

Diane Negra & Yvonne Tasker (Eds.), **Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014, 320 pp., \$94.95 (hardcover), \$25.95 (paperback).

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Gender is an important lens to critique an economic recession because not only are men and women impacted differently by a financial crisis, but gender is also used to illustrate the state of an economy. As such, it plays a significant role in the media because it provides an accessible understanding of the economy for the audience. Despite gender being an important lens, feminist scholars in the communication field have not paid enough attention to financial crises and their aftermaths. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker's edited volume **Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity** is therefore a valuable contribution to a feminist understanding of an economic downturn. It is likely to be remembered as one of the first books on gender, media, and economic crisis.



The 2008 financial crisis is the reference point of many essays in the volume, but the book contextualizes gender in a recessionary culture rather than in a single event. In other words, crisis is not just a temporary occurrence; it is a state of mind. The essays connect a recessionary culture to a neoliberal economic environment and a postfeminist discourse by showing how an increasingly privatized society displaces state responsibilities onto individuals. In this state of mind, women—traditionally seen as more adaptable to changes—refashion themselves as empowered, flexible sexual and financial beings who weather the crisis with creativity and resilience. In contrast, men—in particular, working-class men—are disfranchised culturally and economically. Financial crisis threatens masculinity, but the discourse of recession hides the subjectivity of white upper-class men while it consolidates their control of wealth and power. The empowered women and the frustrated working-class men are only guises of a traditional gender hierarchy and an unequal social relation.

The analysis in this volume goes beyond news reports and financial media. It examines how popular media (such as reality television, advertisements, feature and documentary films, and popular fictions) tell stories about the recession. While some texts analyzed in the book directly responded to the 2008 crisis (such as Levi's "Go Forth" campaign), others are produced in a recessionary climate (such as the chick flick *Eat, Pray, Love*). The 10 essays can be categorized into three groups: (1) how educated, middle-class women dealt with the recession; (2) how working-class men failed in a recession; and (3) how the Other (immigrants and ethnic minorities) were blamed for the recession.

In the Introduction, Negra and Tasker state that postfeminist culture is characterized by a preoccupation of self makeover, an emphasis on career and reproduction choices, a self-empowering sexuality and consumption, and the belief women have made it and are doing better than men. In the chapter "Escaping the Recession? The New Vitality of the Woman's Worker," Suzanne Leonard explores how educated women are seen as immune to recession. They are said to have a difficult time finding a compatible male partner because men are economically disadvantaged in a recession and they are in a state of arrested emotional development. Women are then asked to do more affective labor to help their partners grow up and become responsible adults. The belief that women are more resourceful in a recession is also discussed in Hannah Hamad's chapter, "*Fairy Jobmother* to the Rescue: Postfeminism and the Recessionary Cultures of Reality TV." A woman expert in the UK reality television show *The Fairy Jobmother* trains the unemployed to get jobs. The job consultant not only shifts responsibilities from the government to the individuals, but she also reinforces the types of jobs that women and men are *naturally* good at: caring and service work for women and manual work for men. The assumption of the resourcefulness of women, especially those of working-class background, is also critiqued in Elizabeth Nathanson's chapter, "Dressed for Economic Distress: Blogging and the 'New' Pleasures of Fashion." Looking at full-time, self-employed bloggers who write about mixing cheap with chic, Nathanson argues that the line between production and consumption is blurred; the bloggers create a consumption lifestyle as a form of work, and they produce texts as a source of semiotic pleasure. In "What Julia Knew: Domestic Labor in the Recession-Era Chick Flick," Pamela Thoma examines how privileged, upper-middle-class women in the autobiographies and film adaptations *Julie and Julia* and *Eat, Pray, Love* reinvented themselves through immersing in foreign cultures. The culinary soul-searching in the autobiographies reinforces women's domestic role in the kitchen and their potential entrepreneurial spirit.

The second theme in the collection is how working-class men failed in the recession. In "'We Are All Workers': Economic Crisis, Masculinity, and the American Working Class," Sarah Banet-Weiser examines the gender ideology inscribed in Levi's advertising campaign "Go Forth." The clothing company and consumers are seen in the campaign as partners who work together to overcome the crisis. By seeing men as the breadwinners, women are ushered back to the home as wives and mothers. A threatened masculinity is also seen as a disruptive force in the home, as Tim Snelson argues in "The (Re)possession of the American Home: Negative Equity, Gender Inequality, and the Housing Crisis Horror Story." The horror television genre revives during a recession because a foreclosed house, like a possessed home, provokes anxiety and fear. In the genre, a stay-at-home mother is seen to get rid of evils. Hamilton Carroll's chapter, "'Stuck between Meanings': Recession-Era Print Fictions of Crisis Masculinity," looks at men's autobiographies chronicling their experiences being laid off and their self-reinvention process. Although the men mock their difficulties readjusting and envy their wives' ease of transition, the autobiographies privilege a male subjectivity and give no voice to women.

The third theme that emerges in the collection is the Other—namely, ethnic minorities, immigrants, and working-class young women—being blamed for the recession. The media culturally discipline the Other and put them in their rightful places. Isabel Molina-Guzmán looks at the role of a Latina wife in a "modern" diverse American family in "'Latina Wisdom' in 'Post Race' Recession Media." Despite the story of *Modern Family* centering around a diverse family (a Latina mother, her much older white husband, and a gay couple with an adopted Asian girl), the Latina's body is used to stabilize the

heteronormative family unit and to take care of the sexual and economic needs of white heterosexual masculinities. The working-class female body is also problematized in Sinéad Molony's "House and Home: Structuring Absences in Post-Celtic Tiger Documentary." Echoing the second theme of a failing masculinity, Molony asserts that the Irish economic crisis is seen to signal a crisis of masculinity and morality. When nationalism is threatened, the body of young working-class women is seen as a site of national shame and disruption because those women do not confirm to gender roles. Last, Anikó Imre takes up a similar issue in "How Long Can the Party Last? Gendering the European Crisis on Reality TV" by looking at the portrayal of Irish travelers' lavish weddings in the so-called British documentary *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*. As an ethnic Other, the travelers are said to be stuck in the past and in their traditions. Yet the young women's over-the-top wedding gowns and their highly sexualized bodies are critiqued to reflect the indolent and frivolous attitude of the ethnic Other. The travelers' lack of ambitions and unquestionable adherence to gender hierarchy are used to explain Europe's prolonged economic woes.

While *Gendering the Recession* has focused on the nexus of postfeminist texts, economic recession, and neoliberal capitalism by critiquing how femininities and masculinities are molded in the media to legitimize gender and income inequalities, it has not directly suggested how feminists could critique a financialized capitalism as illustrated in the media. The intersection between gender, unemployment, and foreclosure illustrated in the book has excluded other economic and financial aspects, particularly those pertinent to the 2008 financial crisis, such as how the media represent financial instruments and monetary policies. This is not to say that people were not laid off and lost their homes, and this is not to say that the media—news and entertainment alike—have not overly emphasized job and home losses during the last recession. However, by not subjecting macroeconomic issues to a media analysis, the volume seems to imply women's (and working-class men's) relations to the economy are limited to their roles as workers, homemakers, and homeowners. As a result, the essays collected in the volume are slightly repetitive in their arguments. There is hardly any contestation among the contributors.

After reading this book, I fear that there exists another crisis: the political relevancy of feminisms and feminist theories. It seems that when feminists in the communication field talk about neoliberal capitalism and postfeminism, they are more interested in the adjectives "neoliberal" and "post" rather than the nouns "capitalism" and "feminism." It appears that neoliberal capitalism and postfeminism have been accepted as grand narratives of the contemporary time to the degree that some fundamental questions are not raised. For example, if a neoliberal capitalism is necessarily a financialized one, how does financialized capital circulate in and through the media? Why does a financialized capitalism necessitate a specific gender arrangement as opposed to capitalism that is based on productive activities? These questions are important to ask because recessions are nothing *natural* to an economic cycle; they are an inherent contradiction in capitalism. The pervading recession discourse also codifies a unified understanding of the economy. Gender is a powerful lens to unsettle the assumed naturalness in this unnatural political economic system and to inquire into the nature of financialized capitalism.

Gill (2011) said that "capitalism" may sound too dated in feminist scholarship because feminists have been too preoccupied with narrow research foci such as sexualization and celebrity (both are discussed in this volume). She suggests that it is time to bring the word "sexism" back so that we can be

enraged again. I'd add that it is also time to bring feminism back, to see it as a political movement, as an in-your-face collective force to occupy Wall Street.

#### **Reference**

Gill, R. (2011). Sexism reloaded, or it's time to get angry again! *Feminist Media Studies*, 11(1), 61-71.