

Levine, Elana, ed. *Cupcakes, Pinterest and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*. Pp. 296. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015. US \$28.00 (paperback) ISBN: 9780252081088.

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Scholarship on feminized popular culture in this century must evolve with shifting definitions of the term “woman” as well as the influence of post-feminism, which adds a complex layer to conventional expectations of femininity. This is one of the issues with which *Cupcakes, Pinterest and Ladyporn* engages, set out in Elana Levine’s comprehensive introduction. Levine defines feminized popular culture as spaces, products, modes of expression, as well as now growing digital realms, marketed to and defined by a predominantly female audience. These spaces also allow an audience to identify, take pleasure in or challenge certain meanings of femininity. Feminized popular culture belongs to a long-standing concept that developed from mass-targeted products and limited perceptions of gender roles. On top of this, “whether by dismissive naming – chick flicks, mommy blogs, ladyporn – or by [the] general derision with which they are treated, feminized popular culture is often constructed as lightweight, frivolous, and excessively emotional” (Levine, p. 1); or perhaps these traits are deemed disparaging because they are associated with an assumed femininity. As Levine incisively points out, “many sites of masculinized popular culture (such as professional football, or ‘quality’ TV dramas) escape gendered labeling” (Levine 7).

With essays on erotica, nail polish blogs and cupcakes, this collection is a fascinating analysis of American culture and how notions of gender, class, sexuality and race intersect. What do cupcakes have to do with feminism? A lot, it seems. Levine directs our attention towards how feminized popular culture, particularly in the twenty-first century, is heavily focused on labor. The postfeminist ideal foregrounds successful careers as well as sexual agency, creating certain pressures for women to “have it all”; lucrative jobs, relationships, family and conventional beauty. Areas of popular culture have emerged in response to tackle, encourage or critique this phenomenon.

The collection is divided into three thematic sections: “Passions,” “Bodies,” and “Labors.” “Passions” focuses on the connection between feminized interests and excessive emotion, especially in entertainment and media. Melissa A. Click begins the discussion with

a contextual reading of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the appeal of an “unequal sexual relationship,” given the erotica’s graphic description of BDSM. Drawing on previous scholarship of romance readers by Janice Radway and Carol Thurston, Click conducts her own interviews with 36 readers (white, female and heterosexual). She persuasively argues that their enjoyment of the series is in part informed by the increasingly sexualized environment of a post-feminist culture, one that connects sexuality with power.

Kirsten J. Warner, in her insightful essay on ABC’s drama *Scandal* and black women fandom, demonstrates that more is yet to be discovered concerning women of color in online fan communities. As these platforms thrive in relation to the increased visibility of non-white representation, previously invisible and marginalized voices are emerging to speak passionately about specific cultural experiences. The complex and contradictory nature of feminized popular culture becomes apparent in Jillian Baez’s chapter on *Devious Maids*, a drama about Latina women which attempts to deconstruct stereotypes but still relies on them for success. Likewise, in Erin A. Meyers’ research on gossip magazines and blogs, expanding outlets allow women to challenge norms of femininity previously dominated by print media while at the same time reasserting them.

“Bodies” addresses the physical appearance, health and spirituality of female bodies as sites of labor and pleasure. What is valued and what attempts to push the boundaries? Barbara L. Ley examines pregnancy apps as a mechanism giving women control over their bodies and family welfare. However, these apps are designed with a presumed heteronormative context that isolates same-sex and single parents and places fathers in the backseat. Fashion and nail polish blogs are appreciated as spaces that allow self-expression and creativity of the body. Interestingly, nails are treated as a separate entity, a blank canvas, which escapes the objectification that other body parts are subjected to.

The final section, “Labors,” tackles the pressures of feminized productivity and work. Suzanne Ferris begins by looking at heroines in “chick lit” as young white college-educated women in precarious financial situations. Chapters on Bethenny Frankel and the Kardashians address the obsession with self-branding and entrepreneurship as not just a mark of financial success, but of being a successful woman. The Kardashian empire, writes Alice Leppert, is entirely dependent on a sisterhood which involves the audience and promotes the importance of female bonding and traditional family values.

Cupcakes... will hopefully unleash continuing discussions on the topic of feminized labor. Recently there has been a surge of female celebrities encouraging women to become a “boss.” This initiative aims to attack or take possession of the term “bossy,” which has a derogative association with outspoken girls and women. Tyra Banks, in her hit reality competition *America’s Next Top Model*, requires her contestants to become their own boss and brand. The “female boss” is endorsed as a movement in Sophie Amoruso’s autobiography, *#GirlBoss* which has been made into a Netflix series about the retail founder’s rise to financial success.

The final chapter on cupcakes, from Elizabeth Nathanson, is the highlight of the study, where the intricate layers of this unassuming item are unraveled. Cupcakes are full of contradictions. They are partly treats that celebrate girlhood and promiscuity, as well as key for lucrative female-dominated businesses. They are also criticized for engaging women in a “retrofemininity” (252), that evokes the traditional “housewife-bake sale” image (253). A striking case is made about the sitcom *2 Broke Girls* which, perhaps unknowingly, uses

cupcakes as a symbol of restoring white middle-class femininity, as well as an escape from poverty and racial integration.

This volume has much to engage with romance scholars who are interested in critical discussions of how current cultural industries cater to and inform female pleasure; not just in the chapters about erotica and chick lit, but the specific feminine world in which they are perceived to be situated. The femininity of American popular culture unfortunately remains tied to a white cis-gendered and heteronormative set of traits, a fact that Levine acknowledges. What is left unremarked is popular culture's concentration on youth, as if the main consumers are in their 20s-30s, post-college or new mothers. This study begins to tap into a vast landscape, where there is much still to explore in terms of spaces for women of color, women of different ages, and expanded to keep up with more social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat.