold).

This chapter explores how the social and political climate in the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, particularly related to women and feminism, influenced the neo-traditional romantic comedies of the era. As demonstrated by the metafictional scene originally cut from *Kate and Leopold*, late-twentieth-century feminism and commercialism often collide in unique ways in romantic comedies of the period. In the wake of the upheaval of the 1960s and ‘70s, from the conflict in Vietnam and the protests at home, to the civil rights movements of marginalized peoples, and other counter-culture movements, the 1980s and the New Right swung back toward conservatism, both politically, with neoliberalism, and socially, with neoconservatism. This return appears clearly with feminism, where these conflicting perspectives, when combined with questions about assumptions made by earlier feminist movements, led to splits and schisms within the movement, particularly in a neoliberal era that emphasized individualism and commercialism.

As stated in my introduction, this dissertation focuses on the time between the waves of feminism and the romantic comedies produced therein, largely avoiding films directly responding to gender politics and its public debates. However, third wave feminism presents a challenge for this because the beginning and ending dates for third wave feminism are not quite as straightforward as some of the other waves.28 While it is generally accepted that third wave feminism

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28 Meredith A. Evans and Chris Bobel’s “I am a Contradiction: Feminism and Feminist Identity in the Third Wave” (2007) does a great breakdown of some of the different schools of thought as to the coining of the term when the wave began or who would qualify as a third-waver.
feminism in the United States was set in motion by the testimony of Anita Hill during the confirmation hearings for US Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas in 1991, the end dates are not as clearly defined. Depending on the writer and the date of publication for the source, some, such as Rory Dicker in *A History of U.S. Feminisms* (2016), suggest the third wave is still taking place, while others, such as Deborah Frances-White in *The Guilty Feminist* (2019), suggest we may have already moved into the fifth wave.²⁹ Regardless, by most definitions, the neo-traditional romantic comedy cycle would fall within the third wave. However, it is an era influenced by neoconservative and neoliberal mentalities that appear both overtly and subtextually in the romantic comedies of the period. I thereby read neo-traditional romantic comedies as more connected with postfeminism rather than third wave feminism.³⁰

The first part of this chapter explores the broader social and political factors outside of feminism involved in the close of second wave feminism in the United States and how these factors influenced the next several decades, particularly for women. More precisely, I explore how neoliberalism and neoconservatism influenced popular perceptions of feminism. Neoconservatives first continued and increased attacks on feminists, calling them angry, unattractive, and bitter “feminazis,” while simultaneously elevating certain women to positions of power and authority to argue for the irrelevance of the movement. The term feminism became very unpopular culturally, leaving an opening for postfeminism to arise, a movement that both

²⁹ Despite its 2016 release date, *A History of U.S. Feminisms* is unlikely to have been influenced by the most vitriolic rhetoric of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, which may have influenced some of how Dicker reads the waves of feminism in her book. Deborah Frances-White is writing from a more British perspective, which may account for some of the discrepancies between her book and the others discussed in my dissertation.

³⁰ Scholars choose to spell the various waves of feminism differently, some hyphenating the waves (e.g., third-wave rather than third wave) or selecting to capitalize the first letters of the terms. This inconsistency is also the case with postfeminism, with some scholars using “post-feminism” and others “post feminism.” Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller helpfully review the nuances between these terms. In this chapter, I will use postfeminism as one word; however, I will maintain other scholars’ usage when citing their work.
builds on and rejects the tenets of feminism in its heavy focus on individualism and capitalism. Within this cultural context, the idea of girl power became popular and profitable. Girl power opened the door for a third wave of feminism with a strangely symbiotic relationship with neoliberal mindsets about individualism and self-improvement.

My analysis then explores how these changes in the feminist movement influence the era’s neo-traditional romantic comedies. The era’s cultural changes heavily influence the characters of this subgenre. Films often depict women as postfeminist success stories: successful careers and living independently in a big city. Their success is generally limited to their professional lives, however. While they typically have a group of good friends to support them, their personal lives tend to focus on workaholism and romantic disappointment. The solution the genre offers is for the women to abandon some, if not all, of their professional success to pursue an unexpected romantic relationship. To achieve this romantic relationship, women must undergo any number of neoliberal capitalist exercises, from dating services to makeovers and every step in between. Inevitably, these narratives solidify the heterosexual relationship the film has been building toward in a wedding, an event exemplified by consumption and excess.

The second part of this chapter offers an in-depth analysis of the main characters of *Kate and Leopold* and the ways that the hero and heroine of the film embody the period’s ideas about masculinity and femininity. As a twenty-first-century career woman, Kate represents what is new in the neo-traditional romantic comedy. She epitomizes the professional working woman only days away from earning a promotion that will make her the head honcho in her New York office. However, her success has left her taking care of nearly everyone in her life, both professionally—she prevents her clients from making mistakes that will hurt them financially—and personally—she emotionally and financially supports both her brother and boyfriend until
she and her boyfriend break up, that is. While she is living what should be an ideal feminist life of success, that success offers her nothing and only makes her cynical.

Leopold, on the other hand, represents all that is traditional in the neo-traditional romantic comedy. As a man literally pulled from the past, he embodies old-fashioned values. While his values initially seem somewhat ridiculous, such as when he stands every time Kate stands up from the table during an informal dinner, Kate and the other characters eventually see the value in them. Kate sees how his perspective and manners could be commodified, and she uses them to help her company with an important account. She invites him to audition for a spokesperson role, a role that capitalizes on and manipulates his real identity as a duke to sell margarine. Other characters, such as Charlie, Kate’s brother, take advantage of how women react to Leopold’s manners, asking for his help to woo the women. However, women’s reactions to Leopold further speak to the film’s perspectives on women and gender essentialism in an attempt to answer the eternal marketing question: “What do women want?”

Previous scholars, such as Tamar Jeffers McDonald, have explored the ways that Kate and Leopold engages in the traditions of the neo-traditional romantic comedy. One example is the way that Mangold uses the song “Moon River” to recall Breakfast at Tiffany’s (1961) and the rooftop dinner to recall The Goodbye Girl (1977). However, these scholars have not explored the ways that Mangold manipulates the form and function of generic conventions to further the narrative. That the production history of the film necessitated the elimination of the scene that most sets up this meta-analysis for the theatrical release only reinforces the film’s connection between form and function.
Postfeminist Moment and Third Wave

The complicated nature of postfeminism reflects even in the term itself. Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller argue that the prefix post suggests “both a repudiation and an affirmation of feminist politics, depending on how it is deployed within a certain cultural context,” and while it does have some empowering qualities that push for equality, free choice, and inclusion, its “celebration of the power of the individual” ultimately undermines the impact of systemic constraints that still impact women in society (2). Angela McRobbie claims, “post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved,” and therefore, feminism “is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (12). However, McRobbie disagrees with this postfeminist suggestion because she still sees work that needs to be done. Similarly, Deborah L. Siegel asserts that in its popular usage, “‘postfeminist’ most often describes a moment when women’s movements are, for whatever reasons, no longer moving, no longer vital, no longer relevant; the term suggests that the gains forged by previous generations of women have so completely pervaded all tiers of our social existence that those still ‘harping’ about women’s victim status are embarrassingly out of touch” (75). However, she rejects this popular assessment, arguing, “I insist that this world is emphatically not beyond the need for feminisms” (75).

Postfeminism is generally understood to have arisen as a concept in the 1980s. In part a reaction to the dramatic changes occurring culturally and politically in the 1960s and 70s, the 1980s witnessed the resurgence of the New Right. As opposed to the Old Right, which had been very concerned about laissez-faire economic policies and fighting communism, the New Right was more concerned about social conservatism and promoting traditional patriarchal family
values. Sarah M. Evans asserts, “Making effective use of cultural themes initially politicized by feminists—family, sexuality, and reproduction—the new conservatism reshaped the 1980 Republican Party platform” (176). As Reagan aligned himself with fundamentalist Christianity, televangelists like Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jerry Falwell, with their deep pockets and the wide range of influence of their parishioners, the televangelists, in turn, expanded their reach beyond their congregations. Andi Zeisler argues, “Though you could argue that they were most often preaching to the converted, it wasn’t long before their theatrical denunciations of divorce, homosexuality, the ERA, and women working outside the home oozed into the sightline of secular audiences” (148).

A second major ideology arose during this period, which both pushed the rejection of feminism and influenced the development of postfeminism and the third wave: neoliberalism. Neoliberalism became a significant political and cultural factor in the United States in the 1980s and ‘90s and flourished under presidents of both political parties. Jonathan Hopkin asserts, “The Reagan administration may have been the most aggressive promoter of neoliberal transformation, but the Democrats, after three successive defeats in presidential elections, accepted this broadly market liberal stance” (95). Under the conservativeness of the Reagan administration, policies based on so-called trickle-down economics and the belief that benefiting the wealthy would eventually benefit the lower classes ultimately reinforced social hierarchies and maintained an economic status quo. Then, under the Clinton administration, as Nancy Fraser argues, the nation shifted to “progressive neoliberalism” by “[d]rawing on progressive forces from civil society,” meaning they “diffused a recognition ethos that was superficially egalitarian and emancipatory” (13). Sinikka Aappola, Marina Gonick, and Anita Harris argue that culturally, neoliberalism focuses on “individualism, rational choice and self-realization” (7) and “promotes
a social world where the individual is fully self-responsible” (36), perspectives consistent with the American myth about success. They argue that this majorly impacted women and the feminist movements at the time, as “[w]omen’s attempts to gain the power and status of citizens in terms of achieving social rights have been drawn into a neo-liberal programme of self-generated wealth and standing and leverage within one’s society being based on consumption” (178-79).

This neoliberal perspective and the associated focus on individualism differs significantly from the later years of feminism’s second wave, which were marked by the so-called sex wars of the late 1970s and the early 1980s. This civil war split second-wave feminism into two camps: radical, anti-porn, “anti-sex” feminists on one side and pro-sex, anti-censorship feminists on the other. Some of the leading feminists on the topic, like Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon, and Kathleen Barry, saw pornography, sex work, and in some cases, all heterosexual sex as being part of the patriarchal power over women, regardless of personal preference. These perspectives, understandably, gave some feminists reason to pause. As R. Claire Snyder-Hall states,

Many straight feminists did not appreciate statements like, “Men are the enemy. Heterosexual women are collaborators with the enemy. . . . Every woman who lives with or fucks a man helps to maintain the oppression of her sister and hinders our struggle. . . . If you engage in any form of sexual activity with a man you are reinforcing his class power.” While this argument makes sense given the assumptions of radical feminist analysis, some heterosexual women understandably felt attacked and subsequently left the movement. (“Defense of ‘Choice” 257)

Anti-sex feminists also argued that individual women could not truly know their own sexual preferences because they had been enculturated into any beliefs they had. On the other hand, pro-sex feminists saw that cultural norms had prevented women from fully exploring and understanding their own sexuality in previous generations and argued “that radical feminism’s
representation of women as disempowered actors fails to see women as subjects in their own right” (Glick 20).

Throughout the ‘80s and ‘90s, magazines and news articles boosted their sales with attention-grabbing headlines asserting the death of feminism as a movement and the social dangers to feminists and other successful women. Articles like “The Marriage Crunch,” from Newsweek in 1986, made claims (which were later retracted) about the likelihood that a single woman in her forties would get married. This article and ones like it would “cherry-pick statistics and warp study findings into fainting-couch stories about equality run rampant” (Zeisler 145-46). Zeisler reports, “Fifty-three feature articles bemoaning the lonely state of career women (and feminism’s role in their unhappiness) ran between 1983 and 1986” (146). These articles served to reinforce the perspective that feminism had outlived its usefulness. Male conservative commentators of the time further contributed to this perspective. Popularized in the early 1990s by radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh, the term feminazi, which capitalizes on old stereotypes about feminists and from the anti-sex feminists in the sex wars, came into the American vocabulary to refer to women who pushed for any social or political agenda that may help women. To young women—born into a world that, at least according to the popular news media, accepted them as equals, at least in theory if not in actual practice—all these factors came together to present a world devoid of prospects for those who continue to follow outdated ideas about what women can and cannot do.

As the many high-profile women in the 1980s and ‘90s demonstrate,31 much of the “deliberate exclusion or subordination based on race or gender” (Sturm 466)—what Susan Sturm

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31 Sandra Day O’Connor was the first woman United States Supreme Court Justice; Geraldine Ferraro was the first woman nominated as the Vice-Presidential candidate for a major American political party; Wilma Mankiller was elected the Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation and was the first woman to lead a prominent Native American
calls first-generation bias—was gone, however, the insidious danger of second-generation bias remained. Second-generation bias is the more subtle but equally dangerous series of systemic issues that do not explicitly block individuals from achieving; however, these issues still make it challenging for people to succeed. Zeisler explains that for many people of the time, “[i]f women now had the right to do most everything a man could do, . . . then any obstacles or failures weren’t systemic, they were individual and could be remedied by simply being better, faster, stronger, wealthier” (155). Zeisler adds, “By the early 1990s, the political landscape was pocked with a bitter conventional wisdom that feminism had, if not outlived its usefulness, then certainly aided the creation of a culture of victimhood that infantilized girls and women, demonized men, and made sexual dynamics a minefield” (156). The neoliberal solution to this culture of victimhood is, of course, consumerist, as all a woman needs to do is find the correct product that will help her correct the defect, eliminate the problem, or cover the deficit that is holding her back. These perspectives ultimately influenced both postfeminism and the third wave, which often focused on individualism over collectivism.

The Anita Hill testimony in 1991 and Rebecca Walker’s subsequent Ms. article, “Becoming the Third Wave,” galvanized third wave feminism that had been lurking under the surface for more than a decade. Many found it necessary for this new third wave to clearly identify how their beliefs were different from those who had come before. Snyder-Hall argues, “Third-wave feminism is pluralistic and begins with the assumptions that women do not share a common gender identity or set of experiences and that they often interpret similar experiences differently” (“Defense of ‘Choice’” 259). Third wave feminism not only accepts but welcomes nation in the twentieth century; Sally Ride was the first American woman in space; and Reverend Barbara C. Harris became the first woman bishop of the Episcopal Church (additionally, she was an African American woman), and there were many more.
the differing perspectives that arose when women had control of their bodies and decisions. Snyder-Hall continues, “Because of its commitment to pluralism and respect for self-determination, third-wave feminism rejects judgmentalness. Lacking a common definition of feminism makes it difficult to judge another woman’s claim to be a feminist because of a wide variety of choices—including contradictory ones—could be justified as a feminist” (259). This permissiveness extended to sexual preferences and orientations in ways that the second wave had eventually split over. Meredith A. Evans and Chris Bobel argue that third wavers “seek to redefine feminism and gender roles to suit their life rather than mold themselves to fit a feminist ideal” (214-15). Suzy D’Enbeau asserts, “Contradiction is inherent in third-wave endeavor; indeed, these feminists embrace multiplicity” (56). Similarly, Snyder-Hall argues that “[w]ith no common identity, experiences, or definition of feminism, each feminist must make a conscious decision about how to determine her own path through the contradictory discourses that constitute contemporary society” (“Defense of ‘Choice’” 259). Many second-wave scholars have criticized the pluralistic and individualistic nature of the third wave, arguing that in its rejection of a collective goal, it has forfeited much of its political power in favor of reaching a broader audience, and making it too diffuse to achieve significant change in any direction.

Because of the pluralistic nature of the third wave and the recognition of the importance of individual experiences, differences between third wave feminism and postfeminism become quite narrow. The similarity between the concepts is reflected in the feminist subsets of girl power, power feminism, and girlie feminism. These subsets have values that were informed by and, in some ways, embraced by both the third wave and postfeminism alike. Zeisler and Susan J. Douglas argue that one of the biggest appeals for these subsets in the capitalist United States was that they were infinitely marketable and commodifiable. Girl power came out of the Riot
Grrrl movement of the third wave and represented in part an attempt to reclaim the value of girl culture. The term girl had long been used to minimize and discriminate against women, and thus “[b]aby boom feminists. . . had long rejected most things ‘girly’ as trivializing. But by the early 1990s, many girls wanted to reclaim girl culture as just as legitimate as boy culture: why was getting a pedicure any dumber than lifting weights?” (Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism* 49). By rejecting girliness as being trivial, Baby Boomer feminists had actually bought into the arguments that the patriarchy had made about traditionally feminine pursuits being less valuable than traditionally masculine ones. Even Phillis Schlafly identified the value in so-called women’s work and presented that value to her audience as she fought against the ERA. Popular figures like the Spice Girls saw the power in girl power, telling the *Evening Standard*, “‘Feminism has become a dirty word. Girl Power is just a Nineties way of saying it’” (Laville 7). In addition to being powerful, girl power proved marketable. Even the United States Department of Health and Human Services began a Girl Power initiative in 1997, hoping to empower young women. Douglas reports it also came with “a massive marketing campaign that sold T-shirts, body glitter, lip gloss, and thongs” (*Enlightened Sexism* 104).

The plurality and commitment to self-determination of the third wave, epitomized by girl power, has led to what some have called “choice feminism,” a term coined by Linda Hirschmann. Choice feminism articulates the frustrations many women have with their understanding of second wave feminism, in which it seems as though they have taken their ability to make decisions for themselves from the patriarchy and simply turned around and given

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32 Michaele L. Ferguson describes the relationship between Hirschman’s original use of the term and the way the movement used it: “Hirschman coined the phrase ‘choice feminism’ to name the widespread belief in the US that the women's movement has liberated women to make whatever choices they want. While Hirschman focuses on the choices women make about wage work and unpaid labor in the home, choice feminism is a much broader phenomenon” (247).
it to other women. Third wave feminism has pushed for a more pluralistic perspective that recognizes women are not one homogenous group, all sharing the same opinions, thoughts, and desires, and therefore they may have differing opinions on how feminist a particular decision might be. Snyder-Hall, while advocating for the broader concept, challenges the specific name choice feminism, arguing that the term choice is problematic because it trivializes decisions that can be difficult to make, conflates decisions made based on necessity and obligation with other, seemingly unnecessary, choices, and “focuses attention on the individual choice-maker and so takes the focus off the ways in which women’s choices are often overdetermined by societal structures and cultural traditions” (“Defense of ‘Choice’” 256). Essentially, embedded in the idea of choice feminism is the assumption of privilege. The choice to stay home and care for children, for example, assumes there is a partner who earns enough money to support a family on a single income or that income comes via other avenues. The choice to become a top-tier lawyer or executive assumes access to education and often mentorship.

Neo-traditional Romantic Comedies

The impact of the commodification and commercialism of feminism in its various forms appears readily in romantic comedies of the late 1980s through the early 2000s. The romantic comedy cycle of this period is known by several names: Claire Mortimer calls it the Resurgence of the Romantic Comedy (17), Leger Grindon calls it the Reaffirmation of Romance Cycle.

33 Snyder-Hall argues that this perception is flawed and that, in many ways, choice feminism is an extension of the pro-sex split from the “sex wars” of the 1980s (“What Is Third-Wave Feminism?” 179-80).

34 Grindon ends his interpretation of the cycle earlier than the others, identifying the “Grotesque and Ambivalent” cycle as beginning in the late 1990s.
(58), and Jeffers McDonald calls the cycle the Neo-Traditional Romantic Comedy\(^{35}\) (85). The prefixes of all three terms connect these romantic comedies to the past, and films of the period often seek to connect themselves back to the stories, characters, and themes from previous generations. Jeffers McDonald refers to these films as having “a mood of imprecise nostalgia” (91), sometimes appearing as a direct reference to older romantic comedies. One example occurs in Nora Ephron’s *You’ve Got Mail* (1998), a reimagining of Ernst Lubitsch’s *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), which includes a nod to the earlier film by using the title as the name of Kathleen Kelly’s (Meg Ryan) bookstore. The women of neo-traditional romantic comedies are generally working professionals who do not require economic support from men and have more sexual freedom than women of earlier cycles. More sexual freedom does not mean more sex occurs on screen, however, likely due to “a concern with traditional models of heterosexual relationships and a desire for more conventional and old-fashioned pairings” (Mortimer 18). Films of this genre include *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003), among others.

Revising old romantic comedy narrative structures was not new, as seen in previous decades of Hollywood history. Films of the late 1960s and early 70s, what Grindon calls “the transition through counter-culture cluster,” reflected both the political movements of the time and the rating system that replaced the Productions Code. The rating system offered more latitude for filmmakers about what could appear on screen. This latitude allowed films like *What’s Up, Doc?* (1972) and *Play It Again, Sam* (1972) to revisit classic films in new and interesting ways, such as *Bringing up Baby* (1938) and—in a comic reimagining—*Casablanca*.

\(^{35}\) “Neo-traditional romantic comedy” is the term I will use for the remainder of this chapter to refer generally to this period.

The social and political unrest of the 1960s and 70s heavily impacted how old romantic comedy films and tropes were revised during the decade. Factors such as the conflict in Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement, the Watergate scandal, and general economic stagnation impacted nearly every aspect of American culture. Additionally, Masters and Johnson continued Kinsey’s work from previous decades, leading to changes in perspectives on sex and, eventually, the sexual revolution. While the general attitude of the 1960s was one of sexual optimism and belief in the potential for change, by the 1970s, such optimism succumbed to cynicism, particularly about romantic relationships. Jeffers McDonald argues that this cynicism appeared in romantic comedies of the period in their “willingness to jettison former rules” of the genre (61). Grindon asserts that after all the nation had gone through culturally, the romantic comedy could not emerge the same on the other side, arguing, “The skepticism about love pervading the cycle threatens the humor and optimism long associated with the genre. The happy ending was dethroned as a permanent fixture and the guarantee of love triumphant was cashiered for a never-ending struggle between men and women” (58). Thus, films like *Herold and Maude* (1971), *Annie Hall*, and *Semi-Tough* (1977) end without the traditional generic happily ever after of a marriage or at least the promise of a monogamous coupling.

Like the counterculture and nervous romantic comedies that are very clearly rooted in the cultural events of their time, neo-traditional romantic comedies present a clear late-twentieth or
early-twenty-first century setting and the characters who populate the films are generally modern professionals. Mortimer argues that the men of these films tend to fall into one of two camps: those who “failed to effect the transition into manhood, living in a state of arrested development” (48) or playboys who must choose “between the pleasures of the bachelor lifestyle in the often dubious advantages of married life” (49-50). The women, on the other hand, are fully employed and somewhat sexually liberated. While bedroom scenes rarely appear on screen, audiences know neo-traditional heroines are sexual beings by closed door scenes, which capture the lead-up to a sexual encounter, and morning after scenes, generally involving strategically placed bedding and impeccably coiffed bedhead. While the audience sees these modern professional women as initially having less than ideal love lives, they do not read them as shrill feminazis but as women burned by past experiences and still looking for their Mr. Right. Neo-traditional romantic comedies are often set in big cities, and even those with more rural settings tend to emphasize the juxtaposition between city and rural life. Jeffers McDonald argues that these visual cues “employ the trappings of realism but empty them of special relevance” (88). This ambiguity avoids references that date a film, allowing it to maintain relevance for longer, likely contributing to the subgenre’s longevity.

Even as the trappings of the life presented in neo-traditional romantic comedies are modern, Jeffers McDonald argues that the neo-traditional romantic comedy “pays lip service to such ideas . . . only to confound them within the perfect romance it then produces for its protagonists” (86). Instead, she argues, “The neo-traditional romantic comedy reasserts the old ‘boy meets, loses, and regains girl’ structure, emphasizing the couple will be heterosexual, will form a lasting relationship, and that their story will end as soon as they do so” (86). This adherence to older structures separates the self-referentiality of neo-traditional romantic
comedies from radical and anxious romantic comedies. While films of the 1960s and ‘70s were willing to posit alternatives to the foregone romantic comedy ending, the neo-traditional romantic comedy reasserts the insistence on the happily ever after conclusion, reflecting the conservatism of the culture. Even as films of this period reference older films, the past they point to is not the past as it actually existed. Jeffers McDonald argues that romantic comedies of this period “represent a return to a notional form of romantic comedy which they assume to have existed” (85), often manifesting as “a mood of imprecise nostalgia” (91).

The central tension of the neo-traditional romantic comedy is generally one of culture, often focusing on differences between social classes. In the revisiting of old formulae, the classic rags-to-riches structure frequently appears in the subgenre in films like Coming to America (1988), Pretty Woman (1990), Sabrina (1995), Beautician and the Beast (1997), Sweet Home Alabama (2002), and Maid in Manhattan (2002), among others. Films like Shallow Hal (2001) and Win a Date with Tad Hamilton! (2004) play with ideas of class differently, recognizing factors beyond socioeconomic status that enter into class identification in the United States: Shallow Hal emphasizes the impact of obesity on a person’s perceived social value, while Win a Date with Tad Hamilton! challenges assumptions about the long-term value of physical attractiveness and celebrity.

The neo-traditional romantic comedy commonly features the makeover scene that shows the female protagonist undergoing a physical transformation of some sort. While particularly popular in teen romantic comedies, this trope appears in nearly all iterations of the genre. Joel Gwynne argues, “[P]ostfeminist female agency is contingent upon adhering to a particularly specious form of feminine desirability enacted by and through the makeover paradigm” (60). He adds, “The logic of the makeover narrative is grounded in the assumption of a troubling division
between self and body which can be rectified through both hard work and compliance to an external expert” (68). Some of these makeovers can prove dramatic, such as in *Pretty Woman* (1990) when Barney (Hector Elizondo) helps Vivian (Julia Roberts) completely change her wardrobe and teaches her formal table manners to help her fit in with Edward’s (Richard Gere) colleagues; *The Princess Diaries* (2001), when Mia (Anne Hathaway) straightens her hair, puts in contacts, and plucks her eyebrows before her first appearance as the future heir of Genovia; or *My Big, Fat, Greek Wedding* (2002), when Toula (Nia Vardalos) loses weight, changes her clothes and hair, gets contacts, and even returns to school and gets a new job. Other makeovers are more subtle, such as when Kat (Julia Stiles) in *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999) puts on a prom dress, puts her hair in an up-do, and pretty much nothing else; when Laney (Rachael Leigh Cook) in *She’s All That* (1999) emerges, “New, not improved, but different,” after her transformation, which consists of some makeup, a new dress, and putting in contacts; or when Paige (Julia Styles) in *The Prince and Me*, dons a custom dress and some royal jewelry.

Films of the period, in lieu of a literal prince or princess, occasionally feature the children of non-royal national leaders, like presidents and prime ministers. *What a Girl Wants* (2003) tells the story of Daphne (Amanda Bynes), who leaves her home in New York City to find Henry Dashwood (Colin Firth), the father she has never met. Henry is running for political office in the House of Commons, having just disclaimed his seat in the House of Lords, hoping to become Prime Minister. Daphne finds adjusting to a new country is more challenging than she had hoped, particularly with all the focus on her family. Similarly, *First Daughter* (2004) and *Chasing Liberty* (2004) both tell the stories of daughters of Presidents of the United States who struggle with the constraints placed on them by their fathers’ jobs, leading them to push the boundaries. In *First Daughter*, Samantha (Katie Holmes) leaves for her first year in college as
her father (Michael Keaton) is running for his second term in office. While she has always been
the dutiful daughter, she wants something more closely resembling real life for her college
experience, which is challenging given her secret service protection. In *Chasing Liberty*, Anna
(Mandy Moore) also pushes back against the boundaries placed on her because of her father’s
job as president. When a trip to Prague offers her the opportunity, she escapes her secret service
detail and goes on a tour around Europe. Samantha and Anna’s small moments of rebellion
connect them with James (Marc Blucas) and Ben (Matthew Goode), respectively. Neither
realizes that her new love interest is actually an undercover secret service agent who is making
sure to keep her safe while giving her the illusion of the freedom she desires. In both films, the
daughter learns the truth in a moment of danger, requiring the secret service agent to physically
carry her to safety.

Presidential daughter films are about as close to an American princess as Hollywood gets
(other than secret princess plots, like *The Princess Diaries*, or falling in love with a prince
movies, like *The Prince and Me*), as these films adapt tropes from earlier princess films, such as
escaping from the castle. In *Chasing Liberty*, Anna climbs on the back of Ben’s scooter while
escaping from the security detail that has followed her to a concert. He drives off, taking her to a
bar and offering her the illusion of the freedom she desires, all while keeping her safe. Similarly,
in *First Daughter*, James sneaks Sam away from the paparazzi who are hounding her, and they
run through the streets and alleys of her college town. Then, at the end of the film, James sends

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36 In true neo-traditional romantic comedy fashion, all three of these films can be linked back to 1950s films. *What a Girl Wants* is a remake of *The Reluctant Debutante* (1958); in *First Daughter*, Samantha and James sneak into *The Girl Can’t Help It* (1956) when hiding from the paparazzi; and in *Chasing Liberty*, Anna references *Roman Holiday* (1953) during her adventure across Europe.
her off on her own as she leaves the White House driveway in the VW Beetle with the cooler of beer that she wanted from the beginning of the film.

While on the surface, First Daughter and Chasing Liberty seem to present stories of young women fulfilling their neoliberal third wave prerogative of self-determination, problematic moments in each film challenge such a reading. The age gaps between the presidents’ daughters and their protective details are concerning, given that both young women are eighteen and just beginning college, while the undercover agents have, at least theoretically, completed college and worked their way up the ranks in the secret service to serve the First Family. Additionally, in First Daughter, the cover story itself proves problematic since James is supposed to be Samantha’s college RA; a romantic relationship between an RA and their resident is rife with the potential for abuse. Interestingly, the undercover assignment in both films ultimately leads to a better job for both secret service agents. In First Daughter, while it first appears that James will lose his job because of the relationship, he is ultimately promoted to the president’s protection detail. In Chasing Liberty, Ben leaves the Secret Service to follow his passion for photography.

The young women in First Daughter, Chasing Liberty, and What a Girl Wants face similar challenges to Paige in The Prince and Me and Mia in The Princess Diaries regarding the pressure connected to being in the spotlight and needing to fulfill expectations. However, this is not the case in all aspects of their relationships. Even if Sam’s and Anna’s cross-class relationships lead to scandal, presidents’ children do not inherit the job, alleviating the stress

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37 Chasing Liberty takes the time to identify Ben as 23 and clearly specifies that Anna is 18, thus making it legal—if not entirely ethical—when they sleep together near the end of the film. In both Chasing Liberty and First Daughter, the actors who play the secret service agents are six years older than the actresses who play the presidents’ daughters.
placed on the relationships. On the other hand, while the first installment of *The Princess Diaries* leaves Mia in a romantic relationship with her best friend’s brother, Michael (Robert Schwartzman), the sequel, *The Princess Diaries 2: The Royal Engagement* (2004), establishes within the first two minutes that they are just friends now. The film also quickly establishes that Mia must marry before becoming queen. Further, a second eligible candidate, Nicholas Devereaux (Chris Pine), can assume the throne if she does not. While reviewing the list of potential suitors with Mia, Queen Clarisse (Julie Andrews) declares, “We need someone titled. Someone who can help you run a country without ego getting in the way. Someone attractive, smart, but not arrogant. Someone with compassion.” Given the unconventional nature of Mia’s royal status, she must maintain class boundaries in her marriage. In the end, while the law that requires her to marry is overturned after Mia gives an impassioned speech about equality, she agrees to marry the other heir to the throne, with whom she has fallen in love.

Frequently, minority representation in mainstream neo-traditional romantic comedies comes in the form of side characters, such as the sassy Black friend or the gay best friend. Serving support roles for the otherwise overwhelmingly White and straight characters. These othered characters generally serve as an attempt to appear intersectional, but only superficially. Ultimately, these characters only serve to advance the plot for the straight White protagonists at best. While decades removed, the sassy Black friend trope is generally read as an extension of previous eras of more problematic Black supporting characters in White narratives, even extending to the offensive mammy character from American literary tradition. When such a supporting character appears in literature and film, it is never for her own sake, as her role is to

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38 There is a subgenre of the neo-traditional romantic comedy known as the “Black romantic comedy,” which I explore in depth in Chapter 4.
offer wisdom and guidance to the White protagonist of the story. Similarly, Kyle Stevens argues that, in the case of the gay best friend character, their entire “identity has been constructed and performed through multiple stereotype-defining behaviours” rather than through any demonstration of his actual engagement in any visible queer relationship (136). Stevens argues that “in denying the homosexual male character sexual agency, the narrative ultimately denies his existence” by removing this relational element from the character whose identity “implies sexual desire” (136).

Nevertheless, a few neo-traditional romantic comedies do focus on queer characters as protagonists. Films like *In and Out* (1997), *All Over the Guy* (2001), *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001), and *Imagine Me and You* (2005) highlight queer characters in romantic relationships with members of the same sex. At the same time, however, these films often play with the expectations for neo-traditional romantic comedies, complicating simple genre alignment. The prom-com film *But I’m a Cheerleader* (1999) tells the story of Megan (Natasha Lyonne), a teenage cheerleader whose conservative Christian parents send her to a conversion program when they begin to worry about her sexuality. While she is not initially convinced that she is a lesbian, her time in the conversion program puts her close to Graham (Clea DuVall), and they grow enamored with one another. While more clearly a neo-traditional romantic comedy, the film is simultaneously a satire, as it pokes fun at conversion programs, conservative Christianity, homophobia, gender, and even, at times, queer performativity itself.

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39 Kimberly Wallace-Sanders’s *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* provides an excellent overview of how this character type has been used in the United States for centuries.
The plot of James Mangold’s *Kate and Leopold* (2001) is fairly standard for the genre, just with a time-travel twist: Leopold Mountbatten (played by then relative newcomer to American cinema, Hugh Jackman) and Kate McKay (played by one of the neo-traditional subgenre’s major stars, Meg Ryan) could hardly be a more unlikely couple. He is a nineteenth-century duke who must marry a wealthy American to save his family from financial ruin. She is a twenty-first-century career-driven market researcher who has become disillusioned about love. They meet when Leopold accidentally time-travels forward 125 years and takes up residence in the apartment above Kate’s, where her ex-boyfriend, amateur physicist Stuart Besser (Liev Schreiber), lives. Kate and Leopold are repeatedly thrown together until they find themselves falling in love. Their happiness is short-lived, however, since Kate’s focus on her career clashes with Leopold’s old-world priorities and Leopold’s presence in the future may compromise all of space and time. However, when Kate gets everything she has been working for, she realizes that without someone special to share her life with, life may not have much meaning and that her future exists with Leopold in the past.

As this plot suggests, Kate easily fits into the character type of the neo-traditional romantic comedy heroine and represents the surface modernness inherent to the subgenre. Mortimer describes modern romantic comedy heroines as “[t]antalising figures. They live on the cusp between strong, empowered choices in more traditional, reactionary fates. They start the film as powerful, successful, and free from the confines of the traditional family. They work and play hard, seemingly living the post-feminist dream” (30). Like many real-life women of the 1980s and ‘90s who were achieving in the workplace, Kate is at the top of her market research
field for CRG, a New York firm. In many ways, Kate is living the postfeminist capitalist dream. She can afford not one but two—she used to pay expenses for Stuart—multi-room Tribeca apartments. She has a big office with an assistant and is in the running to become her company’s next senior vice president. This promotion would make her the new top honcho, running CRG’s New York office. Kate, highly competent, understands the perspectives of the women in focus groups and translates their perspectives to the relevant men making decisions. Ultimately, her insight earns her that promotion.

While profitable and potentially powerful, Kate’s career does have some drawbacks tarnishing the postfeminist neoliberal veneer. True to the reported experiences of many women in corporate America in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Kate is regularly the only woman in a room full of men. Despite her dedication to her job, she realizes that these men do not always trust her judgment. On more than one occasion, when Kate provides Phil with information that makes him unhappy, Phil turns to Kate’s boss, J.J., rather than continuing to work with Kate. On the first occasion, Phil turns his body toward J.J., but on the second occasion, he directly addresses J.J., effectively going over her head to her superior. J.J. agrees with Phil, forcing Kate to push back against her client and her boss. This risk could cost Kate the promotion. Later, Leopold challenges her judgment and her integrity after he tastes Farmer’s Bounty for the first time, asking, “Is this what you do at work, Kate? Research methods to deceive people? Refine lies until they resemble truth? It’s no wonder you dread your work week.” She fully rejects his interpretation, instead arguing, “You have no idea what I’ve done with [my life]! I haven’t had all that many comforts and conveniences, Leopold, because I’ve been paying dues all of my life, and I’m tired, and I need a rest and if I have to peddle a little pond scum to get one, then so be it.” While she does not elaborate on the dues that she has paid,
the audience can infer, from the treatment it sees on screen, how much harder it has been for Kate to succeed at CRG than for a man in her position. Kate sees the promotion as the culmination of years of hard work, the evidence that all she has been through has been worth it.

Despite all her professional success, however, and typical to the neo-traditional subgenre, Kate’s personal life leaves something to be desired. She has recently left her long-time boyfriend, Stuart, whom she had supported emotionally and financially throughout his research into time travel. The relationship and breakup have made her cynical. She cannot help but feel she has wasted time in her relationship with Stuart, telling him, “I blew my best years on you.” This cynicism also manifests in her career. In Kate’s opening scene (described in the chapter’s opening), Kate rolls her eyes and can barely stand to be in the theater, whereas Darci is crying and wiping her eyes as she watches the film. Kate occasionally patronizes Darci, such as when Darci cries as she finishes reading a romance novel. While Kate is patient, allowing Darci to finish her reading in her cubical before beginning the workday, even asking, “Did everyone live happily ever after?” when Darci enters Kate’s office, Kate’s tone is patronizing, reinforcing that she asks out of mockery rather than concern. When Darci responds, “He lost his leg to gangrene waiting for her on the island. But they’re together now,” Kate replies, “Wonderful,” maintaining the same patronizing tone.

Kate’s understanding of marketing because of her career further fuels her cynicism. She understands how the marketing industry exploits love, romance, and sex to make sales, which feeds her distrust of sentiment. She tells Leopold, “[M]aybe the whole love thing is just a grown-up version of Santa Claus. Just a myth we’ve been fed since childhood, so we keep buying magazines and joining clubs and doing therapy and watching movies with hit pop songs played over love montages, all in this pathetic attempt to explain why our love Santa keeps getting
caught in the chimney.” Kate cannot stop associating love with consumerism. Her understanding of marketing in the neoliberal landscape of the film means she knows that any perceived flaw in an individual represents an opening for the market to offer a solution for a price. Given the money she knows is at stake in the self-help industry, she cannot help but wonder if the problems they are fixing are real or just another marketing ploy.

In terms of romantic cynicism, Darci operates as Kate’s foil. While Kate is cynical, closed off, and constantly waiting for disappointment, Darci is a hopeless romantic who is open and constantly looking for the best. The contrast is particularly effective because the film has very few recurring women in Kate and Leopold at all, and Kate and Darci are the only significant female roles. Other women who work for CRG are either named but do not appear on screen—like Monica, J.J.’s assistant, and Margo, an otherwise unidentified woman with whom Darci gossips—or appear on screen but are not explicitly named—like the woman who tells Kate that Stuart is in the hospital and the women involved in the hair and makeup process during the filming of Leopold’s commercial spot. Other than Kate herself, all the other women at the company seem to be assistants or in otherwise traditionally feminine roles. The lack of a female presence in the film highlights a feature from Moritmer’s list of contemporary heroine traits that Kate lacks: “a loyal group of friends” (30). In lieu of a close circle of female friends, Kate has focus groups. Kate finds truth and comfort in the consensus a focus group provides. When first introduced in the director’s cut, Kate tells Darci, “I don’t care if it’s crass, just give me the

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40 Only two other women have speaking roles in more than one scene in the entire film: Patrice, the woman Charlie is interested in, and Gretchen, a nurse at the hospital where Stuart is being treated after his accident. Patrice has lines in three scenes: she greets Charlie and Leopold when they go to meet Charlie’s friends at a club, she has a short conversation with Leopold at the club a few scenes later and then she can be heard in conversation with Charlie over the phone the next day. Gretchen has lines in two scenes: in the first, she enters the office where Stuart is being treated and asks if everything is all right; in the second, she tells Stuart she believes his story.
numbers. Give me the bottom line. Give me the truth, straight up, no chaser.” She puts faith in the results that arise from her study of the women in focus groups.

Kate’s discomfort with the emotions expressed by women in the audience is in keeping with the long history of market research and marketing. Men in marketing have long used market research to try to better understand the female consumer. Gail Reekie argues that in the years following World War II, “Market research was perceived by its male proponents as a preeminently scientific form of activity. It was an ‘exact science’, its objective the ‘truth’, real ‘facts’, and ‘accuracy’” (18) and thus “approached women as a marketing phenomenon to be dissected, explained, analysed and understood” (20). 41 These marketing men felt the need to study women so closely because they found that women made most household purchasing decisions. However, women also had a reputation, at least according to the male researchers, for saying one thing and doing another. Like the men Reekie describes, the men involved in marketing throughout Kate and Leopold seem perplexed about how to sell to their female consumer base. One of Kate’s clients, Farmer’s Bounty, a new diet butter substitute, needs a spokesman. In the first meeting, 42 Kate reports to Phil, the representative from Farmer’s Bounty, that their original spokesperson selections had not tested well with the women in the focus groups. The focus-group feedback for the first-choice candidate was that “45% of our demo circled ‘shifty’ as his key descriptor,” while the second choice was “obnoxious, abrasive and a whopping 72% found him just plain creepy.”

41 Reekie focuses on Australia rather than the United States; however, she asserts that the marketing and market research trends were very similar, as “Australian market research was largely a post-war phenomenon deriving most of its ideas directly from American business” (17).
42 This meeting is likely not the first meeting within the world of the film, but it is the first meeting the audience sees on the topic.
The film further reinforces the failure of these male marketing executives to understand what their—primarily female—customers want when Kate brings Leopold to audition for the role. While Phil declares, “I think he looks like the Quaker Oats guy,” Kate sees the immediate change in the women of the focus group and replies, “Well, Phil, it’s really not about what you think. It’s about what they think. They’ve been in a coma all day and now look at them. To them, this guy is a dream.” While the male marketing executives involved in *Kate and Leopold* seem to have the same challenges as those in the mid-twentieth century in that “[t]he problem of how to truly know the mind of the female consumer appeared to be unsolvable” (Reekie 22), Kate easily connects the dots and identifies the solution. Even J.J. later admits that Kate “saved Phil from his own ambivalence.” This striking juxtaposition between Kate’s advocacy for her client’s customer base with Phil’s apparent apathy toward, or at least inability to read, Farmer’s Bounty’s customer base offers an interesting reflection of the different value the characters place on that feedback. While Phil understands that the feedback is valuable and necessary, he focuses on how it can sell his product. Conversely, for Kate, the feedback exposes larger truths concerning gendered desire. The challenge for Phil seems to also lie with Laura Mulvey’s famous theory of the male gaze. The commercial spot scene in *Kate and Leopold* inverts Mulvey’s gender roles relative to the desiring active gaze. Mulvey argues, “According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like” (838). This fear of male sexual objectification seems to be what inhibits the mostly male marketing team for Farmer’s Bounty in their search for a spokesperson and their masculine resistance to Leopold when he auditions. The male marketing team does not fully understand the desiring feminine gaze of their customer base and refuses to listen to the one team member who clearly does.
The men in marketing, in total, cannot fully accept Kate’s success as a woman. Within her career, Kate exists in a space outside the gender binary, at least according to J.J. He tells her, “You’re a rarity among women, Kate. . . . You don’t cling to illusion. You don’t get caught up in emotion. You don’t do pretty. . . . You skew male. You’re like a man. A man who understands women, their desires, their needs. You understand them, but you’re not really one of them.” This denial of her femininity conflicts with her experiences as a woman within the company. During meetings, the men treat Kate differently. Her boss propositions her at a (supposed) business dinner. This propositioning occurs almost immediately after J.J. praises her for her understanding of women while simultaneously denying her own womanhood. This both-and-neither interpretation of Kate’s gender performance, in some ways, fits with what the audience knows and understands about her. While Kate does not uphold the stereotypes of feminists espoused by the New Right of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—the unattractive, man- and sex-hating shrew—she is also not an overly feminized rom-com heroine. She always wears professional clothes that carefully balance the feminine and masculine: always pants, but not the “Hillary-Clinton-pantsuit,” and neutral colors that do not draw attention to herself but still emphasize her slim figure. She only wears a dress twice in the film, and each instance occurs at key points in the progression of her romance with Leopold: first on her rooftop date with Leopold and second to the formal work event at the end of the film. With the character walking this line, the audience is meant to see Kate’s feminine identity as allowing her, a neoliberal subject, to understand women as both audience and consumers.
Grindon’s phrasing of the “Reaffirmation of Romance Cycle” suggests that the connection is not just to previous cycles of romantic comedies but also to old ideas about love and romance and, therefore, gender roles, thus keeping with the late-twentieth-century shift to social conservatism. Just as neo-traditional romantic comedies reflected a desire for women to return to the home from their successful work lives, male characters like Leopold reinforced a return to traditional ideas about hegemonic masculinity. As the character is literally a man from an earlier generation, he has different expectations about how a man should behave, particularly with a woman. Leopold stands every time Kate rises from the table. When he learns that she will have dinner with her boss, he tells her that she needs a chaperone because J.J.’s “intentions are obvious.” When she asks if they need a chaperone to be alone together, he tells her, “We’re not courting, Kate. If we were, as a man of honor, I would have informed you of my intentions in writing.” Later in the film, he follows through on this when he invites her to dinner with a handwritten letter. Kate takes care of the other male characters, like Stuart and Charlie, paying for their rent and utilities. In contrast, Leopold takes care of Kate, keeping her safe, both physically as he chases the mugger who stole her purse and emotionally as he prepares a lavish rooftop apology dinner for her. Just as the neo-traditional romantic comedy generally relies on reimagining ideas about the genre that did not entirely match reality, the traditionalism Leopold points to is not necessarily one that ever existed.

The idealized masculinity that Leopold represents is one that combines perspectives of hegemonic masculinities from both Britain and America, including differing ideas about class and success. In the nineteenth century, Leopold is a duke, one of the highest titles in the British
aristocracy. Further, while he is a fictional duke, he seems to be an amalgamation of two historical characters, Leopold, Duke of Albany, and Lord Leopold Mountbatten, both of whom were descendants of Queen Victoria. More relevant to the modern audience is the use of the surname Mountbatten. Prince Philip, Queen Elizabeth II’s husband, took the surname Mountbatten when he became a British subject in 1947, and it is part of the official surname of the modern British Royal Family: Mountbatten-Winsor. This connection suggests Leopold is a noble with close ties to the British monarchy. However, rather than embracing the life of leisure as would most members of the aristocracy, Leopold pursues his own path. Whereas his uncle would like him to embrace his noble position in society, Leopold thinks toward the future, telling his uncle, “The monarchy is dead, Uncle. We are relics. That is reality. The new royals are men of accomplishment. Men like Roebling, with his bridge, Edison, with his lamp, Diesel, Bell, Westinghouse,” a much more American point of view. Leopold, an inventor himself, wishes to emulate the accomplishments of these men and contribute to society rather than just continuing to stagnate alongside others of his station.

Additionally, although he is a duke, he is an impoverished duke who needs funds to support his title. At the beginning of the film, while dressing for his engagement ball, he has a conversation with an imaginary heiress, telling her, “[W]hilst I am the third Duke the little secret of those of us in the Royal Court, apart from our general uselessness, is our massive indebtedness.” Hearing this speech, his uncle chastises him, telling him, “A wealthy bride is your only surety.” Gail MacColl and Carol McD. Wallace assert, “There was a longstanding tradition

43 The title Duke of Albany was not in use in the year Leopold is supposed to have come from (1876); Queen Victoria’s son Leopold was given that title in 1881. Then, Lord Leopold Mountbatten, Queen Victoria’s grandson, was born in 1889.
44 Previously his surname had been Battenberg, the German equivalent.
in England of noblemen marrying heiresses to refresh the family coffers” (104), and a duke was considered an excellent catch for a young wealthy American bride, as “in England there were only twenty-seven dukes, and a duke had to die before his son could take his place” (23).45

Leopold’s need makes the impact of his decision to marry Kate a powerful one. He needs money from a wealthy family; however, Kate left any money she had in the twenty-first century.

Leopold’s unconventional version of masculinity serves him well in the twenty-first century, and the film shows him to be superior to nearly every other male character. Leopold’s superiority over Charlie is clearly demonstrated when he helps Charlie with his courtship of Patrice. During an evening out with Charlie and his friends, Leopold uses his old-fashioned manners and charisma to charm the women in their party. As they leave, Charlie mocks Leopold, saying, “Let’s get one thing straight. Patrice, she thought you were cute. . . probably gay and cute. And cute, Leo, that’s the kiss of death.” While Americans sometimes read the differences between European and American gender norms for men as queer, it seems far more likely that Charlie sees Leopold’s success with the women as threatening and therefore seeks to challenge Leopold’s masculinity by challenging his gender presentation. By suggesting that Leopold demonstrates a gay masculinity, Charlie attempts to minimize any success Leopold may have felt about the evening. However, Leopold then reveals that Patrice gave him her phone number and then immediately gives it to Charlie, telling him, “I told her of your affections. . . . That you admired her, but you were hesitant to make an overture since you’d been told she was courting

45 Eighteen seventy-six, when the opening and closing of Kate and Leopold are supposed to be set, may be a little early for Anglo-mania to have come to America, and MacColl and Wallace report that American heiresses were more likely to have gone to England than a duke to have come to America; however, Kate and Leopold does not seem to shy away from a little anachronism. When Leopold speaks of other inventors of the period, he includes “Edison and his lamp”—Edison would not begin working on “his lamp” for a couple more years—and Rudolph Diesel—who would still have been in school at that time. Leopold also references Jack the Ripper, who would not begin his killing spree until 1888.
another.” By getting Patrice’s phone number on behalf of Charlie, Leopold reaffirms his heterosexual masculinity but does so in a way that supports rather than undermines his friend.

One of the most interesting examples of Leopold’s superiority over the other men in the film appears in his competition with J.J., Kate’s boss, as they both vie for Kate’s affection and attention. While the undercurrent of their competition exists throughout the film, the competition between them is clearest when Leopold and Charlie crash the working dinner between J.J. and Kate. First, Leopold challenges the provenance of J.J.’s new property in England, arguing that it cannot be as old as J.J. claims because it was not there when Leopold was growing up. Kate and J.J. try to argue that J.J. is correct because he has pictures, but Leopold argues that J.J. must have been swindled. Because the audience has information that the other characters do not have, specifically that Leopold is the nineteenth-century duke he claims to be, this leaves the audience in the position to believe Leopold’s claims and thus believe that either J.J. is lying to Kate about the age of his property or that he has, in fact, been duped. J.J. then asks Leopold if he likes opera, specifically inquiring if he is familiar with *La Bohème*, attempting to demonstrate that he, too, can be as cultured as Leopold. However, J.J. simply demonstrates his lack of knowledge, misnaming the characters and claiming that it is sung in French, not Italian. After the night’s events, Leopold demonstrates his noble superiority over J.J. yet again by apologizing to Kate that he openly insulted her boss without considering the impact it might have on her career. He writes Kate a note, complementing her and apologizing for his actions, acknowledging his bruised pride and overconsumption of alcohol as factors in his failure to maintain his composure. He also offers her an apology dinner to further demonstrate his contrition. J.J., on the other hand, waits for Kate to come to him at work, where he waits for her to apologize for Charlie and Leopold’s behavior.
Leopold’s superiority does not just appear when juxtaposed against other characters; it even manifests in his ability to assimilate quickly into the twenty-first century. His background as an inventor in the nineteenth century has offered him access to then-advanced technologies, such as a prototype of Bell’s talking telegraph, and, as such, we see him integrate into the new era with only a few hiccups. While at first confused by modern New York City—the audience is treated to a scene of Leopold in the bathroom figuring out the aerosol shaving cream can and disposable razor—he quickly adjusts to the new sights, sounds, and technology. He can easily navigate the streets, even going to the Brooklyn Bridge and back to Stuart’s apartment. Upon hearing the sirens of approaching firetrucks, he announces, “The fire brigade.” Despite it only being a few days since he was brought forward in time, he quickly comes to understand how the telephone, television, and even the teleprompter work. He does not seem surprised when he receives a fax at Stuart’s apartment. The toaster challenges him at first, leading to him calling it a “damn hazard” and ranting, “insertion of bread into that so-called toaster produces no toast at all... merely warm bread! Inserting the bread twice produces charcoal. So, clearly, to make proper toast, it requires one and a half insertions which is something for which the apparatus doesn’t begin to allow!” However, only two days later, he has built a contraption that will allow the “one-and-a-half insertions” required for perfect toast. He immediately seems to draw connections between the direct address of the TV show Geraldo with what he needs to do for the commercial.

Leopold’s noble superiority presupposes a savviness that also suggests experience with women in either century. As a neo-traditional romantic comedy, such an ability ultimately suggests a fundamental essentialism to women, an essentialism that Leopold understands. Although Leopold is not complimentary to the imaginary Miss Blaine in his mock conversation
as he gets ready—“Ah, Miss Blaine. You dance like a . . . like a herd of cattle. You are a rare woman who lights up a room simply by leaving it”—he is perfectly polite when he meets the heiresses in person. He understands the expectations for how to behave around women. He demonstrates this understanding again when he is out with Charlie and his friends. He charms the women, speaking to their interests and helping one light a cigarette. During the audition for the spokesperson role, he turns on his ducal charm in front of the camera and wins the part. When he is cleaning the kitchen after his romantic night with Kate, Charlie shows him how to load the dishwasher, telling him, “Don’t press that [button to start the dishwasher] ‘til she wakes up, so she sees you doing it,” Leopold immediately understands Charlie’s point, and the following conversation ensues:

LEOPOLD. Oh, clever. The proverbial tree in the woods.

CHARLIE. If a man washes a dish and no one sees it . . .

BOTH. Did it happen?

Charlie and Leopold’s mutual understanding of the situation—they both believe that women only focus on what they see happening, ignoring results if they do not see the activity occur—suggests that in the more than one hundred years since the time Leopold came from, women have not changed that much regardless of the social changes facilitated by the various waves of feminism.

The ultimate manifestation of both Leopold’s superiority over other men in the film, and his understanding of women, appears in his work as the spokesperson for Farmer’s Bounty. Here, his position as the overtly traditional in this neo-traditional romantic comedy directly relates to gendered commodification. One of the reasons Leopold successfully promotes the margarine, at least in the audition, is because of his genuine sentiment. The lines, “Fresh creamery butter. Is there anything more comforting? I say there is, and perhaps you’ll agree
when you sample fat-free Farmer’s Bounty with the genuine essence of creamery butter in every bite” are very similar to sentiments Leopold expressed to Kate only moments earlier: “[P]erhaps one day, when you’ve awoken from a pleasant slumber to the scent of a warm brioche smothered in marmalade and fresh creamery butter you’ll understand that life is not solely comprised of tasks, but tastes.” Kate actually uses his own language and aspects of his identity when she defends her decision to include him in the audition. While it is the phrase “fresh, creamery butter” that catches her attention, she expands that when describing the impact that Leopold is having on the women in the focus group, “To them, this guy is a dream. He’s handsome, honest, courteous. Stands when you walk in a room. Brings you brioche in bed. If you eat his margarine, maybe your hips will shrink, and he’ll come to your door.” The air of authenticity in Leopold’s performance stems from his real identity as an emblem of an idealized past. The marketing team manipulates Leopold’s authenticity, even his real identity, and dresses him in a costume of ducal finery, his Farmer’s Bounty is delivered on a silver platter by a butler. However, Leopold’s first taste of the margarine shatters the illusion, revealing the marketing for what it is, “peddling pond scum to an unsuspecting public.”

The Farmer’s Bounty commercial in Kate and Leopold demonstrates the incompatibility of neo and traditional ways of understanding truth. Leopold’s truth, that he is a duke and that Farmer’s Bounty “tastes like raw suet” are incompatible with Kate’s, that the majority is right, and that as a diet food Farmer’s Bounty is “supposed to be awful.” For all his ability to exist—and even thrive—in the twenty-first century, Leopold cannot buy into the lie established by decades of marketing and neoliberal thought. In Kate’s world diet food is the type of lie everyone has tacitly agreed to accept as truth; while everyone knows the claims are false, they do

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46 Hilariously, his butler is named “Millard,” also Leopold’s uncle’s name.
not see them as lies, per se, because they are lies everyone accepts. In Leopold’s world as a manifestation of the idealized traditional, the marketing is just a lie. Leopold’s traditionalism undermines commodification and neoliberalism itself, but those values themselves are vital to the neo-traditional romantic comedy genre. Like the introduction cut from the theatrical release, the story and the genre directly conflict with one another, and like the introduction, the conclusion must give way to the genre. The neo-traditional romantic comedy demands a happy ending, and *Kate and Leopold* will do everything possible to satisfy the genre. The audience knows that intelligent, insightful, ambitious Kate will never be happy in Leopold’s world and that she cannot bring him the money that he so desperately needs. But we do not see the ending as a lie because it is a lie that the genre demands we accept. If Leopold cannot exist in Kate’s world, then Kate will go to Leopold’s, even if she must jump off a bridge to get there.

**Conclusion**

The post-Civil Rights post-counter-cultural context of the neo-traditional romantic comedy reflected not only changing perspectives on women and feminism but also on race and ethnicity. While there had been Black films going back decades, a new subgenre of romantic comedy arose during the late-1980s through early-2000s: the Black romantic comedy. This subgenre sought to present the Black experience to its viewers, complicating what had long been seen as a very White genre through popular Black actors, screenwriters, and directors. This subgenre pushed back against the White Gaze, bringing Black characters to the screen as protagonists rather than as support for White characters. These films stand in contrast to a trend in the later years of the neo-traditional romantic comedy cycle, featuring carefully constructed interracial relationships still influenced by Production Code era policies about miscegenation. In
the next chapter, I examine how Sanaa Hamri’s *Something New* (2006), written and directed by Black women, challenges and inverts many stereotypes regarding the Black community in the United States. *Something New* explores the relationship between Kenya (Sanaa Lathan), a successful upper-middle-class Black woman, and Brian (Simon Baker), a White man whose class is much more difficult to pin down. The film’s heavy emphasis on their racial differences is largely absent from films such as *Hitch* (2005), in which both lead actors are people of color but race is largely ignored.
In 1988, comedian Eddie Murphy brought Prince Akeem of the fictional African nation, Zamunda, to the American cinema with *Coming to America*. This *Saturday Night Live* alum (Murphy was a cast member from 1981-1984) was known for using his characters to poke fun at cultural institutions and shine a light on class- and race-based disparities in the United States through sketches such as “Mr. Robinson’s Neighborhood” that parodied PBS’s *Mr. Rogers’s Neighborhood* (1968-2001) by offering a look at a very different neighborhood than the one Fred Rogers and his friends inhabited. Rather than Mr. Rogers’s nice, tolerant, friendly, suburban neighborhood, Murphy’s Mr. Robinson presented a run-down inner-city apartment building with a landlord always looking to evict him. By 1988, Murphy had also become a familiar face on the big screen, having starred in such fish-out-of-water comedian comedies as *Trading Places* (1983) with Dan Aykroyd, where Murphy plays a con artist who gets a job as a commodities trader after Aykroyd’s character, an actual commodities trader, is arrested, and *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) with Judge Reinhold, where Murphy plays a Detroit detective who finds himself in the unfamiliar White world of Beverly Hills, California, as he hunts for his friend’s murderer. *Coming to America* follows in these footsteps but with a royal romance twist.

*Coming to America* hits all the major beats one would expect from a Ruritanian-style romantic comedy. Murphy’s character, Prince Akeem, is a pampered young man who only
knows luxury but understands that his life in the palace is not one that most people experience. He wishes to leave his life behind, if only for a while, as he seeks out new experiences, telling his parents, “Just for once, I would like to cook for myself and take care of myself, dress myself, wipe my own backside.” He also wants to find an intelligent, hardworking bride who will “love me for who I am, not because of what I am.” To find this woman, he and his valet, Semmi (Arsenio Hall), travel to New York City, to Queens specifically—because where else will they “find a woman with grace, elegance, taste, and culture, a woman suitable for a king.” There they pose as poor foreign exchange students, stay in an apartment that was recently a crime scene, and take jobs as janitors at a local fast-food restaurant. Here Akeem not only meets the woman of his dreams, Lisa (Shari Headley), his boss’s daughter, but also experiences life as the average person does. When his identity comes to light, Lisa, unlike the women he has known before, is not sure she is interested in becoming the queen he would need her to be.

Although directed by a White filmmaker, John Landis, Coming to America was written by Murphy himself and thus could be considered an example of a Ruritanian romance within popular Black cinema. As it grossed a worldwide total of more than $350 million and inspired a sequel in 2021, Coming 2 America, it is among the most popular Black romantic comedies of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. Coming to America is a uniquely Black Ruritania romantic comedy in part because of how it negotiates the visual and narrative elements of its constituent parts. Coming to America cleverly recontextualizes the traditional narrative elements of the Ruritanian romantic comedy to reflect the visual elements of Black film. Coming to America presents not two worlds separated by class but three. The first is that of the most privileged individuals in the kingdom of Zamunda, a nation that seems to have been spared the horror and exploitation of European colonialism, thus allowing the culture to develop without
Western influence or interference. It is a distinctly African nation, as is demonstrated through visual elements such as the jungle setting, the fabrics used in the costuming, the animals that populate the background, and the dance performances in the film’s early scenes. The film juxtaposes this mythical untouched African perfection against the more real world setting of Queens, New York, which contains signifiers of 1980s Black culture, such as the barbershop, the Black beauty pageant, and the prominent social position of clergy members. Later, the story presents a third, American, Black middle class. This middle class, while a far cry from the opulence of the Zamundan palace, has its own markers of wealth, such as successful Black-owned businesses, a large suburban home with nice furniture, a party with a guest list that includes important community members, local celebrities, and even hired valets (Semmi and Akeem, who initially thought they were invited to the party as guests) to take care of guests’ cars. These visual elements ensure that the traditionally White narrative structure does not impede the film’s Blackness.

Despite the plot fitting very closely with tropes standard to the subgenre, such as the arranged marriage, the masquerade, and the surprise reveal, *Coming to America* is not mentioned in Nicholas Daly’s *Ruritania: A Cultural History, from The Prisoner of Zenda to The Princess Diaries*. While *Coming to America* is not a strictly Ruritanian film, as the fictional kingdom is African rather than European, the fact that it is not mentioned, even in the section discussing the overwhelming Whiteness of the subgenre, reinforces the Eurocentrism expected of such cross-class romantic comedies. Stuart Hall asserts that so-called Black popular culture exists within mainstream popular culture. However, for a long time, Black popular culture was largely excluded from the mainstream, except for a few aspects of the culture appearing as “linguistic innovations in rhetorical stylization of the body, forms of occupying an alien social space,
heightened expressions, hairstyles, ways of walking, standing, and talking, and a means of constituting and sustaining camaraderie and community” (129). Hall goes on to argue,

This mark of difference inside forms of popular culture—which are by definition contradictory and therefore appear impure, threatened by incorporation or exclusion—is carried by the signifier “black” in the term “black popular culture.” It has come to signify the black community, where these traditions were kept, and whose struggles survive in the persistence of the black experience (the historical experiences of black people in the diaspora), of the black aesthetic (the distinctive cultural repertoire out of which popular representations were made), and the black counter narratives we have struggled to voice. (129)

In contrast, Michael Boyce Gillespie rejects the idea that Black film must inherently connect to real life, arguing, “The belief in black film’s indexical tie to the black lifeworld forgoes a focus on nuance and occults the complexity of black film to interpret, render, insight, and speculate,” and that, “black film operates as a visual negotiation, if not tension, between film as art and race as constitutive, cultural fiction” (2). By existing as art, “Black film does not and cannot satisfy identitarian fantasies of black ontology; instead it poses conceits, specificities, and contexts” (7).

This chapter briefly explores the relationship between Hollywood and the Black community in America from the Civil Rights Movement through the first decade of the twenty-first century, focusing on the complex dynamics between actors, filmmakers, and the public. Hollywood has long reinforced White, male, hegemonic power structures in the types of roles made available and stories being told. While the number of opportunities for Black actors and filmmakers has increased over time, filmmakers often have to fight for the kinds of stories they want to tell and for those stories to be seen. The chapter then shifts to addressing interracial relationships, both off- and on-screen, and changing understanding of the social acceptability of such relationships. As public acceptance of such relationships has grown, they appear more
frequently on the screen; however, these relationships bring their own challenges and assumptions, as they offer more screen time to some while removing opportunities for others.

The second part of this chapter shifts to an analysis of Sanaa Hamri’s *Something New* (2006). Because of the Ruritanian romance subgenre’s Eurocentrism—to the point that there are almost no examples of Ruritanian romances featuring a character of color in one of the two main roles—this chapter focuses moves away from discussing a royally focused narrative to one that emphasizes the interplay between race and social class in the United States, particularly in interracial relationships. Upper-middle-class Kenya (Sanaa Latham) and working-class Brian (Simon Baker) are an interesting relationship to explore, not only because of their racial differences, but because of the ways that their races influence their social classes. Further, the film advertisements focused on the separation between their classes almost as much as their races, emphasizing the inversion of the standard forbidden-fruit trope expectations. Interestingly, one of the most visible markers of Kenya’s social class, and their class difference, is the debutante ball. The elements of the debutante ball reflect a history connected to an even higher social class, further increasing Kenya and Brian’s social difference.

Further, *Something New* is the first major Hollywood studio release written, directed, produced, and starring all women of color. While the films in this dissertation have been produced with a primarily female audience in mind, *Something New* is the only one written, directed, and produced by women and, even more importantly, by Black women. This shift in authorship represents a new voice that can speak more authentically to the film’s primary audience. This film’s unique position allows it to tell a story about an interracial couple and the challenges they face in twenty-first-century California differently than if told by anyone else. The film privileges not only a feminine lens but a Black feminine lens in a way that had not been
done before and rarely since. Shelly Cobb asserts that the identities of these women “make the film a challenge to the systemic silencing and marginalization of black women in American cinema” (158). Director Sanaa Hamri was born in Morocco to a Jewish-American mother and a Muslim Moroccan father. She came to the United States to attend Sarah Lawrence College, where she studied theater. She started her directorial career directing music videos, some of which were for stars like Christina Aguilera and Prince, before moving to direct feature-length films. *Something New*, her first film, is not strictly a Hollywood romantic comedy but a hybrid between independent film and Hollywood, which Cobb calls “Indiewood”: independently produced and distributed but “aesthetically mainstream” films (157).

Cobb challenges the idea that Hamri’s mainstream aesthetics prevent her romantic comedies (*Just Wright* [2010] in addition to *Something New*) from making political statements about social oppression or Black feminism. Cobb argues that Hamri’s films “centre black women as subjects and consequently challenge the ‘structural silence’ imposed on black women” and “offer alternative representations of black women that productively engage with and even challenge the usual stereotypes, even as they use and conform to mainstream cinematic conventions” (157). She argues that Hamri’s romantic comedies “both use and disrupt

47 *Something New* is a Focus Features film. NBCUniversal owns Focus Features, LLC and whose film list includes such other popular films as *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005), *Pride and Prejudice* (Joe Wright, 2005), *Blakklansman* ( Spike Lee, 2018), and the *Downton Abbey* films (Michael Engler, 2019 and Simon Curtis, 2022). Mark Reid offers a helpful description to understand the differences between independent film production and commercial production, often called “Hollywood.” He says:

For purposes of clarity, the black commercial film is limited here to any feature-length fiction film whose central focus is the Afro-American community. This film is written, directed, or produced by at least one black person in collaboration with non-black people. Films included in this category are distributed by major American film companies.

The black independent film is defined as any feature length film whose central focus is the Afro-American community. Such films are written, directed, and produced by Afro-Americans and people of African ancestry who reside in the United States. These films are not distributed by major American film companies. (4)
Hollywood cinema” particularly fighting against Hollywood’s “ongoing inability to portray black women as anything other than mammys, jezebels and tragic mulattos” (158). Cobb argues that these character types have historically served to “exclude the black woman from the feminine bildungsroman narrative that portrays successful heterosexual coupledom as the climax of the coming-of-age plot for white women” (159-60). In many ways, *Something New* is a coming-of-age film as much as a romantic comedy; it is as much about Kenya settling into her identity as an adult as it is about her finding love. At the same time, it is a film with a message that can be challenging to interpret as it seeks to remain faithful not only to the characters but to the romantic comedy genre, existing as it does during the neo-traditional romantic comedy era, but also at a time when much media presented America as post-racial. As a result, *Something New* has to navigate between two sometimes conflicting ideologies, that of the neo-traditional romantic comedy on one side and Black cinema on the other.

**Black Film and Black Women**

The Civil Rights Movement saw some Black actors achieve success in mainstream America—Harry Belafonte was the first Black man to win an Emmy in 1960 and Sidney Poitier became the first Black man to win an Oscar in 1963. However, opportunities for Black actors in Hollywood were limited at the time. Few projects being available for Black actors had been a long-running problem for Hollywood. While the years following Poitier’s win offered some opportunities for Black actors, particularly male actors, Catherine Sogy argues that these roles were a very watered-down version of the “Uncle Tom” role that would avoid old traditional approaches of the role by “adapt[ing] the ‘Negro’ formula. They present a view meant to be honestly opposed to previous stereotypes. But the formula remains” (186). An important factor
in the types of roles for Black actors connects to who controlled the budgets for the films: almost always White men. Sugy asserts, “It should not perhaps be necessary to underline the fact that the films under discussion are made by white men, with white money, for white audiences. And they will reflect in varying degrees the fears, hopes, and wishes of these audiences” (188). If Black moviegoers were going to see a more authentic representation of Black life and Black experiences, it would need to come from Black filmmakers. Thus came Blaxploitation films, popular low- to mid-budget films across many genres, initially intended for Black urban audiences. Rising to popularity in the early-1970s, Blaxploitation films are predominantly set in Black urban locations and use culturally specific soundtracks, dialogue, and costuming. They also frequently include high levels of sex and violence that in previous years had been forbidden by the Production Code.\textsuperscript{48} They also tended to be action focused and did not address female-targeted genres like romantic comedies.

Blaxploitation films were not universally praised by the Black community. Richard Wesley opens his 1973 \textit{Encore Magazine} article “Which Way the Black Film”\textsuperscript{49} saying, “To put it bluntly, black movie making, at its current stage, is hopelessly shallow. It is controlled primarily by persons who have nothing on their minds except the desire to make money. Questions of art, relevancy, \textit{truth}, have little to do with what they are all about in any real sense” (65). He goes on to say, “These ‘blaxploitation’ films are characterized by an overwhelming lack of creativity, not to mention morality” (65) and that most “have come from the decrepit bowels of a withering Hollywood” (66). Charles Michener challenges Wesley’s assumptions regarding quality, however, saying, “those involved with the black films countercharge that the critics are

\textsuperscript{48} For a full definition of the Blaxploitation genre, see the entry in the \textit{Dictionary of Film Studies}.
\textsuperscript{49} Reprinted in Lindsay Patterson’s edited collection, \textit{Black Films and Film-Makers}. 
obtuse, overwrought, and condescending to their own people. ‘It’s ridiculous,’ says Gordon Parks,⁵⁰ ‘to imply that blacks don’t know the difference between truth and fantasy and therefore will be influenced by these films in an unhealthy way’” (239; my footnote).

The differing interpretations and the implications of each put many Black actors in a challenging position, with their only options seeming to be working for Black production companies—which left something to be desired in terms of substance and quality—or working for White producers who failed to produce authentic images of Black life. The emphasis on Black life and experiences, written, directed, and produced primarily by Black filmmakers for Black audiences, offered an opportunity for self-representation, although perhaps not the representation for which many had hoped. At the time, Michener asserted, “Many of the talented blacks who are involved in making these movies are torn between conflicting attitudes about their value and significance” (238). The other option was continuing to work on White projects that further reinforced racist tropes. When Black Films and Film-makers was published in 1975, Patterson reports, “As a protest, some critics of black films have suggested that black actors refuse to act in artistically inferior properties. But that’s like asking a politician to put a sack over his head in front of a television camera. Nevertheless, that’s a problem the black actor has been struggling with for a long time” (xi). For many actors, not working on these projects would mean not working at all and abandoning everything they had potentially sacrificed for in coming to Hollywood. Patterson laments, “The fact is, black movies have never had a sustained period where actors, writers, directors, and technicians could perfect their craft. Even the rash of new films have now slowed to a trickle, and the much vaunted black movie boom of the early seventies has now become, it seems, a bust” (xiv).

⁵⁰ Producer and director of such famous Blaxploitation films as Shaft (1971) and Superfly (1972)
Malecentrism further complicates this critical moment in Black cinema history. Historically, Black women have been even further marginalized for their position at the intersection between Blackness and womanhood. While fully embodying both identities, they frequently find themselves on the margins of both communities. For as few jobs as there were for Black actors, there were even fewer for Black actresses, and the roles for women were as problematic, if not more so, than those for men. The problematic elements came from both White and Black production companies. Scholars such as Edward Mapp have long complained about the representation of Black women in films by White filmmakers, arguing that “[h]er image has been defined by others rather than herself. When she is not a figment of white male fantasy, she is a product of white female thinking” and thus representation exists as “a steady procession of mammies, maids, misogynists, matriarchs, madams, and assorted, ‘make-it-for-money’ types” (196). Mapp argues, however, that Black film has not been able to correct the issues of the representation of Black women: “Machismo is alive and well in Hollywood. Women are displayed as nothing more than rings on a merry-go-round of masculine madness. This is not surprising because a popular theme of black films is the male identity crisis. Black females therefore are required to supply temporary relief and distraction for libidinous Shaft, Slaughter, and Super Fly types” (201).

These problems did not just exist within the film industry. White, patriarchal gender roles had a prolonged impact on the Black community, even from the early days after the abolishment of slavery. In *Black Looks*, bell hooks offers insight into the kinds of problems recently freed slaves of both sexes faced as they sought to establish autonomy:

Most 19th-century black men were not advocating equal rights for women. On one hand, most black men recognized the powerful and necessary role black women had played as freedom fighters in the movement to abolish slavery and other civil rights efforts, yet on
the other hand they continued to believe that women should be subordinate to men. They wanted to be recognized as “men,” as patriarchs, by other men, including white men. (92)

At the same time, Black women also struggled to reconcile their new freedom with the expectations established by the culture that surrounded them: “Many black women who had endured white supremacist patriarchal domination during slavery did not want to be dominated by black men after manumission,” however, they also “wanted black men to be protectors and providers” (hooks 92). The Civil Rights Movement felt the after-effects of these White patriarchal gender roles on the Black community, and the attitudes were perpetuated by both men and women. Angela Davis reports that there was the attitude that women should focus on “domestic work” rather than being at the forefront of the movement, “[a]nd if we had a role in these new movements that were emerging, then it should be perhaps as the educators.” She goes on to tell of “getting into a number of arguments with people very much captured by that notion, that in order for the Black man to rise, the Black woman had to step back” and that “Black liberation was really only about liberation of the Black man.”

Despite the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, the 1980s saw political rollbacks for Black Americans financially, educationally, and in areas of employment and public policy. However, it proved a crucial time for Black actors, especially male actors, to crossover into mainstream motion pictures, although as S. Torriano Berry and Vensie Berry point out, “[m]any of these films were basically white comedies with a solo black lead or supporting character” (177) like Beverly Hills Cop and Lethal Weapon (1987). Ed Guerrero argues that Raegan era films like these “put what is left of the Black presence on the screen in the protective custody, so to speak, of a White lead or co-star, and therefore in conformity with dominant, White sensibilities and expectations of what Blacks should be like” (239). The following decade was
similar, both socially and in popular culture. The 1990s were the decade of the riots following the Rodney King incident and the O.J. Simpson trial. It was also a time of the rolling back of affirmative action policies, juxtaposed against the Million Man and Million Woman marches in Washington, DC. Berry and Berry also report, “One sobering reality during this period was that more money was spent on building prison facilities than building college facilities, and that one in three young black men were in prison, on probation, or on parole” (215). However, at the same time, there were many Black household names found throughout popular culture, and Black filmmakers once again had the opportunity to tell stories about their communities in films such as *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), *Soul Food* (1997), *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998), and *The Best Man* (1999). These films “move away from the ‘boys in the hood’ theme to portray affluent young black characters in professional careers such as NFL superstars, novelists, lawyers, and television producers” (Berry and Berry 266). More significantly, many of these films focused on Black women and their experiences, a notable change from the Black cinema of the previous eras. An interesting feature of these more woman-focused Black films, some of which were Black romantic comedies, is that rather than focusing on a specific couple, the comedies tended to focus on an ensemble cast, a collective experience; this trend would not come to the rest of the romantic comedy genre until well into the twenty-first century.

The twenty-first century has offered some new opportunities for Black filmmakers, although certainly not enough. Filmmaker, Julia Dash, argues that Hollywood is “now an even more complex scene than ever before. With the success of Tyler Perry, F. Gary Gray, Gina Prince-Blythwood, Will Smith, Tim Story, Mara Brock Akil, and Shonda Rhimes, one wonders why it is still so difficult to convince the powers that be that we do, in fact, have an audience. It’s a constant fight” (11). She argues that despite Black production companies such as Tyler Perry
Studios, founded in 2006, far too much decision-making in Hollywood exists outside the Black community. Dash asks, “[W]ho’s deciding on which films will be made and which will not? What kinds of films are being made and why? Who is the audience? Are we still performing for white audiences? Are we being funny, are we dancing, are we singing, or are we now the love interest?” (5). Ultimately, the answers to these questions impact the types of stories about the Black experience that are told. “We don’t get to go beyond certain boundaries,” she argues. “We have to stay in this country and do this, that, and the other. Maybe we can run around in a war a bit, but we’re largely portrayed working that plow, walking the streets selling drugs, or being the victims of drugs.” (11).

Interracial Relationships and the Romantic Comedy

In the United States, the last great social and cultural barrier a couple can cross is that of race.51 While race constitutes only one factor contributing to a person’s social class, it proves one of the most visible and historically charged. Not until the United States Supreme Court decision on *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967, which ruled that state laws banning interracial marriages were unconstitutional, did the right to marry someone outside one’s race become legal for all Americans. While the Supreme Court determined the laws were unconstitutional, society

51 While the primary focus of the larger analysis of this chapter is on relationships with one Black partner and one White partner, much of the data coming from Pew Research Center analysis of census data is more general, speaking to relationships between one Black partner and one non-Black partner. Additionally, data regarding interracial and interethnic relationships are often combined, though not always. Interracial relationships refer to relationships between individuals whose physical appearance, such as skin color, socially identifies them as members of different races. Interethnic relationships refer to relationships between those whose physical appearance may socially identify them as members of the same race but come from different ethnic backgrounds. The United States Census, at this time, only differentiates between race and ethnicity for those of “Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin,” however, individuals responding to other survey types may identify other relevant ethnicities when self-identifying if they are in an interethnic relationship. For the purposes of this chapter, I am focusing almost entirely on interracial relationships, and the data will reflect that focus. When data includes information on interethnic relationships as well as interracial relationships, that will be explicitly stated.
remained largely unwelcoming to interracial couples. The history of race in the United States means that interracial relationships, both in real life and on film, are controversial and encoded with meaning. In 1960, fewer than 0.5% of marriages were between couples of different races, and by 1970, that number was still below 1% (Crowder and Tolnay; Wang, “Who’s Marrying Out”). However, by 2013, 6.3% of all marriages were between people of different races, and only two years later, that number reached 10%. The rapid increase from 2013 to 2015 connects to the high percentages of interracial newlyweds: 12% of new marriages in 2013 and 17% in 2015 (Wang, “Who’s Marrying Out,” Bialik), likely due at least in part to the prevalence of Millennials reaching the average age of marriage. According to the Pew Research Center, Millennial marriages involving partners from different ethnic or racial backgrounds reached roughly 13% in 2019, up from approximately 9% when Generation X was a similar age in 2003. While some racial groups demonstrate this trend more than others, Millennials are more likely to intermarry than members of Generation X across all racial and ethnic groups (Barroso et al.). This difference is likely connected, at least in part, to changing public perception of intermarriage. Pew Research Center reports, “In 2014, 37% of Americans said having more people of different races marrying each other was a good thing for society, up from 24% four years earlier. Only 9% in 2014 said this trend was a bad thing for society, and 51% said it

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52 While the specifics of the dates have varied over the years, in 2018, Pew Research Center officially settled on defining Millennials as those born between 1981 and 1996 for their purposes (Dimock); this is the definition I am also using.

53 This data regarding Millennials does not include any data reflecting the roughly 4.2 million Millennials who are cohabitating. As of 2012, Millennials were almost four times as likely to cohabitate than Baby Boomers of a similar age in 1987. As there is no formal process for these relationships, there is little data regarding the racial breakdown of these partnerships (Fry).

54 Barroso et al. report, “Among married Millennials, 8% of whites are married to someone of a different race or ethnicity. The shares are higher among Hispanic (19%), black (18%), and Asian (16%) Millennials.”
doesn’t make much difference” (Wang, “Who’s Marrying Out?). Two years later, the numbers climbed even higher, up to 39% saying that interracial marriage was a good thing.

One major factor that seems to impact how others react to an interracial relationship concerns who in the relationship is of which race: specifically, whether the relationship is between a Black man and a White woman or a White man and a Black woman. Interracial marriage numbers between Black men and women of other races have been high, relative to other pairings, since the 1970s, significantly outpacing interracial relationships between Black women and men of other races since that time (Banks 535). R. Richard Banks attributes these changes to several factors, including stereotypes regarding the desirability of Black men as sexual partners and the idea of forbidden fruit for White women. Banks also points to longstanding theories from sociologists such as Kinsley Davis and Robert Merton that having a White wife serves as a marker of success for Black men, suggesting that they could “trade professional status and high earnings potential for the more desirable racial status of a white spouse” (538). While Banks also identifies studies in the years since Merton and Davis originally posited these claims that offer inconclusive data to verify the ideas, this perspective does seem to fit with popular sentiment. It also correlates, to a certain degree, with data from researchers like Kyle D. Crowder and Stewart E. Tolnay, who found that out of all the individuals they studied, a clear hierarchy emerged with intermarried Black men having the highest level of income, education, and occupational prestige, and the greatest likelihood of being employed” and that, “On average, Black men married to non-Black women earn about $1,400 more than do Black men married to Black Woman, and more than $9,000 more per year than the average unmarried Black man. (799)

While institutional integration resulting from the Civil Rights Act and other anti-discrimination policies also benefitted Black women, the relative impact on interracial marriage
for Black women has been lower.\textsuperscript{55} One explanation, particularly for Black women in relationships with White men, is that there is a history of generational trauma, going back to when White slave owners and overseers would rape slaves under their control. This long history of sexual violence from White men on Black bodies colors how sexual relationships between White men and Black women are interpreted, particularly by the Black community. In the 1999 \textit{Essence} article, “Dating White: When Sisters Go There,” Rachel Blakely addresses this perception, asking, “If my foremothers were forced to fend off White men, what does it mean if I choose to be with one? How can I look at my own honey-colored skin and not see slave rape? . . . What does this mean? What is the attraction? Is this a self-hatred thing? Do I hate who I am?”

In terms of the history of interracial relationships in film, a complex legacy still influences more recent depictions of interracial romances on screen. For decades, the Production Code carefully controlled the kinds of relationships between those of different races that could appear on screen, romantic or otherwise, fully forbidding any hint of “miscegenation” in most cases throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{56} Even once the MPAA rating system replaced the Production Code Administration, many of the traditions and perspectives of the Code and the nation continued. The cover story of the April 27, 1998, issue of \textit{Jet}, entitled “Is it Still Taboo for Blacks and Whites to Kiss in Movies?” asserts, “Hollywood makes no secret that it isn’t big on interracial romance on the big screen, especially when it comes to black men kissing white women. Yet it hasn’t deterred black actors from braving these roles anyway”

\textsuperscript{55} In the immediate aftermath of \textit{Loving v. Virginia}, the rate of Black women intermarrying actually dropped slightly, according to Banks.

\textsuperscript{56} At some points, even the “pre-Code” era before the Production Code was carefully followed, “in industry discourse and in practice, miscegenation meant more than just implied interracial sex. As early as 1927 Hays had pronounced it ‘inadvisable always to show white women in scenes with negroes where there is any inference of miscegenation or social relationship’ a very broad standard that could keep any adjacent social mixing off screen” (Scott 15).
(32). The article describes films that feature interracial romances—and a few adaptations of novels that eliminated such a romance—as well as the prominent actors and actresses who play in them. The article discusses the examples in ways that suggest that Jet sees these relationships as a good thing, although it expresses sympathy for the reasons why actors such as Denzel Washington prefer to abstain from such roles. The article was one of many in Black magazines at the time discussing the increasing prevalence of interracial relationships in Hollywood, both on-screen and off-, and in the rest of America. The New York Times ran a similar article in early 1991, “When a Kiss Is Not Just a Kiss” by Gail Lumet Buckley. Buckley discusses Hollywood’s history of avoiding interracial relationships on screen, arguing, “The motion picture industry was not more racist than any other American institution—it simply suffered from generic cultural laziness. If the ‘formula’ worked once, it would work forever.” She argues that the reasons for more interracial relationships appearing on screen in the late 1980s and early ‘90s “have nothing to do with black or white or yellow. The true color is green. There is a current perception that films involving race are financially profitable. One can only hope that they are, and that they will also inform us about our society.”

Americans’ growing acceptance of interracial relationships in real life was proving profitable for Hollywood.

One of the most notable films about interracial romance appeared during the late Civil Rights era. Stanley Kramer’s Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner (1967) tells the story of a White family in California whose daughter, Joanna (Katharine Houghton), brings home her new fiancé, John Prentice (Sidney Poitier), whom she has only known for ten days. Although a successful doctor with the World Health Organization, he is also fourteen years her senior, widowed, and

Black. Her parents, Matt and Christina Drayton (Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn), now must wrestle with their daughter fully putting into practice the things they have taught her about accepting people of other races. *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* represented a critical historical moment for interracial relationships in the United States as it was released only six months (to the day) after the Supreme Court decision on *Loving v. Virginia*. While *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* is not truly a romantic comedy, in many ways, it has the feel of one, in part because Tracy and Hepburn, who had played a couple numerous times in romantic comedies through the forties and fifties, fill two of the lead roles.\(^58\) However, unlike true romantic comedies, by the time the film begins, the boy-meets-girl portions of the story have already occurred; the couple must woo the parents, so to speak, rather than the hero wooing the heroine.

*Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* was met with mixed reviews from both Black and White audiences. Many argued that it did not reflect real race relations in the United States at the time in part because, as Glen Anthony Harris and Robert Brent Toplin assert, “at no time in the story do the two lovers contemplate living in a social setting in America where interracial romance and marriage is likely to excite strong public resistance” (704). The couple meets and falls in love in Hawaii, “a rather open, polyglot society that included many racially mixed peoples. Then they visit the Bay Area of San Francisco, perhaps the most liberal metropolitan area in America to meet their families,”\(^59\) plan to marry in Geneva, Switzerland, “and presumably they will spend a long time in Europe or Africa” (704-705). Harris and Toplin assert, “[I]f Hollywood’s story had

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\(^58\) *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* was Tracy and Hepburn’s ninth and final film together. Tracy died shortly after filming concluded.

\(^59\) Interestingly, Wang of the Pew Research Center reports, “Interracial marriage in the United States tilts West. About one-in-five (22%) of all newlyweds in Western states married someone of a different race or ethnicity between 2008 and 2010, compared to 14% in the South, 13% in the Northeast and 11% in the Midwest, At the state level, more than four-in-ten (42%) newlyweds in Hawaii between 2008 and 2010 were intermarried” (“The Rise of Interracial Marriages” 2).
shown Prentice and Joanna falling in love in Baltimore and planning to move to Georgia, it
would have dealt more honestly and truthfully with the power of social resistance to mixed-color
marriages in 1960s America” (705). Similarly, they argue, “Kramer (and the movie’s writer
William Rose) privilege the issue of race in this film and virtually exclude the issue of class”
(703). While Prentice, as a top-level physician, is, in many ways, socially similar to the Drayton
family, whose patriarch works in newspaper publishing, the other Black characters, such as
Tillie, the Drayton family maid, do not receive the same treatment from the family. Even
Prentice’s father, a retired mailman, and mother are not entirely afforded the same treatment as
their son. When discussing Prentice’s background with his wife, Matt Drayton asks, “Now, how
do you suppose a colored mailman produced a son with all the qualities he has?” This statement
suggests shock at the Prentice’s ability to socially climb, a foundational belief of the American
Dream, and firmly establishes Prentice’s parents as lower than the Draytons, and even Dr.
Prentice himself, in the minds of Matt and Christina Drayton.

Kramer was very intentional in his treatment of Prentice, whom Buckley refers to as a
“paragon (or parody) of perfection.” In 1968, Roger Ebert wrote about interviewing Stanley
Kramer regarding the film and related a moment when a woman approached them and declared
that she hated Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner. “‘What a fink-out,’ the lady said. ‘What a phony
plot. Not only would the girl marry Sidney Poitier, but anyone would marry Sidney Poitier. So
what did you prove?’” During the interview, Kramer comments on the woman’s statement,
reflective of a general attitude about Portier’s portrayal of Prentice:

People attack the plot on the grounds that it’s too perfect,” Kramer said. “You know.
Poitier is rich and famous and practically ready to win the Nobel Prize. And Tracy and
Hepburn are progressive, enlightened, liberal parents with lots of cash. And Katherine
Houghton is an ideal young woman.
Hell, we deliberately made the situation perfect, and for only one reason, If [sic] you take away all the other motives for not getting married, then you leave only one question. Will Tracy forbid the marriage because Poitier’s a Negro? That is the only issue, and we deliberately removed all other obstacles to focus on it.

Removing all other potential objections the Draytons might have had about the relationship from the equation forces the characters and the audience to explore their own prejudices and objections.

Released nearly 40 years later, Kevin Rodney Sullivan’s *Guess Who* (2005) reimagines *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, with the families’ races reversed. Rather than a White family in California, *Guess Who* focuses on a Black family in New Jersey whose daughter, Theresa (Zoë Saldaña), brings home her boyfriend, Simon (Ashton Kutcher), without telling her parents he is White. There are conversations that parallel those in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, such as one where Percy (Bernie Mac) and Marilyn (Judith Scott) talk about how they “taught our girls to see only people, not color.” Like *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, *Guess Who* is not really a romantic comedy, given that the relationship between Theresa and Simon has been going on for months. Like with the earlier film, *Guess Who* focuses less on Simon wooing Theresa and more on Simon and Theresa convincing her family. Even more specifically, *Guess Who* operates almost like a bromantic comedy, as Simon has been tasked with convincing Theresa’s father to like him.

*Guess Who* also highlights one of the goals that Black filmmakers have expressed for Black films: presenting different images of Black people and Black families than are generally shown in the media. *Guess Who* inverts many of the stereotypes about Black and White Americans. Simon was raised by a single mother who had to work multiple jobs after his father left them when Simon was a child. Theresa was raised in a large suburban home, in a nice
neighborhood, with parents who are still together, even renewing their vows at the film's end. These families invert the narrative that often appeared during the Reagan administration and beyond of the Black single mothers and deadbeat fathers. Instead, the White character has that background. Percy, Marilyn, and their family belong to the Black middle class, specifically the Black upper middle class. Class divisions have long been a part of the Black experience in the Americas. Bart Landry describes Black middle- and upper-class communities when denied access to White recreation and cultural facilities, forming their own, such as “small, exclusive social cliques,” (59) or men’s clubs that “sponsored several large affairs during the year such as picnics, suppers, and, especially, dances” (60). These clubs and cliques offered opportunities to form connections and relationships and represented ways families helped their children get into the best schools, find the best jobs, and marry the best partners. This attitude partially explains why Percy and Marilyn are so surprised when Theresa brings Simon home; they expect her to continue these traditions into the next generation, which may prove challenging with a White partner.

Another important film from this period depicting an interracial relationship is Andy Tennant’s Hitch (2005), a more traditional romantic comedy. Hitch tells the story of date doctor Alex “Hitch” Hitchens (Will Smith), a charismatic man who helps generally overlooked nice men build relationships with the women in whom they are interested. He gains the attention of a reporter, Sara Melas (Eva Mendes), and as he tries to distract her from his work, he falls in love. Notably, the film completely ignores the interraciality of their relationship; in fact, their races are never mentioned at all.\textsuperscript{60} However, while the narrative eschews any tensions surrounding race,
the production history reveals the focus the industry places on race when making a mainstream interracial romantic comedy. While the characters’ races are irrelevant to the plot, Mendes was not the first choice for the role. According to reporting in *The Mirror*, actress Cameron Diaz was considered for the role but was ultimately not cast due to concerns about the interracial nature of the pairing.\(^6^1\) Smith is quoted as saying, “‘How are you not going to consider Cameron Diaz? But Hollywood is nervous about a black man kissing a white woman on screen’” (“Film Kiss ‘Banned by Bigots’”). The decision to cast a Latina actress as Smith’s love interest, as opposed to one who is (or at least appears) White or Black, caused a stir in Hollywood and popular media alike. NBC’s *Today* ran the Jeanette Walls article “Was Race an Issue in ‘Hitch’ Casting?” that quoted Smith telling a British newspaper, “‘There’s sort of an accepted myth that if you have two black actors, a male and a female, in the lead of a romantic comedy, that people around the world don’t want to see it.’” Responding to the *Today* article, Greg Morago of the *Hartford Courant* pointed out, “For some reason, American audiences are a tad more forgiving when white men mix with black women. Why wouldn’t Whitney Houston go for Kevin Costner in ‘The Bodyguard’? . . . Or Halle Berry falling for Billy Bob Thornton in ‘Monster's Ball’? . . . We can even believe a romantic pairing of Whoopi Goldberg and Ted Danson in ‘Made in America.’”

From another perspective, *Newsweek* ran the Allison Samuels article “Why Can’t a Black Actress Play the Girlfriend?” exploring the impact of this perception on Hollywood actresses, particularly those who are Black, “[Actress Nia] Long says Smith has called her several times

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\(^6^1\) Interestingly, while Diaz is nearly always a blonde on screen and has blue eyes, her surname reflects her father’s Cuban heritage, making Diaz herself a Latina actress, albeit a White Latina.
about roles, though not for ‘Hitch.’ ‘Will obviously has say, but not completely,’ she says. ‘If we
can’t play the girlfriend, then Hollywood has to figure out what to do with us.’” These racially
motivated practices also impact Latina actresses; Samuels continues, “Even Mendes herself
thinks it’s odd. Why is she considered too dark to be paired with a white lead, but just right for
an African-American?” Samuels quotes Mendes as saying, “‘Certainly I’ve benefited, because
I’ve got to work with Ice Cube, Denzel and Will. But it’s lame. I wish the mentality wasn’t so
closed.’” Angela Onwauchi-Willig asserts, “In today’s society, however, alleged customer
preferences affect not only whether actors are cast across racial lines in films that involve
intimate couples, but also which kinds of interracial couples are cast in movies and even whether
actors of the same race are cast opposite each other” (323). She continues, “Although such
depictions of interracial, or rather interethnic, couplings between Black and Latinas should be
applauded and highly encouraged in Hollywood, the question remains: in what ways does this
new form of multicultural casting for couples reinforce current racial hierarchies in society?”
(323). The decision to avoid addressing the characters’ races in Hitch further complicates
Hollywood’s treatment of racial dynamics. In “Film Kiss ‘Banned by Bigots,’” Will Smith
argues that the way the film ignores the interraciality of the relationship is precisely why his co-
star cannot be White: “‘Ironically, Hollywood is happy to do it if the film is about racism. But
they won’t simply do it and ignore it.’” Onwauchi-Willig agrees, arguing that interracial couples
“tend to be absent from television shows and movies unless the interracial relationship itself is
the storyline” (327). She adds that while interracial relationships in Hollywood films have
become more common as the broader cultural taboo is waning, “the scripts for many stories in
the entertainment industry either fail to deal ‘honestly with race,’ or present interracial
relationships only in parings that society has most commonly seen and ‘accepted’” (327). Sanaa
Hamri’s *Something New* is a film that attempts to “deal ‘honestly with race’” and interraciality without abandoning its generic identity as a romantic comedy.

**Interracial Love in Sanaa Hamri’s *Something New***

Sanaa Hamri’s *Something New* explores the relationship between Kenya, a successful upper-middle-class Black woman, and Brian, a White man whose class is much more difficult to pin down. Kenya is an accountant on track to become a partner at her firm, but like many romantic comedy heroines before her, she struggles to find similar success in her romantic life. She is looking for her I.B.M., her Ideal Black Man, but like her equally successful friends, she finds that good men prove hard to find. Brian owns his own landscaping business, which he started after leaving behind a career in advertising. They meet when a mutual friend sets them up on a blind date, but their different backgrounds put Kenya off. Upon a second meeting, however, Kenya realizes that Brian may be perfect after all, not as a romantic partner, but as a landscaper. Ultimately, Kenya cannot ignore their mutual attraction and begins a romance with Brian. Their racial differences seem to make no difference to Brian, and he challenges her to reject the socially expected trappings of a professional Black woman in a primarily White society, such as hair extensions. At the same time, most of the challenges in their relationship arise from Brian’s refusal to discuss race and his lack of support for Kenya’s worries and frustrations at her job. When Mark (Blair Underwood), a candidate for her I.B.M., enters the picture, Kenya must decide between her chemistry with Brian and the perfect life she has always imagined.

While Tamar Jeffers McDonald describes romantic comedies of this period following a “‘boy meets, loses, regains girl’ structure” (86), *Something New* flips this script a little, as Brian is not nearly as round or full a character as Kenya. This restructuring turns *Something New* into
more of a girl meets, loses, regains boy film. In an interesting flip of expectations, Brian, the male lead, fits in the roles often filled by a minority character in a neo-traditional romantic comedy. As a character, Brian exists, not as a fully developed character in and of himself, but as a means to Kenya successfully becoming a more complete version of herself. Despite him being the male romantic lead, the audience knows very little about Brian other than as he interacts with Kenya. Except for Maria, the woman at the community garden, Brian’s only on-screen friendships are with Leah and her family, the friendship that initiates his entire relationship with Kenya. Furthermore, except for a scene where he is driving to Kenya’s house for the first time, he does not even appear in any scenes without Kenya. This peripherality is usually reserved for the sassy Black friend or the gay best friend, but in this case, it is merged with the male romantic lead and, even more importantly, the White male romantic lead. This character, who traditionally would have the most hegemonic power and position, has been relegated to a position only slightly more significant than a side character. This sidelining of the romantic male lead contributes to the sense of *Something New* as bildungsroman as well as neo-traditional romantic comedy.

In many ways, Kenya embodies the traditional neo-traditional romantic comedy heroine. As a good postfeminist heroine, she has many of the neoliberal trappings of success. Her family lives a comfortable upper-middle-class life; her father (Earl Billings) is a physician, and her mother (Alfre Woodard), a homemaker. She and her brother, Nelson (Donald Faison), are both college-educated, with professional careers; her as an accountant and him as a lawyer. She is well respected by her colleagues at work and is actively being considered for partner. She has just purchased her first home, a marker of professional success and achievement within the American Dream. She is also succeeding in some ways in her personal life: she has a close group
of friends who are also successful Black women. Her friends, pediatrician Suzette (Golden Brooks), judge Cheryl (Wendy Raquel Robinson), and banker Nedra (Taraji P. Hensen), are equally successful in their own fields. Together they talk not only about their love lives and other personal experiences but also about their professional challenges. Tori C. Denton argues that for Black women, bonding operates as “a sense-making mechanism” and that those “bonds provide direct confirmation and validation for experiences that others might not readily understand” (448). Denton found that supportiveness like Kenya experiences through her friends—their “encouragement, high commitment to one another, emotional support, and self-acceptance” (452)—is strongly associated with professional growth in Black women, particularly when working with White coworkers.

However, as the film unfolds, the cracks in the neoliberal façade begin to show. While Kenya lives in an allegedly post-feminist and post-Civil Rights America, her lived experience challenges the benefits these terms imply. Camille Hall et al. assert, “Discrimination in the workplace against Black, female workers comes in the form of stereotypes, excessive demands, an absence of mentoring, exclusions from the work [office] cliques, being ignored and/or harassed, and assumptions that they are incompetent” (211). Interestingly, Kenya escapes many of these discriminatory practices in the firm where she works. Her colleagues at work respect her, and especially Bill (David Monahan), who Kenya calls her “very own personal computer.” Despite being a White man, Bill seems perfectly comfortable in his role as subordinate to Kenya. When she assigns him tasks, he responds with, “Got it. No problem. Anything else you need, I’m here.” The major exception to support in the workplace comes from Jack Pino, a big client who does not trust her but whose experience will impact whether Kenya will become a partner. While the reasons for Pino’s lack of trust are never explicitly stated, the fact that he regularly assumes
that someone else will join them in meetings, turns to Bill seeking a different answer when he
does not like the one Kenya gives, and then asks Kenya’s male boss to step in when he still does
not like her response. Altogether this suggests that Pino assumes Kenya to be incompetent based
on her sex or race, or both.

Kenya tends to primarily focus on how the discrimination she faces at work from Jack
stems from her race, ignoring the ways it might be connected to her sex or, even more likely, a
combination of her race, sex, and age. Hall et al. assert, “The particular stressors in the lives of
African American women reflect their distinct history, sociocultural experience, and position in
society. These stressors differ in magnitude from those of White women, White men, and
African American men” (209). The intersectional nature of the stresses Black women experience
can come from many different places and take many different shapes, all at the same time; thus,
“[d]iscrimination in the workplace on the basis of race and gender is a chronic stressor for Black
women” (Hall et al. 209). Tori C. Denton reinforces this idea, stating, “When discrimination
occurs in organizations, minorities experience uncertainty with respect to the source of these
events and may develop a tendency to identify the source of discrimination in personal prejudice
or in institutional or societal forces” (448). While Kenya attributes Jack’s behavior to her race,
her boss assures her that Jack is “being an ass,” but rather than challenging the behavior, her boss
reaffirms that they are “here to serve the client” and therefore must put “egos” aside. This
reinforces the difference in the interpretations that Kenya, a Black woman, and her boss, a White
man, have; while her boss attributes Kenya’s unease with ego, Kenya firmly believes, and is
probably at least partially correct, that it stems from prejudice and bigotry.

While she is professionally successful, despite the challenges, much like the traditional
neo-traditional romantic comedy heroine, Kenya struggles in her romantic life. What separates
Kenya and *Something New* from other neo-traditional romantic comedies, however, is the aforementioned shared experience with her friends, a feature more common to the Black romantic comedy. While Claire Mortimer identifies “a loyal group of friends” (30) as a critical component to the neo-traditional romantic comedy heroine, in *Something New*, Kenya’s friends play a more prominent role in the narrative, all going from single at the beginning of the film, to in relationships by the end, more reflective of an ensemble cast. All her successful girlfriends are also single at the beginning of the film, and they express opinions and perspectives in line with the experiences of Black women in America for decades. When Kenya and her friends go out on Valentine’s Day to celebrate one another, they spend a significant amount of time discussing the fact that they are single, focusing much of the time on Kenya and the reasons that Kenya, in particular, is single. They discuss a recent statistic from an unspecified article that asserts that “42.4% of Black women have never been married” and that “the phenomenon is most acute among African American woman. . . who are educated professionals. Judge, accountant, banker, pediatrician. That’d be us.” When Kenya expresses optimism despite the odds, her friends tease her about her list of things that she is looking for in a future partner, although Kenya insists that she does not require much: “I just want a good brother. . . . He doesn’t have to make a lot of money, so long as he’s got a job. . . . He just has to be taller than me, college-educated, and not crazy. No kids, good teeth, and no kinky sex.” Responding to Kenya’s demanding list, her friend Suzette describes a self-help CD she has been listening to, claiming the author, Dr. LaWanda Phillips, insists “that if we keep hanging onto this preconceived notion of what we think we want we’re actually cutting ourselves off from our universal abundance. See, we hold on so tight to this image that we have of our I.B.M.—Ideal Black Man—but she says that we’ve got to let go to let love flow. In fact, that’s what it is called. ‘Let go, let flow.’”
The statistics and advice they discuss during the dinner reflect the real-life lived experiences of Black women through the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Throughout the 1980s and ‘90s, magazines such as *Essence* and *Ebony* reported on the challenges facing the Black family. In February of 1985, *Ebony* ran the article “How to Close the Widening and Dangerous Gap Between Black Men and Black Women,” which addressed a “growing imbalance between the sexes that threatens the future of all Blacks” as “Black males are lagging behind Black female socially, professional, and academically” and that this lagging had potentially disastrous consequences (60). They report, “The Black family has been adversely affected; and many Black women are dismayed by their inability to find what they call ‘good and eligible’ men in a variety of areas: schools, colleges, offices, churches, lounges, and social organizations” (60). They go on to say that there is a “Black sex ratio” imbalance that exists “at almost every level of the Black community” where there are increasingly fewer Black men for every 100 Black women and report, “Sociologist Robert Staples has said that if you exclude married men, imprisoned men and homosexuals, there is only one acceptable Black male for every five unmarried Black women” (62). In May of the following year, *Ebony* ran the article “How Black Women can Deal with the Black Male Shortage,” which included such advice as polygamy or “man sharing,” the lowering of expectations for the “ideal” mate, fixing her attitude and considering those from different social backgrounds than she would typically date,

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62 While Black women have long held the primary responsibility for maintaining the Black family (Banks), they have also faced increasingly difficult marriage prospects and had increasingly low marriage rates and at older ages, for the reasons mentioned above. However, some have posited that the low marriage rates among Black women, particularly well-educated Black women, is in part because they have removed themselves from the dating pool. Crowder and Tolnay assert that when given the option “to either compromise in their selection of spouse. . . or to remain single as they extend their search,” some will choose “to forgo the marriage search entirely” (795). Linda M. Burton and M. Belinda Tucker verify this theory as they examine cultural trends: “The cultural elevation of highly successful single (even if partnered) African American women (e.g., Oprah Winfrey, Condoleezza Rice) has demonstrated the possibilities and benefits of going solo” (143). They also point to songs with similar themes from popular musical artists such as TLC, Janet Jackson, and Destiny’s Child (143).
“importing” a husband from another country, and being “more supportive of Black men in general and devote their time and talent to community organizations that focus on elevating the socio-economic status of Black men and strengthening the Black family,” because “[b]y doing so, the previously ‘lonesome’ Black woman will make good use of her spare time and in the process just might meet ‘Mr. Right’” (34). Again, in March of 1987 *Ebony* ran the article “25 Ways to Find a Good Man” where, in addition to advice such as, “Join professional organizations” (148), “Get out of the house” (150), and consider men they would not usually think of as relationship material, the article offers such advice as, “Learn how to cook” because “[w]hile many men are more liberal and understanding of the plight of working women, they still want a woman who can put a decent meal on the table,” “Get your house in order” because “[a] man looking for a wife certainly doesn’t want a woman who can keep house no better than he can,” and “Be more athletic and sports oriented.” (148). Insisting that Black women must be the ones to change for the future of all Blacks significantly burdens an already burdened community. Advice like this makes Black women responsible for the continuation of the Black family and culture.

Kenya fulfills her promise to “let go, let flow” by agreeing to a blind date with Brian. Her willingness to be open has its limits, however. She continues to be unwilling to consider Brian as anything other than a contracted employee until they get to know one another better as a homeowner and landscaper. At first, they share coffee, then dinner, and go out as friends. Importantly, Kenya, not Brian, initiated the first two of these new things: the coffee and the dinner. During this time as friends, Kenya realizes they have more chemistry than she had allowed herself to believe. Part of what disarms her about Brian is how well he seems to know and understand her. While this has been clear in minor ways the entire time they have known one
another—he respects her boundaries on the blind date, and when they meet again at a party, he
does not pressure her to hire him, leaving the decision to her—when Brian comes to see Kenya’s
backyard that he most clearly demonstrates how well he understands her. As they walk around
her backyard, he “throw[s] around some ideas” about what they could do in the space, starting
with a fountain he had noticed her admiring at the engagement party. He tells her, “You gotta’
have a fountain. You come home from a hard day’s work. You lay back on your chaise. You
listen to the sounds of the water, have a glass of wine. . . . And I was thinking we could build
some kind of a structure here. Drape it in bougainvillea or wisteria.” Brian’s suggestions sound
like they would exactly meet Kenya’s lifestyle and expectations, but she is concerned about the
price, to which he tells her, “We can make it work,” later adding, “I could draw up some kind of
a proposal and submit it to you. And then the ball’s in your court. If you have any questions or
ideas, just give me a call anytime.” His willingness to work with her budget, especially when
paired with his willingness to step back and give her time to decide, again reinforces that he
understands how she processes information.

While Brian respects Kenya’s boundaries, he also pushes at the edges of her comfort
zone, encouraging her to try new things, helping her grow as a person. During the backyard
meeting, he encourages her to go with him to see a recent property he designed, despite her
arguing that she has work to do, promising, “I can take you straight there and bring you straight
back,” and then stopping at a local community garden on the way, promising “I’ll be real quick.”
This incident begins a pattern between Brian and Kenya, with Brian encouraging Kenya to do
something fun she would not normally do, including breaking away from time working at home
out of business hours to go hiking and letting go of expectations about what it means to look like
a professional Black woman.
While on the surface, Kenya does not seem like a person needing a bildungsroman, a deeper look at her character reveals how her mother is still shaping her life. Kenya’s life until she meets Brian has been very focused on the things she thinks she is supposed to want and do. Much of her life has been influenced by her community and her family, specifically her mother. Her mother’s influence is apparent in the official list of things Kenya doesn’t do, which includes “dogs, kayaking, creepy-crawly things, and the color red.” This list matches almost precisely a list of the things Brian encourages her to explore as he offers her opportunities to be herself. For example, while at first Kenya behaves coldly and is uncomfortable with Max, Brian’s dog, insisting that he stay in the car when Brian first looks at her yard, as she and Brian become friends, she becomes more comfortable with Max, eventually letting him sit on the couch with them. Similarly, while Kenya and Brian are not explicitly shown kayaking, he does encourage her to spend time outdoors, not only in the beautiful yard he creates for her but also hiking, which leads to their first kiss and, eventually, sex. When he takes her to the community garden, and Kenya walks into a spider web and starts screaming because she is sure there is a spider in her hair, Brian does not make fun of her but instead calms her and then offers to immediately take her home. Probably the most important on the list is “the color red.” When Brian asks about the lack of color in her apartment, “What’s with all the beige? You are gonna paint, right? You’re gonna bring some color in? . . . It doesn’t reflect you,” Kenya reveals, “My mother thinks bright colors are for children and whores.” Later, as part of a montage showing the progress of Kenya and Brian’s relationship, Brian paints Kenya’s toenails red, saying, “I know you’re sensitive about color. So, we’ll just take it slow. No one has to know if you don't want them to. It’ll just be our little secret.” Moments later, they appear, painting the walls of her house a soft seafoam green. When they hold a party to show off Brian’s work in Kenya’s yard, Kenya’s
mother looks around and, before she can even greet her daughter, declares, “This looks like a bordello in Bangkok.” As Brian helps Kenya bring more color into her life through the flowers he plants in her yard, the paint on the walls, and metaphorically, through their new experiences together, Kenya becomes a happier person. He supports her autonomy. He encourages her to try new things, things that she ends up enjoying and her mother vocally rejects. Color becomes a metaphor for Kenya becoming comfortable with herself and her relationship with Brian.

For all his attempts to understand and encourage Kenya, Brian’s experience with race is such that it is a null factor for him, and it is the same for the other White characters in the film. Apart from Jack Pino, the White characters in the film generally treat race as though it does not matter because, to them, it does not. Because of their racial privilege, they do not see any reason to take race into consideration in any number of situations. Leah does not think anything of setting Brian and Kenya up on a blind date and, further, does not think to mention their races when she does. Bill does not think anything of doing as Kenya asks because their position differences in the company mean more to him than their races do. It does not occur to Kenya’s boss that the issues with Jack are more than him being an ass when they are more likely an issue of prejudice. For these White characters, their race is an insulating factor to such a degree that they do not even realize its existence.

However, race is not a null factor for Kenya, and this causes problems in her relationship with Brian. One moment happens early in their relationship when they are cuddling in bed, and he asks about her hair, if it is a wig that she can take off, or if it is her real hair. She then tells him to leave and that their sleeping together “was a really, really stupid mistake” before firing him. A few scenes later, after her friends convince her that she may have been hasty in dumping and firing him, Kenya goes to her hairdresser and tells them to “take it out.” When Brian arrives at
her house to pick up the last of his things, he says, “You’re gorgeous,” and she asks him not to leave. A.E. Stevenson reads these scenes as overtly post-racial, particularly in their treatment of Brian, that makes these scenes especially challenging to interpret. Stevenson asserts, “Brian attempts to acknowledge Kenya’s hair as the sign of difference, but in actuality, he affirms her ‘natural’ hair, a clear distillation of her Black femininity, as a signifier of Black feminine chaos, that which gestures to a long history of expressing freedom” (38). While Brian’s apparent lack of understanding demonstrates their racial difference, his embrace of her “natural” hair suggests a rejection of Eurocentric standards of beauty and professionalism. Kenya’s hair is an obvious place for their racial differences to manifest. The politics of Black hair, particularly Black women’s hair, have a long and complicated history. While for many in the Black community, hair care is connected with same-sex socialization for both sexes, first at home and then in the local beauty parlor or barber shop, hair can also be used as a location for discrimination, both from within the Black community and without. Within the community, that conflict often comes from the distinction between good hair—hair with loose curls that is relatively easier to maintain—and bad hair—hair with tighter curls that can require more time and effort to upkeep. Within the White community, Black hair, particularly when left natural or in another Black cultural hairstyle, such as cornrows or locs, are often described as unprofessional and is used as an excuse for discrimination against Black people in schools or workplaces.64

63 The word “natural” is used by her friends to describe her hair after she removes her weave, but “natural” Black hair is often used to refer to hair that has not been chemically processed or relaxed to be straight. Some might object to the word being used to describe Kenya’s hair in the film’s second half.

64 When he first asks about her hair, Brian tells Kenya, “I was just wondering what you’d look like completely naked,” and this is likely how Kenya would have interpreted such a request. As Kristin Denise Rowe explains, Because so much emphasis is placed on Black women’s hair being styled in aesthetically pleasing ways, and there is a certain level of interpersonal intimacy involved in this process of styling, it follows that there would be a certain level of intimacy and vulnerability involved when Black women reveal their unstyled or undone hair. Being seen by others with undone hair may leave some Black women feeling exposed. (22)
Kenya’s hair is not the only time Brian demonstrates a lack of sensitivity to issues of race. After a particularly challenging day of dealing with her client, Jack, Kenya tells Brian about her day and declares, “That old black tax again. . . . [Y]ou have to work twice as hard just to prove yourself equal.” Brian asks, “You sure you’re not being paranoid?” and when Kenya assures him that she is sure, he supports her, even going so far as to try to join in a conversation with some Black men at her party a few days later, asking them about the Black tax. However, a few days after that, after another challenging day related to Jack, when Kenya brings it up to Brian again at the supermarket, he is less supportive. He says, “Could we put the White boys on hold for tonight? . . . I had a rough day, too. I need to get home and relax. . . . It just makes me feel uncomfortable. I’m sorry, but I wasn’t brought up that way.” Kenya responds, “First of all, you don’t have to talk about being White because no one reminds you every day that you’re White. The only time you guys know you’re White is when you’re in a room full of Black people. . . . I’m in a world full of White people, and every day they remind me that I’m Black.” Her words hold additional weight given the setting of the conversation, a grocery store in a Black neighborhood, and Brian being the only White person in the scene. The lines are spoken in a combination of hushed tones and loud voices, fitting for a private argument in a public space. This space is designed for Brian to seem out of place.65 Despite being out of place, Brian does attempt to push back. He tells Kenya, “You’re a senior manager at one of the Whitest firms in

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65 This feeling would likely be particularly true for up-tight Kenya, especially early in their intimate relationship. However, Brian’s apparent lack of understanding about the impact of his words is also somewhat understandable. Alayna D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps argue that the “secret-society status of Black hair care in popular culture” has generated a world where “most non-Black Americans are unable to make an educated guess about the form or function of basic Black hair tools, style techniques, or maintenance rituals” (141). Further, “the average person’s lack of knowledge regarding the Black America’s tangled hair history” has resulted in a society where “[i]nnocent questions always seem loaded and curiosity can be misconstrued as mockery” (141).

65 At one point, during the argument, another customer, a Black man, walks down the aisle in between them, a rather unsubtle metaphor for their argument.
the country. . . . You graduated top of your class from Stanford and Wharton, for Christ’s sake.
You own a home. You earn more money than what? 98% of the country, Black or White.”

Brian’s response taps into a common misconception about minority success despite systemic oppression, particularly in a culture that likes to believe itself to be post-racial. Kenya’s personal achievements do not mean that racism no longer exists, nor do they undermine her experiences with racism. Kenya responds, “You don’t want to hear about how when I show up at an account meeting, they always have to regroup when they find out I’m the one who’s responsible for their multi-million-dollar acquisition. They’d rather trust it to a file clerk—the guy who gets me my goddamn coffee—because he’s White. Do you know how insulting that is?” Brian then responds, “Forget them, baby. They’re jerks. They have nothing to do with us.” Brian’s response taps into another common misunderstanding about race and racism, that it is only about the jerks, the obviously racist bad actors, as opposed to systems that keep groups of marginalized individuals from succeeding. Kenya then suggests that their relationship cannot continue if she cannot feel free to be her entire self with him:

KENYA. Brian, if I can’t talk to you about the Black shit that drives me crazy or the White shit that drives me crazy, . . . if I’m just supposed to keep that to myself. . . and deny who I am-

BRIAN. No, I’ve never asked you to deny anything. All I wanted, all I wanted was a night off.

KENYA. That’s what being Black is about, Brian. You don’t get a night off.

This argument brings them to a decision to end their relationship. Unlike *Hitch*, or even *Guess Who, Something New* forces the characters, and the audience, to see and acknowledge the characters’ races and the realities of living in a racialized world.

However, Kenya has been changed by her relationship with Brian in ways that not even she immediately realizes. After her breakup with Brian, Kenya turns to Mark, her brother’s
former mentor, who has recently moved to Los Angeles. Mark absolutely meets the criteria for Kenya’s I.B.M. Mark is a tall lawyer with a beautiful smile, who does not seem crazy, nor have children, although we do not see enough of him to know for sure. Like the montage showing the progress of her relationship with Brian, the film shows a montage of Kenya and Mark’s budding romance. Whereas the montage with Brian involved intimate moments and fun, the montage with Mark shows them having dinner, playing golf, and working from home, side-by-side on Mark’s couch. While their relationship is not as passionate, Kenya and Mark demonstrate similar values, and perhaps most importantly, Mark understands the aspects of Kenya that Brian repeatedly demonstrated he could not. While they are eating a nice dinner out, Mark asks Kenya, “So, how are the good old boys treating you down at the plantation?” using the same terminology that Kenya used that triggered her final fight with Brian: “The White boys at the plantation are getting on my last nerve.” Rather than engaging in conversation with someone who will understand, however, Kenya simply replies, “Oh, you know them. Fond of testing us.” Mark then adds, “Oh, yeah. The old Black tax. But we play the game. We do what we gotta’ do to get ahead. Don’t we?” Kenya replies, “We sure do,” before changing the subject. She does not take the opportunity to have the conversation with Mark that she wanted to have with Brian, despite Mark clearly understanding her situation in a way that Brian never could. Instead, she shuts the conversation down.

While with Mark, Kenya seems to revert more to the person she was before her relationship with Brian, reverting to her workaholic tendencies. However, Mark and Kenya’s relationship is short-lived. At a dinner with Kenya’s parents, despite their relatively new relationship, Mark tells them, “If things keep going well, in six months from now, who knows what we’ll be celebrating.” This comment sends Kenya’s mother off to find a bottle of
champagne to celebrate. His suggestion that they are only months away from an engagement, given that it is revealed in the next scene that they have yet to have sex, and without having ever spoken with Kenya about her long-term plans, leads to a very quiet Kenya on the ride home. Quiet, that is, until Mark suggests Kenya grow her hair out. He tells her, “I love that picture of you, at your folks, with the long hair. . . . You should let it grow.” This response is a far cry from Brian’s simple, “[y]ou’re gorgeous,” and is more similar to her conversation with her mother:

MOTHER. Oh, why did you cut your hair? It was your shining glory.
KENYA. It was a weave, Mother.
MOTHER. Well, it suited you.

For Kenya, the discussion of her hair is the final straw that breaks her hopes for her I.B.M. No matter how perfect Mark may be for her on paper, he does not seem to appreciate her as an individual; instead, he prefers the person she was at the beginning of the film, before the growth she experienced with Brian. She tells Mark, “I’m just looking for something. I don’t know what it is, really, but it’s not here.” She is confident when she talks to Mark but privately confides in her friends that she may have made a mistake. Her friends tell her, “You did a brave thing. You let your heart do the talking, not your parents, not society, not Black people, not your girls. You decided for you, honey.”

Kenya’s growth does not stop with her romantic relationships. Breaking up with Mark gives Kenya the confidence to do what she needs to do at work. She gives an honest recommendation about the Pino account, an answer that Jack Pino does not want to hear. While she is prepared to lose her job over the decision, her “[g]uts, smarts, integrity” earn her the promotion she had been vying for. Her boss tells her that her ability to do what is right, even when it is difficult, is “precisely what we want at this firm. . . . Without your good judgment, this
firm would have made a big mistake.” Breaking up with Mark and her realizations about herself, thanks to her relationship with Brian, also gives her courage to put a condition on her acceptance of the partnership, that “one weekend a month is untouchable. No cell phone, no email. Just my time.” Through her challenges, personally and professionally, Kenya is learning to balance both.

 Appropriately for a coming-of-age story, the film climaxes at “the Black, high-society event of the year,” a cotillion ball held in Los Angeles.66 Traditionally, cotillion and debbing were also a place of matchmaking where young people had the opportunity to meet suitable potential marriage partners; Karal Ann Marling reports, “Beneath all the high-minded rhetoric, the planning and the rituals, debbing still came down to the fundamental fact that here was a tenderly nurtured bud with all the qualifications to make a fine wife for a suitable gentleman” (157-58). Kenya objects to this attitude as she attends the cotillion with her family. She is in a particularly bad mood, in the face of all the partnering, given that she has recently ended two relationships. She looks over the young women in white dresses and the men in black and white tuxes and cannot help but comment, “This is so silly. I can't believe I ever took this seriously. I mean, really, what are we trying to prove with this? That our little princesses can grow up and marry little princes, too? As long as they both have the right pedigree. . . they’re guaranteed to

66 The cotillion, a party where a young woman is presented to society, is a tradition with long roots in the Black community as a celebration of American ideals. Karal Ann Marling asserts, “In the prosperous postwar years, then, African-Americans—like their white counterparts—celebrated a whole range of middle-class ideals through debutante balls: family, decorum, dress, preparation for future positions of social leadership” (156). Different communities developed their debutante for different reasons, and many focused on fundraising for various charities and causes of import, such as libraries, hospitals, and the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund. It was also believed by some to help the debs “maintain good moral character” (qtd in Marling 159). Despite all the good that the cotillions sought to do, they were not universally accepted. Marling reports, “Within the black community, some have criticized debuts for copying a sexist and paternalist white ritual that is outmoded. Some argue that the emphasis on professional credentials and social standing only serves to ghettoize have-nots in the ranks of African-Americans” (158). Marling also reports that some argue that the social barriers that have stood between Black and White social groups no longer stand as prominently, and there is no reason to separate them any longer, an idea that brings about its own set of questions and concerns: “Don’t black-and-white debuts essentially funnel off all the most talented and ambitious teens, consigning them to the ranks of all-white society? Is all-black high society any less insular than the clannishness of the white system?” (158).
live happily ever after.” Recent events have taught her that sometimes the person with the right pedigree is not the right person; for all the ways her I.B.M. looked good on paper, he did not want the person she had become. Conversely, the man who did appreciate the person she had become would not easily fit into her community. A conversation with her father, where he assures her that she has more in common with Brian than she does not—”The boy’s just White. He ain’t a Martian”—however, convinces Kenya to go after Brian, and she finds him at the community garden and brings him back to the cotillion with her, wearing a bright red suit they have acquired from a mariachi musician between the community garden and the cotillion. Kenya and Brian dance the night away, his red suit a beacon in the sea of black and white.

Throughout the film, color represents a disruption to how Kenya has been living her life, particularly concerning Brian. It starts with the nail polish on her toes. As he paints her toenails, Brian says, “I know you’re sensitive about color. So, we’ll just take it slow. No one has to know if you don’t want them to. It’ll just be our little secret.” This sentiment could also easily describe her relationship with Brian at the time. As their relationship was new, they could control who knew about it and did not have to let anyone else know if she wanted to keep it a secret. Later, when they paint the walls, both work and put the evidence of their relationship out where anyone can see, regardless of whether they approve. The party where Kenya shows off her new home is also significant for revealing her relationship with Brian. Kenya’s mother disapproves, asserting that it “looks like a bordello in Bangkok” and that Kenya has “gone all bohemian.” Kenya’s mother even explicitly connects Kenya’s use of color to Kenya’s love life, asking, “What on earth has gotten into you?” She then realizes the double entendre and exclaims, “Do not answer that.” This disapproval represents the larger community’s disapproval of interracial relationships. Kenya’s ultimate rejection of the superficial aspects of her community’s values manifests in
Brian’s red suit. The contrast between Brian's bright red suit and the black and white worn by the other couples is visible to everyone. The paint on her walls was clear to anyone invited into her home, no longer a secret, but she could still control who saw the evidence of her changes. The red of the suit appears in a very public forum, one very explicitly involved with relationship building. By bringing Brian there in the suit, Kenya is telling the world about their relationship, refusing to keep it hidden in any way. Like her outbursts earlier during the cotillion, she is telling everyone exactly how much she rejects the expectations of her community.

The biggest challenge in interpreting Kenya’s growth throughout *Something New* comes from identifying the disrupting influence in her life that initiates her growth in her life: Brian or the idea of let go, let flow. Ultimately, does Kenya make these changes in her life because Brian, a White man, has suggested she make them, or are these changes an extension of the “let go, let flow” mentality that led her to Brian in the first place? If Brian is the disruptive force, and Kenya takes breaks from work, cuts her hair, and changes her entire surroundings because Brian has essentially told her to, that is incredibly problematic. It suggests that even as an adult Black woman, Kenya cannot make changes to her life without the wisdom of the White people around her, that she must defer to their wisdom the same way she deferred to her mother as a child. Alternately, if the disruptive force comes from LaWanda Phillip’s recommendation to “let go, let flow,” the decision to enter into a relationship with Brian results from the decision to try new things rather than the cause of it.

Hamri offers a significant clue that we should attribute Kenya’s growth to her decision to “let go, let flow”: her friends. At their Valentine’s Day dinner, all four accept the challenge of embracing the mantra. Ultimately, embracing new ideas and crossing boundaries is the solution to happiness, according to the film. By the closing scene, all of Kenya’s friends have crossed
social boundaries for a relationship. Cheryl, a judge, is engaged to Walter, a chef she meets at the engagement party where Kenya and Brian reconnect after their blind date. While Cheryl is initially hesitant about their social difference, telling Kenya, “See, now, why do I always get the ones in the aprons or the uniforms with the nametags on them? Am I wearing a sign that says, ‘all need apply’?” she reminds herself to “let go, let flow” and remains open to someone she would previously have ignored. Suzette, a pediatrician, begins a relationship with a married man, although she is sure to inform her friends that “the separation is legal.” They met when “[h]e came into my office cradling that feverish child. Those muscular arms. He said, ‘Doctor, we need help.’ What was I supposed to do?” Finally, Nedra, a banker, ends the film with Nelson, Kenya’s younger brother, who never appears with the same woman more than once throughout the film but announces in the film’s final line, “I found her, Daddy!” The success of these other relationships demonstrates that the advice to “let go, let flow” really offers the opportunity to change rather than the influence of the White man. Brian is simply one of the ways Kenya’s changes manifests in the film, tackling the increasingly complicated racial politics of the early twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Two years after the film’s release, on Tuesday, November 4, 2008, Barack Obama was elected president. This election solidified the idea that America was a post-racial nation in the minds of many. Americans saw his election as proof that Black people could break into any corner of the nation, and thus society had become equal. Other events demonstrated, however, that this was not the case as even during the eight years of his presidency; time and again, Black people—generally men—were killed by police overreacting to situations. While these deaths had
always been Black Americans’ lived experiences, technology allowed these cases to be recorded and shared, bringing the issue to the attention of the nation at large. In the world of Hollywood, the Oscar nominations of 2015 reinforced the ways that bias was alive and well in America. The 2014 film *Selma*, director Ava DuVernay, and star David Oyelowo were believed to be shoo-ins for Oscar contention, but none of them received a nomination, in part, they believed, because of their support for Black Lives Matter during one of the premiers for the film. The absence of people of color nominated that year led activist April Reign to initiate the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite on Twitter. Moreover, this was, in fact, true. According to Cheryl Boone Isaacs, then president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 94% of Academy members were White, and 77% were male at that time (Ugwu). #OscarsSoWhite inspired a push to diversify Academy membership, leading to some successes and failures. While many years following 2015 have led to more Black nominations, this is not always the case. By 2020, academy membership had made small advances toward diversity but was still 84% white and 68% male. As Franklin Leonard, founder of the Black List, an organization that highlights the best unproduced screenplays each year, says, “You could have a year when literally every nominee is of color and that would still not mean that the systemic problems that exist in the industry have somehow evaporated overnight—any more than Obama being elected president means that we’ve solved the problem of racism” (Ugwu). In short, care and attention to ensuring equity needs to begin long before award season and needs to involve films in all genres, not only those that are award show darlings or that tackle the topic of race and racism. The changes must

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67 Many screenplays on the Black List come from people from marginalized groups. Several have also gone on to win Academy Awards after the attention brought to them by their presence on the Black List.
also occur in genres usually overlooked in the Academy, such as the romantic comedy, where casting Black actors remains the exception and not the rule.
CHAPTER 5

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME:
THE ROMANTIC COMEDY IN A POST-NOTHING AMERICA

As the preceding chapters have shown, the past century has seen some significant improvement in the rights of women thanks to the efforts of the feminist movements. However, events of the past decade have demonstrated there is still significant work to be done, particularly given the efforts of some to undo the achievements of previous generations. These efforts have inspired a new generation of feminists and yet again motivated them to political action. The kinds of tensions brought about by a nation divided between traditionalism and progress are also playing out in Hollywood cinema. On one side are those who would see America progress, becoming a more welcoming and inclusive place, and on the other are those who seek to uphold their own vision of a traditional America. The romantic comedy genre is once again serving as a place for these social and culture issues to manifest, with those issues exhibiting a generic split between a more progressive and more traditional take. Interestingly, in both cases, despite the different approaches the filmmakers take, the plots of the film inevitably must work to reconcile diverse America as it is with an America as traditionalist fantasy space.

This divide is not surprising given the divisive American political moment. The 2016 election cycle was reactionary, responding to the eight years of the Obama administration. The 2016 democratic nomination of Hillary Clinton, the former Secretary of State under Barack Obama, was historic as the first woman to run at the top of the ticket for a major party. The Republican nomination of Donald Trump only further highlighted this as an election heavily
invested in issues of identity. Trump, with his Make America Great Again (MAGA) slogan, leaned into questions about who counts as an American. John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck assert that the 2016 election centered around issues of identity and “a debate about whether innocent blacks were being systematically victimized by police forces. It was a debate about whether white Americans were being unfairly left behind in an increasingly diverse country” (2). They assert, “How people felt about these issues depended on which groups they identified with and how they felt about other groups. . . . In short, these identities became the lens through which so much of the campaign was refracted” (2-3).

Trump and the MAGA movement were not the only ones invested in identity during the 2016 election. Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck argue, “Hillary Clinton fashioned her campaign as a direct rebuke of Trump. One part of that involved a different social identity: gender.” As she was the first woman major-party nominee, Clinton emphasized “the historic nature of her candidacy” and “targeted Trump for his mistreatment of women” (6). During the election, in a so-called October surprise, a 2005 Access Hollywood tape was leaked of Donald Trump speaking to Billy Bush, where Trump admitted to sexual harassment and sexual assault, notoriously stating, “And when you’re a star they let you do it. You can do anything,” including “[g]rab them by the pussy” (“US Election: Full Transcript”). Many expected the release of this hot mic behind-the-scenes moment to be the end of Trump’s campaign. Lili Loofbourow asserts, “Misogyny isn’t rare—Hillary Clinton’s campaign made that crystal clear—but no one really thought a broad

68 Billy Bush has his own connections to the political world. His uncle, George H.W. Bush, was the 41st president of the United States and his cousin, George W. Bush was the 43rd. Despite both Bushes serving as Republican presidents, neither would endorse Trump’s presidential run, and it was widely reported that neither voted for Trump in the 2016 election. While The Texas Tribune reported that the younger Bush did not vote for anyone for president (“George W. Bush Congratulates Trump”), the BBC reported that Bush Sr. voted for Hillary Clinton, whose husband, Bill Clinton, ran against Bush Sr. in 1992, and won (“George Bush Sr calls Trump a ‘blowhard’”).
swath of the American public would find sexual assault not just electable but charming.”

However, despite several women reporting exactly such behavior from Trump, his supporters dismissed the tape as “locker-room talk” and “turned the world into a metaphorical ‘locker room’ where men could be indulgently absolved of anything misogynistic they said provided they weren’t addressing women” (Loofbourow).

The attitudes displayed in the *Access Hollywood* tapes, and the lack of response from the Republican party that had nominated Trump “clarified that the party in power had consciously decided not to see women as equal citizens under the law, but it had also decided that women were no longer worth protecting” (Loofbourow). Loofbourow argues, “The Me Too movement emerged in part as a lunge toward accountability in the year after the *Access Hollywood* tape—and after witnessing how the many Trump accusers who came forward were treated.” In 2017, the Me Too and Times Up movements (often identified by the internet hashtags #metoo, and #timesup) burned through popular culture, outing open secrets in Hollywood and beyond. Solidarity helped women find their voices to speak the truths about what they had experienced at the hands of powerful men. These voices rose to a volume that could no longer be ignored in society, leading to the firing and, in some cases, criminal prosecution, of men who had long been accused of sexual misconduct, had never been held accountable. This includes men from many walks of life, from politicians to television and film personalities to powerful men behind the scenes.

Many see this new online push as clear signs that a fourth wave of feminism has emerged. Pauline Maclaran asserts that “there is a fresh feminist zeitgeist coming from young activists . . . who try to blend the micropolitics that characterised much of the third wave with an agenda that seeks change in political, social and economic structures much like the second wave”
and she specifically identifies that these activists “are using the power of the Internet and online media, creating blogs and Twitter campaigns” (1734). Some, such as Rory Dicker are not entirely prepared to separate this “fresh feminist zeitgeist” from the third wave. She asserts,

Perhaps because of my involvement in theorizing the third wave and because of my interest in history, I have difficulty with an uncomplicated acceptance of the fourth wave. I am ready neither to declare an ‘end’ to the third wave nor claim the existence of a fourth wave, though I acknowledge that younger women can engage with both feminist and antifeminist ideas extremely easily as a result of the internet, technology, and social media. (141)

On the other hand, Jennifer Baumgardner asserts, “Much like the Third Wave lived out the theories of the Second Wave (with sometimes surprising results), the Fourth Wave enacted the concepts that third wave feminists had put forth” (250). She further asserts, “Personally, I believe that the Fourth Wave exists because it says that it exists” (251).

While postfeminism and the third wave were often criticized for being so firmly embedded in the cultural and commercial, ignoring politics, if not fully rejecting it, the Me Too and Times Up movements have brought the cultural and the political firmly back together. While in some ways a cultural and social movement similar to previous eras, Me Too seeks to bring awareness to the sometimes subtle gender expectations that support the modern rape culture. Harnessing the power of the internet to bring people together, the movement seeks to tell women that they are not alone in their experiences, much like the consciousness-raising (or CR) sessions of second wave feminism and to offer resources and support. The movement also seeks to leverage the modern connection between the popular and the political to influence not only the workplace by removing these abusive men, but to enact legislation that will hopefully make it harder for powerful individuals to take advantage of those under them as well as make it easier for those being abused to report that abuse.
Further evidence of the new political connections between the emerging fourth wave and the political appears in an unlikely place: teen girl magazines. Scholars such as Zeisler, Douglas, and Gonick have decried the ways that magazines for teen girls have used their focus on consumerism, ad sales, and co-opting the feminist movement, when they are not completely denouncing it. The 2016 election changed things for at least one of these magazines. On December 10, 2016, *Teen Vogue* ran the scorched-earth politics op-ed, “Donald Trump Is Gaslighting America” by Lauren Duca.\(^6^9\) It was the most-read article for the magazine that year.\(^7^0\) There is certainly a marketing component to the decision to be more politically vocal in the past several years since the editors realized that their target demographics were more and more politically engaged, as the last several elections and social movements like Black Lives Matter and Me Too have demonstrated. However, Sophie Gilbert asserts that the op-ed was in line with changes that the magazine had been making at the time. Gilbert reports, “The pivot in editorial strategy has drawn praise on social media, with some writers commenting that *Teen Vogue* is doing a better job of covering important stories in 2016 than legacy news publications.”

The 2016 election had a profound impact on Americans. Samhita Mukhopadhyay argues, “The 2016 election wasn’t just a loss for Clinton, it was a loss for feminism. Not only did the first female candidate from either major party lose, she lost to an open misogynist—someone who called a former Latina beauty queen fat and was caught on the record bragging about grabbing women by the pussy” (2). The attitudes Donald Trump expressed during his campaign played out during his administration in dramatic and consequential ways, particularly on the

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\(^6^9\) In 2018 Duca wrote a follow-up article, “Donald Trump Is Still Gaslighting America. I Really Care. Do U?” commenting on the Trump administration and the behavior of the Trump family during the Trump presidency.

\(^7^0\) According to Sophie Gilbert, “How to Apply Glitter Nail Polish the Right Way” was the second most-read article, so there is still room to grow, though the fourth most-read article also had to do with politics: “Mike Pence’s Record on Reproductive and LGBTQ Rights Is Seriously Concerning.”
Supreme Court. During the nomination process for Brett Kavanaugh, Christine Blasey Ford, a psychology professor from Palo Alto University, and former classmate of Kavanaugh’s, brought sexual assault allegations against him. In scenes eerily similar to those of the Anita Hill testimony against Clarence Thomas, Ford testified before the senate during Kavanaugh’s hearings, despite the fact his nomination felt predetermined with the conservative Senate. Trump’s subsequent nomination of Amy Coney Barrett after Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s death only forty-six days before the 2020 election gave the Supreme Court a conservative supermajority, a major blow to reproductive rights.

In May of 2022, women once again found themselves at the center of American politics, when there was an unprecedented leak of a draft of the U.S. Supreme Court decision on *Dobbs v Jackson Women’s Health*. This case challenged the precedent established by *Roe v Wade* (1973) and reaffirmed by *Planned Parenthood v Casey* (1992). This leak, which was then confirmed in July of that year, revealed that by a 6-3 vote, the Supreme Court was returning decisions regarding a woman’s right to an abortion to the individual states. In some states, so-called “trigger bans” went into place, reinstating laws that had previously been determined to be unconstitutional, some of which many decades (if not centuries) old and out-of-date, as governors and courts in other states interceded, preventing such actions from taking place. This led to significant confusion in some places, especially as some states sought to institute new laws, including some that would make it illegal to travel to another state to receive an abortion. Stories of some women—and even some young girls—being denied abortions after sexual

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71 In the leaked version only five justices were signed to the opinion, as Chief Justice Roberts was hoping for a more moderate decision that did not fully overturn Roe.
assault, necessary medications because of their potential as abortifacients, and treatment for incomplete miscarriages went viral.

Protests arose across the country after both the leak and the official release of the decision, and ultimately American citizens took their discontent with the decision into the midterm elections that year. In the aftermath of the *Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health* decision, voters in five states reaffirmed a woman’s right to choose through constitutional amendment proposals for their states. The first was in Kansas, where the proposed amendment was on the ballot during the state’s midterm primary elections. Voters in the state voted down a proposed amendment which would have established that there was no right to abortions in the state; during the November midterm elections, Kentucky also voted down a similar constitutional amendment. Three other states (California, Michigan, and Vermont) voted to enshrine women’s rights to make their own medical decisions regarding pregnancy into their state constitutions. Many voters also identified the Dobbs decision as a key issue that led them to decisions regarding who to vote for that year. While there had been many predictions there would be a so-called red wave of Republicans winning – as would be typical for in a president’s first midterm election during economic uncertainty – that was not the case. Many candidates who held the most extreme positions on abortion were defeated, and while the Republicans took power over the U.S. House of Representatives, Democrats retained control of the U.S. Senate, even increasing their margin by one vote. Recent events have shown that women’s rights are constantly under attack,

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72 Interestingly, there was a similar effect on the 2018 midterm elections in the wake of the Kavanaugh hearings which Susan Page and Cat Hofacker from *USA Today* referred to as “The Kavanaugh Effect” in which 60% of likely voters said that Kavanaugh’s confirmation after facing sexual assault allegations made them more likely to vote for one party or the other, though the effect was on both sides of the aisle. Interestingly, they reported a significant “gender difference: By 3 percentage points, men said it made them more likely to vote Democratic. By 12 points, women said it made them more likely to vote Democratic.”
thoroughly demonstrating the continued importance of feminism, both as a social and political movement. As Mukhopadhyay argues, conversations about feminist issues, goals, priorities, and agendas “need to enter the mainstream political discourse rather than our hiding from them in the service of a false narrative about America. . . . We live in complex, sometimes mind numbingly confounding times and the only way to understand them is to understand each other: the good, the bad, and the sometimes extremely ugly” (8).

Against this socially volatile backdrop, Hollywood was facing its own uncertain future as movie theaters faced a crisis point thanks to changing technology. Just as early television served as a disruptor to film in the 1950s, streaming services, such as Netflix and Hulu, followed by a proliferation of services from cable channels such as HBO and Starz to production companies such as Paramount and Disney, have disrupted the television and film industry. Websites such as Screen Rant and The Hollywood Reporter were reporting significantly low box office numbers back in 2017, suggesting that perhaps “the widening world of TV and online streaming offering so many alternatives to the traditional cinematic experience,” rising ticket prices, and sequelitis were to blame (Leane, McClintock). Alissa Wilkinson asserts, “[T]he impending death of the movie theater has been attributed to streaming services almost as long as streaming services have existed, despite evidence that people who stream also go to cinemas more.” Back in 2017, The Hollywood Reporter made the observation that “people watching their pennies and already paying for cable and a video subscription service might take a pass on movies they don’t consider ‘must see’” (Fithian).

73 Despite the numbers, directors such as Martin Scorsese and James Cameron have been critical of streaming services. Scorsese argues “[T]he art of cinema is being systematically devalued, sidelined, demeaned, and reduced to its lowest common denominator, ‘content,’” and he objects to the use of algorithms in place of curation. Cameron, on the other hand, simply asserts, “‘Enough with the streaming already! I’m tired of sitting on my ass’” (Sharf).
When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in the first quarter of 2020, closing the doors of nearly anywhere groups could gather in the name of social distancing and flattening the curve, the problems for movie theaters only got worse. Production companies (along with many other industries) were forced to rapidly shift gears, delaying the releases of some production and offering limited-time at-home streaming releases of others. In post-COVID-19 America, it seems Hollywood is attempting to identify which films need to receive a full theatrical release and which would be better served going straight to streaming. Another, parallel shift is occurring in serialized media, what is more traditionally associated with television, sometimes called linear TV. Large budget shows, frequently produced by premium cable channels or on streaming services, are blurring the lines between film and television. These shows generally have a shorter season length than has been traditional in the US (eight to twelve episodes rather than eighteen to twenty-four) and are generally serialized, which offers more of the effect of a very long film rather than a series of discrete episodes. This has also had an impact on the kinds of actors who star in the shows, with more prestigious film actors filling traditionally less prestigious television roles. All these elements come together to reflect changing options for a changing audience.

As occurred in previous eras, the social and political landscape as well as the uncertainty in the film industry has had a significant impact on the romantic comedy. Since the decline of the neo-traditional romantic comedy in the aughts, numerous articles from popular media sources

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74 The closures delayed production schedules across Hollywood, as sets were forced to close, some mid-scene, and then safety measures were put in place, such as quarantine periods, face shields, masking and routine testing policies among others.
75 In July 2021, Scarlett Johansson sued Disney over breach of contract over Black Widow’s (2021) simultaneous release in theaters and on the Disney+ streaming service, resulting in low box office numbers, depriving Johansson of lucrative “box office bonuses.” The case was settled out-of-court in September 2021 under undisclosed terms.
76 Nicholas Grous defines “linear TV” as “real-time programming accessed over the air or by cable/satellite at scheduled times” (9).
such as the National Public Radio,\textsuperscript{77} \textit{L.A. Weekly},\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Washington Post},\textsuperscript{79} and \textit{Business Insider}\textsuperscript{80} have asked variations on the question “Is the romantic comedy dead?” and come to differing conclusions. However, scholars such as those featured in Maria San Filippo’s edited collection, \textit{After “Happily Ever After”: Romantic Comedy in the Post-Romantic Age} (2021) argue that romantic comedies still exist, but that the genre looks different than it has in the past. These scholars assert that more and more romantic comedies highlight previously un- or underrepresented voices, come from outside Hollywood, either by way of indie productions or from other countries, focus on what happens after the happily ever after that traditionally marks the end of a romantic comedy, or have become serialized, telling a longer-form story.

Scholars have been anticipating the shift from the neo-traditional romantic comedy to the next cycle for some time. Jeffers McDonald was already observing a shift in the conclusion of her book, \textit{Romantic Comedy}, back in 2007 where she discusses the hommecom, while Grindon described the Grotesque and Ambivalent Cycle in 2011. Jeffers McDonald defines the hommecom as “romcoms for boys,” which “work to counterbalance all those other narratives that have depicted only the central females’ longing” for the right partner (108), identifying films such as \textit{The Forty-Year Old Virgin} (2005) and \textit{Wedding Crashers} (2005) as examples of the genre.\textsuperscript{81} Grindon observes something similar in his Grotesque and Ambivalent Cycle that splits from the neo-traditional romantic comedy\textsuperscript{82} in 1997. Grindon asserts that “by the late nineties grotesque elements of animal comedy, the slapstick humor, focus on sex, gross physical jokes,

\textsuperscript{77} Linda Holmes, “Are Romcoms Dead?”
\textsuperscript{78} Amy Nicholson, “Who Killed the Romantic Comedy?”
\textsuperscript{79} Emily Yahr, “The Romcom is Dead. Good.”
\textsuperscript{80} Jason Guerrasio, “The Big Hollywood Romantic Comedy is Dead — Here’s what Happened to It.”
\textsuperscript{81} In her introduction to \textit{After “Happily Ever After,”} however, she observes that this was a short-term transition, only lasting approximately five years (xii).
\textsuperscript{82} He uses the term “reaffirmation” to describe the cycle.
and uninhibited vulgarity became integrated with romantic comedies” (62) and that these films “mock romance and seldom retain a conviction that love can bind the couple in a fruitful partnership in which self-sacrifice and tenderness elevate their union” (62-63). He then argues that the ambivalent romantic comedy “usually poses a healthy skepticism toward love in order to gain credibility with the audience before making an affirmative move the union of the couple” (64).

In the years since the release of Jeffers McDonald’s and Grindon’s books, Hollywood has released a limited number of romantic comedies that continue in the vein of the hommemcom or grotesque and ambivalent romantic comedy, such as Trainwreck (2015), while others feature main characters from underrepresented backgrounds, such as Crazy Rich Asians (2018) and The Big Sick (2017), both of which feature Asian main characters, or Fire Island (2022) and Bros (2022), which feature not only queer main characters, but fully queer casts (even in straight roles). While scholars such as Kyle Stevens took issue with the neo-traditional romantic comedy’s tendency to reduce queer characters to stereotypes, denying them any actual romantic relationships, which in turn “denies [their] existence” (136), films such as Fire Island and Bros ensure that queer relationships are not only visible, but the central relationships of the films. These films continue with the tendency of the grotesque romantic comedies to show more graphic sex than was allowed for neo-traditional romantic comedies, ensuring that gay sexual desire is not just implied but is explicitly shown (as much as is allowed for an R-rating, which both films received).

Public reception for these boundary-pushing romantic comedies has been mixed. While Fire Island received a streaming release on Hulu in the United States, Bros received a full theatrical release in October of 2022. When it did not achieve the projected level of success ($4.8
million its opening weekend rather than the $8-10 million the studio had anticipated), co-writer and star, Billy Eichner tweeted his disappointment, asserting that homophobia was to blame. Sharf and William Earl, writing for *Variety*, argue that while homophobia was likely a contributing factor in the low performance, there were likely other factors as well, including competition both in theaters and on streaming, and the importance of star power to post-pandemic theatrical release success, particularly for romantic comedies, which *Bros* did not have. While other recent romantic comedy theatrical releases have starred some of the largest names from the neo-traditional era, such as Julia Roberts, Sandra Bullock, and Jennifer Lopez, neither of the *Bros* stars, Billy Eichner and Luke McFarlane, have that box-office draw. Eichner is primarily known for his TV work, particularly cable TV and digital show *Billy on the Street* (television 2011-2017, digital platforms 2018-2022), while McFarlane’s filmography heavily features straight Hallmark romantic comedy roles, where he is the hero opposite a female costar. This may not have been sufficient draw to bring audiences back to the theater in post-pandemic 2022.

Thus, in total, recent years have seen a splitting of the romantic comedy genre. While one side continues the work of the hommecom or the grotesque romantic comedy, pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable in the genre, on the other side are specifically made-for-TV style films. They are hyper-generic, both in structure and in production, relying on shorthand created by tropes and formulae to meet strict time requirements set by television. They serve as

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83 The tweet has since been deleted, but articles such as Sharf and Earl’s have retained the content.
84 In theaters it was up against such as horror movie, *Smile* (2022) and historical epic, *The Woman King* (2022), as well as a re-release of *Avatar* (2009) in preparation for its sequel. On streaming it faced competition from *Hocus Pocus 2* (2022), *Blonde* (2022), a highly controversial film supposedly based on Marilyn Monroe, and a series about true-crime favorite serial killer, Jeffrey Dahmer.
85 *Ticket to Paradise* (2022), *The Lost City* (2022), and *Marry Me* (2022), respectively.
sharp contrast to films such as *Trainwreck* or *Bros* and are often overly wholesome and family friendly, rarely including swearing, drugs, or sex. While there are several producers of this genre of films, the most well-known, and certainly the most prolific are those from Hallmark and its parent company, Crown Media. While Crown Media has been making films for decades, they officially debuted their Hallmark Channel “Countdown to Christmas” programming in 2011 and have since particularly come to be known for their romances (especially those related to seasonal holidays). In 2017, Hallmark aired eighty-nine new films, which included thirty-three new films during their Christmas season (Malanga). That same year they launched their own streaming service: “Hallmark Movies Now.”

Because of their fast-paced production style, Hallmark films heavily rely on romantic comedy tropes and formulae to communicate their messages in the compressed time frame. The genre’s reliance on formulae has actually become a popular culture meme, with jokes on Twitter that say things like,

Watch out ladies. When you visit family over the holidays, there will be charming, flannel-wearing men who never left your hometown who will attempt to charm you into quitting your high-paying city job and rope you into a boring, traditional suburban relationship. STAY VIGILANT. (@jordan_stratton)

Does every Hallmark Christmas movie have the same plot?
Yes.
Am I still going to watch them and act surprised when Susan falls in love with the small town baker who only wears sweaters instead of falling for the big city CEO?
Yes. (@AlliMichalMoore)

Those Hallmark Christmas movies have one of three plots: broken hearted girl falls in love with a prince, chick who hates kids falls in love with a dude with adorable chirren (sic), or girl goes home to help out the family and falls for an old flame/dude she never noticed. (@unicornsdisco)
These tweets reflect the relationship that the audience has with the formulaic nature of the subgenre. They recognize, and to a certain degree, appreciate the consistency and predictability that the subgenre offers.

Like previous cycles of romantic comedies, these two modern subgenres reflect their society, especially the contentiousness of recent politics, with one side seeking to become more inclusive in terms of representation and the other seeking to reinforce boundaries around comfort zones in a socially tumultuous period. Heather Long reports on a correlation between Hallmark’s ratings and the beginning of the 2016 election cycle in 2015. She asserts that during election week “the Hallmark Channel was the fourth-most watched channel on TV during prime time.” She also reports that during this contentious period “more and more Americans are turning to the Hallmark Channel for relief from the daily news cycle. Hallmark is the complete opposite of the divisiveness that so many families felt during the election and President Trump’s penchant for courting controversy.” Stephen Battaglio reports, “Hallmark’s appeal is strongest in the Midwest and the South. Though the channel’s programming is politically agnostic, if you highlighted its strongholds in red on a map, it would look a lot like the electoral college results in the 2016 election.” He draws connection to these locations, politics, and “shows that depict traditional family values.” He reports that audiences in these spaces tend to “prefer male leads and heroes who are not conflicted and ‘tend to do the right thing,’ . . . . They are likely to tune out entertainment shows with depictions of gay people in sexual situations, negative portrayals of religion and political humor.”

Scholars and regular viewers alike have observed the lack of diversity in Hallmark programming, with Emily L. Newman and Emily Witsell dedicating one of the three sections in their edited collection, *The Hallmark Channel: Essays on Faith, Race and Feminism* to issues of
representation in Hallmark. Hallmark, too, has observed the issues of representation in their programming and has taken some steps to rectify the issue. In 2019 the Hallmark channel aired a commercial during their popular Holiday romance lineup featured a same-sex marriage, which led to backlash, and a petition from conservative group One Million Moms for the network to pull the ad, which it did. This then caused further backlash, including from celebrities such as Ellen DeGeneres, who pushed for the network to reinstate the commercial, which they eventually did. The next year Hallmark aired their first film to feature a gay couple, although it did so in a family-centric film rather than a romance. The Christmas House (2020) starred Jonathan Bennett, an openly gay actor who had frequently starred opposite female love interests in Hallmark holiday romances in the past. They released their first gay holiday romance, The Holiday Sitter, which also stars Bennett, in 2022. This decision may have come in part because other producers of what Walter Metz calls “Classical Holiday Cinema” were already moving in that direction, with Hulu releasing the lesbian themed Happiest Season in 2020, and Netflix releasing the gay male themed Single All the Way in 2021. Hallmark’s 2022 holiday film season also featured Chinese-American culture in Christmas at the Golden Dragon and A Big Fat Family Christmas as well as the network’s first Kwanza-themed film, Holiday Heritage (Macke). According to Ellen Gamerman, spokespeople from Hallmark have “emphasized the network’s commitment to storytelling that reflects diverse perspectives. ‘We want all viewers to see themselves in our programming and everyone is welcome.’”

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87 Single All the Way, interestingly, features Luke McFarlane, but as an interloping third leg of a potential love triangle.
These changes in representation were not without their own backlash. Candace Cameron Bure, a long-time star of the network and outspoken Christian, left Hallmark in 2022 for a new network, Great American Family, that hopes to compete with Hallmark in the holiday cinema arena.\textsuperscript{88} One explanation Bure offered for her move asserts, “I knew that the people behind Great American Family were Christians that love the Lord and wanted to promote faith programming and good family entertainment” (Gamerman). Bure went on to say, “I think that Great American Family will keep traditional marriage at the core” (Gamerman).

Like several of the films discussed in the chapters of this dissertation, the (stereo)typical Hallmark plot reflects a complicated relationship with capitalism and the American Dream. This is most clearly reflected in the prince and princess plots, such as \textit{A Princess for Christmas} (2011) and \textit{A Prince for Christmas} (2015) because of the exaggeration offered by the extreme class separation. Historically, films involving the prince and princess trope comment on issues related to social upheaval, and these films are no exception. While these films, and the channels that feature them, have flourished of late as audiences seek refuge from the stress of real-life political and social upheaval, the films cannot help but reflect the issues of life in a capitalist state that Americans deal with on a daily basis. While on the surface these films appear to be simple wish-fulfillment, Cinderella stories, ultimately, they present a contradictory message about American ideas about class mobility and the American Dream, ideas held dear by much of the subgenre’s target audience.

In \textit{A Princess for Christmas}, Jules (Katie McGrath), is fired from her job at an antiques shop despite her skill in antique repair because there simply have not been enough sales for the

\textsuperscript{88} Interestingly, one of Bure’s Hallmark Christmas Romantic Comedies is \textit{A Shoe Addict’s Christmas} (2018), which also placed her opposite Luke McFarlane.
shop owner to justify keeping on an employee. This leaves Jules without a way to provide for her niece and nephew, Maddie (Leilah de Meza) and Milo (Travis Turner), whom she is raising after the death of her sister and brother-in-law. In *A Prince for Christmas*, Emma (Viva Bianca) struggles to keep her parents’ small-town diner going after their deaths, especially as she is now also raising her teenage sister, Alice (Brittany Beery). No matter how hard she works, it seems that she will lose the legacy her parents left behind. While the American Dream asserts that their hard work should be met with financial success, or at least stability, both heroines are only met with failure until the narrative intervenes and they meet the princes, Aston, Prince of Castlebury (Sam Heughan) and Prince Duncan (Kirk Barker), respectively. Ashton is Maddie and Milo’s uncle on their father’s side. His brother was disowned when he married Jules’s sister, a commoner. Prince Duncan, on the other hand, meets Emma when he is running away from an arranged marriage, and he crashes his car into a snowbank in her hometown, where he keeps his true identity a secret from everyone. Meeting Jules and Emma helps the princes learn to find joy in everyday things, something that the pressures of being next in line to the throne have made challenging. When the couples fall in love, the heroines are finally offered a way out of their financial troubles, but not through their hard work or any amount of bootstrap pulling. While their hard work makes them deserving of the princes’ love, the plot essentially relies on karma to fulfill capitalism’s promise of financial stability and success. In the afterword to *Ruritania*, Nicholas Daly asks, “Why have there been so many of these films in the last few years? Is the renewed power of these Princess stories underwritten by the waning of democracy in an age of oligarchs and strong-men leaders? Do they appeal by wrapping up in romance, braid, and tinsel the structural inequalities of late capitalism?” (195). Like the Ruritanian romances of previous generations, these Hallmark films, for all their need to offer an escape for a relatively low cost
(each film is reported to cost approximately $2 million and requires only a few weeks for filming), cannot escape the social and economic realities of late-stage capitalism.

Daly does offer a less abstract reason for the current popularity of Ruritanian romances: the British royal family (195). Like in the 1950s, when the production team of *The Swan* was carefully watching Princess Anne’s relationship with Peter Townsend, the production teams surrounding the current Ruritanian classical holiday films seem to have closely watched the British royals in the twenty-first century. There was a new batch of Ruritanian romances following the marriage of Prince William and Kate Middleton in 2011 (the same year that *A Princess for Christmas* was released), and then one even starring a Black heroine, *A Christmas Princess* (2019), following the marriage of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in 2018.

However, the real-life inspiration for these films has also offered a chance to see the post-marriage impact of the kinds of relationships presented in Ruritanian romances play out in real time in world news cycles, particularly the ones connected with entertainment and celebrity news. Both Princesses Kate and Meghan have received significant criticism over the years from the press and on social media. Helen Lewis asserts that the United Kingdom “has a long tradition of deeming royal women unsuitable,” and Elise Taylor points to the ways that the late Princess Diana and Duchess Sarah Ferguson were pitted against each other in the media during their marriages, in that “Diana was often described as less fun than Fergie, while Fergie was depicted as less glamorous than her sister-in-law.” While “Kate Middleton was once depicted as a dull social climber” and “deemed vulgar and hopelessly bourgeois,” Lewis asserts, “[t]abloid headlines have become noticeably kinder since Prince Harry’s relationship with Meghan was announced.” For Meghan, the misogynistic language used to describe royal women has also taken on a racial tone: “she is ‘exotic,’ ‘urban,’ ‘straight outta Compton’” (Lewis). In addition to
being an American and mixed-race, Meghan was an actress prior to her relationship with Harry, most prominently starring as Rachel Zane in *Suits* (2011-2019), a long-running legal drama on the USA network in the United States.\(^9^0\)

While these common princesses have helped reinvigorate the Ruritanian romantic comedy, the continued scrutiny of Harry and Meghan in particular is a reminder why romantic comedies tend to end where they do. In 2020, Harry and Meghan announced plans to “step back” from their duties as working members of the royal family, following the birth of their son the year before. The following year Harry and Meghan sat down for an interview with Oprah Winfrey to discuss their time as working royals and their decision to leave. They revealed that during their time with the royal family Meghan was feeling significantly depressed and anxious due to her treatment by some members of the royal family, which reminded Harry of the way his mother was treated during and after her marriage to then Prince Charles. Fearing that his wife might meet a similar fate as his mother who died when Harry was only twelve, Harry and Meghan renounced their titles as working royals. This led to significant backlash both from within and outside the family. In the years since leaving their working royal lives, Harry and Meghan have spoken out numerous times about their experiences: in addition to the interview with Oprah, they have released a docu-series on Netflix (*Harry & Meghan, 2022*), and Harry released a memoir, entitled *Spare* (2023). While a few Ruritanian romantic comedies, such as *The Prince and Me* \(^9^1\) and *The Christmas Prince* have sequels that continue the couples’ stories,

\(^9^0\) Markle’s last episode aired in 2018, less than a month before she and Harry married. Many of her long-time *Suits* costars attended the wedding.

\(^9^1\) She also starred in two Hallmark romances, *When Sparks Fly* (2014) and *Dater’s Handbook* (2016).

that is the exception rather than the rule. The real-life pressures of marriage into a royal family presents significant consequences, both for the couple, and their home nations. By ending where they do, most Ruritanian romantic comedies can avoid these kinds of conversations about consequences of what happens after the happily ever after that real life royals face.

Despite the declaration of their death as theatrical releases, the romantic comedy genre saw a resurgence in 2022 and early-2023, with multiple films in addition to Bros appearing on the big screen and becoming mid-sized box office hits. These films include Marry Me (2022) making over $48 million in the Worldwide Box Office; Ticket to Paradise (2022), at $172 million; and The Lost City (2022) at nearly $183 million; with Love Again (2023) coming in the first half of 2023. These theatrical releases were joined by a few streaming romantic comedies that featured high-profile actors, some of whom were major figures in the neo-traditional romantic comedies, such as Shotgun Wedding (2022) that starred Jennifer Lopez and Josh Duhamel and Your Place or Mine (2023) starring Reese Witherspoon and Ashton Kutcher. What sets these romantic comedies apart from other recent fair is they seem to attempt to reinvigorate the neo-traditional romantic comedy. Rather than continuing the progress made in the late-2000s, and 2010s, these films seem inclined to make a safe investment in a tried-and-true subgenre. Only time will tell if these films mark a new re-reaffirmation of romance cycle, or if filmmakers are clinging to a past too far removed from reality to be recognizable.

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92 Shotgun Wedding may not entirely fall within the boundaries of a romantic comedy, as it focuses on the main characters’ wedding, rather than their courtship, but this too is in keeping with some late-neo-traditional romantic comedy films, such as Monster-in-Law (2005), which also starred Jennifer Lopez.

93 The Lost City and Shotgun Wedding are also both interesting demonstrations of genre blending, as they seem as invested in being action/adventure films as they are romantic comedies.


@jordan_stratton. “Watch out ladies. When you visit family over the holidays, there will be charming, flannel-wearing men who never left your hometown who will attempt to charm you into quitting your high-paying city job and rope you into a boring, traditional suburban relationship. STAY VIGILANT.” Twitter, 6 November 2022, 9:51 a.m., twitter.com/jordan_stratton/status/1589284463779143681. Accessed 15 March 2023.


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APPENDIX
Timeline

1918
- End of WWI
- Ratification of Women's Suffrage (First Wave of Feminism Ends)

1920
- Wall Street Crash

1929
- It Happened One Night (Beginning of Screwball Comedy)

1934

1941
- US Enters WWII
- Cold War Begins

1947
- Second Wave Feminism Begins

1950s
- Sex Comedies

1960s
- Radical Comedies
- Neotraditional Romantic Comedies

~1967
- Sex Comedies

1991
- Anita Hill Testimony (Third Wave Feminism Begins)
- Late-1980s