The Feminist Futures of American Studies

Addressing the Post-Weinstein Media and Cultural Landscape

Julia Leyda

Abstract

This article reflects on the long-term and recent developments in the interdisciplinary field of American studies and its imbrications with its cultural and political contexts. Pushing back against premature assertions of feminism's obsolescence, I argue that scholars and teachers of American studies and media studies must take the popular seriously—popular film and television as well as popular political movements. Given the growing demand from students for a deeper and more sustained engagement with intersectional feminism, the article works through some short case studies to urge even the confirmed feminists to rethink and refresh their approaches to teaching and performing scholarship to best provide students with the theoretical tools to strengthen and define their feminism as a discipline as well as an attitude. Inspired by the popular 2014 movement, "The Year of Reading Women," the #MeToo and #TimesUp phenomena, and the popularity of and backlash against celebrity feminism of Beyoncé and others, this article weaves together academic and pop-cultural sources such as Sara Ahmed and Roxane Gay to underscore our responsibility to maintain, nurture, and contribute to the progress made by previous generations of feminists.

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Addressing the Post-Weinstein Media and Cultural Landscape

Julia Leyda

When I received the invitation to deliver a keynote to the 2017 conference of the Austrian Association for American Studies named "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" I planned to organize the talk around my own wide-ranging academic career, which has traversed several continents and disciplines. I was going to build an argument about transdisciplinarity and transnationality that touched on my own ongoing research in climate change narratives and on the financialization of domestic space. Yet as 2017 wore on, I began to have a creeping sense that another topic was somehow more urgent, and perhaps just as timely, if not more so.

As Ralph Poole's brilliant keynote reminded us,[1] F. O. Matthiessen conceived of American civilization's "saving characteristic" as its "sharp critical sense of both its excesses and its limitations."[2] We in American studies have made a habit of exercising this sharp critical sense, aspiring to live up to Margaret Mead's assertion, in her report on the Salzburg Seminar of 1947, that American culture is one in which "self-criticism is a necessary condition."[3] I had gone back to revisit the Joyce Carol Oates short story that lent the 2017 AAAS conference its name, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (1966), which I had probably last read when I was close in age to its teen protagonist. In becoming reacquainted with the character of Arnold Friend, I found in the story's theme of the threat of sexual violence and predatory masculinity what I took to be a dismayingly timely confirmation of my choice of topic for my keynote. And so in the spirit of criticism and self-criticism, and with deference to the message that Hanna Wallinger conveyed to us from Oates herself about the need, now more than ever, to cultivate the ability "to recognize evil in its most banal forms,"[4] I will undertake a somewhat more polemical project, shifting from literary and historical subjects to popular culture and visual texts, but for all that I hope to open up a discussion about what we do as Americanists and how we

envision and enable feminist futures for our discipline and, one hopes, beyond.

Feminism, Postfeminism, and Contemporary American Studies

In my recent academic posts in Japan, Germany, and Norway, I have noticed one clear change over the last decade or so: increasing numbers of students want to talk, read, and write about intersectional feminism (and many arrive already equipped with feminist concepts and perspectives acquired through social media). This shifted baseline awareness is visible in the new prominence of feminism in public discourses, a welcome change from the 1980s and 1990s, when my generation of Americanists were coming of academic age. Today, students in most countries are steeped in a host of varieties of American popular culture in which this emergent vernacular feminism co-exists alongside powerful backlashes, as well as the subtler dismissals embodied in "postfeminism" that assume fighting sexism is irrelevant and outdated. With co-authors Diane Negra and Jorie Lagerwey, I have written about the rise of female-centered television and its context within contemporary emergent vernacular and corporate feminisms.[5] My present article builds on our 2016 article and extends its reach to the momentous changes in the US screenscape in 2017, in light of the Women's Marches in response to the inauguration of Donald Trump, the investigative reporting and activism that brought down Harvey Weinstein, and the thriving online activism that fosters a wealth of online GIFs, memes, blogs, Tumblrs, etc. that make it easy to express and share feminist sentiments (Illustration 1).

Particularly now that feminism is being appropriated in advertising and fashion, and as a buzzword in corporate and conservative rhetorics, the critical thinking skills of the humanities are sorely needed. This might seem paradoxical: surely, we may reason, because of the "comeback" of popular feminism, we in the academy can begin to take a bit more for granted in terms of student awareness or even acceptance of the basic tenets of feminism? It does take less work nowadays to move discussions of gender forward, and often such discussions face less resistance. Teaching in Norway, too, means that more students enter the room with a different cultural knowledge of feminism than, say, students in Japan. I don't want to over-generalize nor do I presume a non-existent universality across different classrooms and national contexts. But I draw on my own experience of recent changes, which is backed up by feminist scholars such as Sara Ahmed:

> I think we have in recent years witnessed the buildup of a momentum around feminism, in global protests against violence against women; in the increasing number of popular books on feminism; in the high visibility of feminist activism on social media; in how the word feminism can set the stage on fire for women

Illustration 1: Meme alluding to Donald Trump's admissions of groping women.
As a meme, this image is in public domain. From: https://me.me/i/finally-understand-rk-why-all-the-trump-women-stand-like-83564d30fc3d4a2794b93a74db69e818 (July 1, 2019).

> artists and celebrities such as Beyoncé. And as a teacher, I have witnessed this buildup firsthand: increasing numbers of students who want to identify themselves as feminists, who are demanding that we teach more courses on feminism; and the almost breathtaking popularity of events we organize on feminism, especially queer feminism and trans feminism. Feminism is bringing people into the room.[6]

Perhaps because coming to feminist consciousness can be a profound personal and emotional experience, in addition to a powerful intellectual development, it can resemble a conversion. And if Beyoncé can hasten that process for young people today, all the better. And yet, this very momentum can also produce a sense of over-familiarity, a "yes, yes, we all agree" that can operate almost like a dismissal. Ahmed describes it this way: "[T]here is a fantasy of feminist digestion, as if feminism has already been taken in and assimilated into a body and is thus no longer required."[7] The prevalence of "fame-inism," to borrow Roxane Gay's term for celebrity feminism,[8] which Debra Ferreday and Geraldine Harris interrogate in their co-edited special section of *Feminist Theory*,[9] means that scholars who teach and research in

the realms of popular culture have a crucial role to play. We can begin our conversation of popular feminist momentum, then, with Gay's assertion that "fame-inism is a gateway to feminism, not the movement itself."[10] If celebrity feminism is one of the currents in contemporary culture that is, as Ahmed suggests, "bringing people into the room," our task in academia is to figure out where we ought to take them from there, where they want to go, and to equip them for the journey.

The mainstreaming of feminism *as an attitude* is doubtless leading more students to delve into feminism as a discipline. However, recently I've experienced a worrying phenomenon in which some enthusiastic students want to equate their familiarity with and support for mainstream pop feminism with the requisite expertise in feminist theory necessary to, say, write an academic thesis. The "fantasy of feminist digestion" is a poor substitute for a rigorous engagement with feminist scholarship. This paradoxical dilemma—which I could never have anticipated back in the days of backlash—is even more reason for Americanists to provide firm academic foundations for the next generations of feminist research. These foundations come out of not only popular culture and lived experience, but what Ahmed calls feminist "companion texts" from Woolf to Firestone to Lorde, which

> might spark a moment of revelation in the midst of an overwhelming proximity; they might share a feeling or give you resources to make sense of something that had been beyond your grasp; companion texts can prompt you to hesitate or to question the direction in which you are going, or they might give you a sense that in going the way you are going, you are not alone.[11]

American studies prides itself on its engagements with social change movements and the study of inequality, so the discipline is well-positioned to build on the recent feminist momentum outside academia. However, if Americanists take this popularity for granted, we risk lending credibility to specious postfeminist arguments claiming that gender equality is already achieved and we needn't bother anymore. As Ahmed writes, "A significant step for a feminist movement is to recognize what has not ended."[12] Intersectional feminism is indispensable to the twenty-first-century interdisciplinary Americanist agenda, and we have a responsibility to provide the critical tools and ethical lenses that these new generations will need.

I believe that we need to renew our commitment to intersectional feminism to ensure a feminist future for American studies. I don't mean to come across as hectoring; I also need to remember that feminism is a process of constantly examining and questioning one's own practice and assumptions, and we should remember to turn the lens on ourselves. A quick example in the mode of self-criticism: the Year of Reading Women, 2014. I was teaching in Japan, where most students in our literature department were women, and I decided to integrate the spirit of the Year of

Reading Women into my classes. In my first-year course in American short fiction I usually maintained a 50/50 gender balance on the reading list, but that year I redesigned it to consist entirely of women writers and explained on the first day that I had done it to show that we could study "American literature" reading only female authors. Some of the students started the semester a bit dubious, but all ended up enthusiastically asserting that women writers were indeed both a source of insight on gender, and a diverse group of American authors with a wide array of aesthetic and thematic concerns. When I asked them at the end of the term whether they felt they were missing something in the semester's readings, they said, "No."

The other side of the Year of Reading Women, however, gave me insight into how I was living my own feminist life. I committed to reading only women authors for the entire year in my leisure reading. This at first felt unnecessary, because after all I am a feminist! I love so many women writers! Yet in my guilty-pleasure genre fiction—science fiction and crime novels—I found myself having to seek recommendations and skim "best of" lists looking for women authors. Setting aside the novels of Iain M. Banks and Stieg Larsson, I am ashamed to say that I had never read Nnedi Okorafor or Tana French until I took that pledge. Now I find it's a stubborn habit to break. Years later, moving to Norway, I decided to delve more deeply, ladies first, into Nordic crime fiction. I've barely sampled male authors—Anne Holt, Karin Fossum, and Camilla Läckberg are keeping me busy.

My point is that even those of us who feel confident in our feminism can benefit from a bit of self-examination and an occasional syllabus shake-up. We need to remember that feminism is not an end point; it is a process. Moreover, it is not only an individual process but a disciplinary and institutional one that requires constant rejuvenation. As Ahmed observes, "It seems once the pressure to modify the shape of disciplines is withdrawn, they spring back very quickly into the old shape. We have to keep pushing; otherwise things will be quickly reversed to how they were before."[13] At both the individual and the disciplinary level, the complacency that can accompany that numbing sense of "feminist digestion" can only be countered by vigilance and self-criticism, maintaining the pressure to recognize and rectify power imbalances along lines of gender but also race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, ability, age, and class.

This is especially true for white women, who made up fifty-two percent of Trump voters in the United States. Intersectional feminism performs a similar function within feminism that feminism performs in the wider world: It makes people uncomfortable and insists on a constant awareness of one's own blind spots and biases. But when *USA Today* publishes articles bearing the headline, "What is intersectional feminism? A look at the term you may be hearing a lot,"[14] we need to find

ways to build on this new ubiquity by bringing its promise into our classrooms, and to approach it with the critical principles that form the basis of contemporary American studies scholarship.

In what follows, I'd like to sketch a few case studies to open up a conversation about how the post-election "state of emergency" mindset around race and gender, combined with the remarkable slate of films and television series released in the aftermath, creates a captive audience for feminist viewing positions and thus an occasion for discussing these issues, including the still galling problems of white privilege within feminism. These texts are drawn from the rich array of potential material from 2017—a year that began, for many of us, like a hangover, staring up from the bottom of a cold, damp abyss of dejection and disbelief. But the year also brought an embarrassment of riches for feminist Americanists in film and television studies, including the two biggest Emmy winners—*Big Little Lies* (HBO, 2017–) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017–).[15] Perhaps catering to "feminist momentum" in popular culture, these series and several others in the United States and United Kingdom explicitly thematize violence against women and sexual harassment as institutional, systemic phenomena that demand collective resistance as well as enormous individual fortitude.[16] This was also the year when *Wonder Woman*, with its canonical superhero narrative and naive but ass-kicking protagonist burst onto movie screens and in the media. Yet these screen texts were conceived (if not produced) before the Trump presidency, which subsequently lent them a sudden unanticipated urgency as they were released over the course of the year. I suggest that this urgency also provides a new impetus for creative, engaged, provocative acts of resistance and self-examination in our academic and private lives.

Big Little Lies and the Female *Rückenfigur*

My first case study performs a feminist textual analysis of a critically successful popular 2017 series focusing on the key theme of female survival, and then briefly examines its reception in the media as the product of feminist creators. The visual strategies of the series align with its female-centered narrative, each in its own way placing measured emphasis on individual women's lives alongside the cumulative effect of their collective existential struggles. Its complex, devastating portrait of intimate partner violence brought needed attention to its insidious psychological and social effects, as its anatomy of female friendships and rivalries earned praise for subtlety and verisimilitude. The series portrays violence against women as a blight that spreads to affect all its female leads, and its emphasis on the collective process of surviving violence breaks important new ground in television drama.

In its thematics and its aesthetics, the first season of *Big Little Lies* crystallizes

many of the structures of feeling that marked 2017. The series won eight Emmys and four Golden Globes, in addition to making most critics' annual top ten lists; along with *The Handmaid's Tale*, it was one of the most critically successful series of the year. *BLL* cannot be separated from the contexts of its reception, a year scarred by Trump and Weinstein. At a time when women were pushed—by politics and by pop culture—to think hard about gendered violence and collective action, *BLL* not only thematized the need for survival strategies in its narrative, it also provided visual motifs that underscored the power and profundity of women's contemplation. Shooting individual characters from behind, standing before the sublime Pacific, the show presents a series of images recalling the *Rückenfigur* of Romantic painting. Traditionally, the motif depicts a male figure facing a vista overlooking a natural landscape, interpreted by art historians as the human awed by Nature. By feminizing and serializing this motif, *BLL* intervenes in the visual convention of solitary male Romanticism on behalf of a (white, middle-class) feminist resistance narrative. *BLL*'s *Rückenfigur* constitutes a revisionist articulation of the traditional motif that here signifies women's agency in the face of, and their collective survival of, the seemingly overwhelming threat of male violence.

Briefly summarized, the series tells the story of a group of privileged heterosexual women in the idyllic Northern California coastal town of Monterey whose children all attend the same school. Some of the women are friends or become friends over the course of the story; others are more like rivals or antagonists depending mostly on their relationship with Madeleine (Reese Witherspoon). Celeste (Nicole Kidman) and Jane (Shailene Woodley) are loyal friends, while Renata (Laura Dern) and Bonnie (Zoë Kravitz) must cope with Madeleine's disapproval and frequent hostility. The series weaves a complicated web of emotions among the women, based on the status of their secrets and their ongoing crises and vulnerabilities. Celeste conceals her husband's abuse, while Jane reveals her ongoing trauma stemming from a rape several years earlier that left her pregnant with her son. Rivalries add another layer of complexity: successful Silicon Valley executive Renata is an easy target for the resentment of stay-at-home mom Madeleine, while lithe young yoga instructor Bonnie (the only woman of color among the leads) poses a threat as Madeleine's ex-husband's current spouse.

The series exploits the seaside setting of Monterey to maximum effect: justifiably renowned for its striking beauty, the Northern California coast in this area provides scenes of surf crashing onto jagged rocks and vertiginous cliff sides shrouded in fog, as well as gentler sandy beaches and golden sunsets. The series takes full advantage of these spectacular scenarios, and of course one of the best ways to showcase such a landscape is to shoot characters standing in front of it. This setup works especially well when several of the characters are wealthy enough to have ocean views from

their private homes, indoors and out, as well as private beach access. Incorporating the ocean as a primary feature into the visual design of the series thus makes perfect sense; what I aim to do here is interrogate the way in which the shots of the women before the ocean convey particular meanings in relation to the thematics of the show while recalling and revising traditional symbolic and art-historical conventions associated with these images.

The ocean has been highly symbolic in Western art. Its fecundity as a habitat for life, including human-sustaining food resources, makes it a frequent emblem of fertility and perhaps consequently renders it personified as female. On the other hand, its size, depth, force, and unpredictability are often portrayed as deadly, whether vindictively so, or callously indifferent to human life; Greek and Roman pantheons rendered the often violent and lethal god of the sea as male. Regardless of its gender assignation, however, the ocean is one of the most common avatars of sublime Nature—limitless, inconceivably vast, and dwarfing human stature and individual powers of perception. In keeping with these varied meanings inscribed on the sea, the Pacific Ocean near Monterey, as pictured in *BLL*, oscillates among many moods and modes of representation: a calm, soothing constellation of colors, sounds, and textures; a mysterious, obscured landscape enveloped in fog and mist; and a violent maelstrom of foamy surf. The images of the ocean in the series are sometimes devoid of human figures—establishing shots and cutaways of the landscape as the characters drive past in their cars along the Pacific Coast Highway. But many of the shots position a figure in front of the seascape, and it is to these I would like to turn more attention.

The first time I watched the series, I noticed the repetition of rear-view shots of Renata on her enormous veranda, which spurred me to watch for other instances of this motif. The willowy silhouette of Laura Dern's character facing the sublime view of the Pacific Ocean immediately recalls the Romantic motif of the *Rückenfigur*, while at the same time significantly revising its conventional connotations. Perhaps the most famous example of the classic *Rückenfigur* is the *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818; Illustration 2) by Caspar David Friedrich. This painting forms the cornerstone of Joseph Koerner's extensive scholarship on the *Rückenfigur*. Koerner's study of Friedrich popularized the concept of the *Rückenfigur*, arguing that the paintings "are strangely sadder and lonelier when they are inhabited by a turned figure than when they are empty [of people]."[17]

To make a gross oversimplification, and to overlook the nuances of Koerner's insightful analysis of Friedrich's oeuvre and its socio-political contexts in nineteenth-century Germany and in European painting more generally, I propose to adapt the concept for my purposes as it pertains to gender, in the quite different

Illustration 2: Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1818). This painting exemplifies the *Rückenfigur*, a human figure seen from behind, usually positioned before and gazing at a sublime landscape.

Image uploaded to *Wikimedia Commons* by user Cybershot800i, from *Wikimedia Commons*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caspar_David_Friedrich_-_Wanderer_above_the_sea_of_fog.jpg (July 1, 2019).

aesthetic and socio-cultural contexts of twenty-first-century US-American television. Like Koerner's mostly male figures, these women function as intermediaries between the viewer and the wilderness. As they contemplate the sublime, we contemplate them together with the sublime. In this sense, they help to digest or dilute some of its force—as shock absorbers for the viewer, they soften the blow. Even so, we are drawn into their act of looking, even as we are involved in our own act of looking at them. But one of the Romantic vestiges of this visual convention holds that not only is the human looking into the sublime; at the same time, the sublime is looking into the human. The sense of mastery inherent in the unpopulated landscape takes on greater ambivalence as the landscape here also appears to master or overwhelm the human figure. Whether the majestic mountains or the infinite sea, the human figure in rear view positioned before such a sublime vista—we imagine—feels awe faced with its presence.

The differences in temporality between painting and moving image media also enable me to alter Koerner's conception of the rear-view figure as a solitary image now past: *BLL* employs the *Rückenfigur* as a serial image recurring within a single text, across different scenarios and embodied by different characters throughout the ten episodes of season one, yet all conjoined into the relative coherence of the show's narrative and visual design. Depending on the scene, the figure of the woman before the seascape might suggest her power, her isolation, her beauty, and/or her sense of "drowning" in her own melancholy, rage, or other overwhelming emotion. All four central women characters in the series appear repeatedly in similar rear view shots against the seascape—analogous to the Romantic *Rückenfigur*, I argue. Frequently positioning the woman alone in the frame, these shots recur often enough to constitute a motif in the series, which I argue signifies a revision of the classic *Rückenfigur*.

The scene in which the *Rückenfigur* first struck me as a visually significant motif in the series is a nearly three-minute sequence of Renata facing the ocean view at twilight, holding a wine glass and conversing with her husband who sits behind her (Illustration 3). She is not alone, and not silent, as the figure in the paintings appears to be. Yet only occasionally does she turn to him—she is transfixed by the sea, and the camera never circles around to film her in a frontal shot. Renata is ranting about how the other women ostracize and isolate her, defending herself as a successful working mother with a full-time job, and postulating that they resent her for having maintained her career. Although she and her husband are wealthy enough to live in such luxury, commanding such a view of the ocean from their home, Renata's visual superimposition over the infinity of the sky and sea here also inherently question the value of their material success, even as her lines convey her defensiveness about her choice to remain in the professional world. Notably Renata is the most "successful"

Illustration 3: Renata (Laura Dern) stands framed in a rearview silhouette shot on her veranda.
Frame capture from *Big Little Lies*, "Somebody's Dead" (Season 1, Episode 1). *Big Little Lies* © HBO, 2017. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

and powerful female character, which is manifest in the way she most often enjoys such an unmediated ocean view, while the others often gaze through windows and doorframes, or share the image frames with other people such as family members.

In stark contrast to Renata's socio-economic power, the character of Jane is the youngest and the least economically secure—a single mother working as a bookkeeper, renting a modest one-bedroom (non-beachfront) house with her young son. They drive or bike to the beach, rather than gaze at it directly from their home. Jane struggles with post-traumatic episodes connected with the sexual assault that resulted in her pregnancy, and throughout the series we see flashbacks of her in her silky blue dress walking barefoot on the beach in what appears to be the immediate aftermath of the attack. The absence of power signifiers in comparison to the shots of Renata are striking: She has just survived a rape, she is walking (or sometimes running) without shoes in the wet sand at dawn, she is at ground level rather than surveying it from an elevated viewpoint, and she appears to be following a man whose footprints in the sand abruptly end, leading her nowhere (Illustration 4).

The two other central women in *BLL* are best friends Madeleine and Celeste. Both are married, stay-at-home moms and live in large waterfront homes that afford them easy beach access and framed views of the ocean through their windows and doorways. Both also have marital problems, granted of different orders of severity, and both express dissatisfaction with their lack of a career. Their appearances as

Illustration 4: Jane (Shailene Woodley) appears in a recurring scene on the beach, which flashes back to the immediate aftermath of her rape.

Frame capture from *Big Little Lies*, "Somebody's Dead" (Season 1, Episode 1). *Big Little Lies* © HBO, 2017. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

Illustration 5: Madeleine (Reese Witherspoon) stands in rearview framed by the doorway leading from her kitchen to her veranda.

Frame capture from *Big Little Lies*, "Serious Mothering" (Season 1, Episode 2). *Big Little Lies* © HBO, 2017. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

Rückenfiguren tend to be framed from inside the domestic spaces of their homes—kitchen, bedroom—or place them in shared frames with their husbands and/or children (Illustration 5). In his analysis of the Friedrich painting *Woman at the Window* (1821; Illustration 6), one of the few examples of a female subject in his study of the motif, Koerner argues that the framing of the female *Rückenfigur* before the window, looking out onto the landscape, "expresses not an identification with, or emersion in, the landscape, but rather a separation from it."[18] This extremely confining image only hints at what lies outside: We can see the mast of a ship, with sky and distant trees. The woman's leaning position also produces a sense in the viewer of straining to see what is almost hidden, only partially visible. While this painting could serve any number of interpretations of women's domesticity in nineteenth-century Europe, Koerner doesn't speculate on its gendered implications. However, in the twenty-first-century American context, it is remarkable that the women in *BLL* are still indoors looking out, though their windows are larger and our views from behind their *Rückenfiguren* less obstructed.

Wealthy former attorney Celeste's beachfront home also has a massive veranda and direct ocean views from many windows, and when she is pictured outside on the veranda or on the beach, she usually shares the frame with her twin sons and/or husband Perry (Alexander Skarsgård). When surrounded by men, she often exudes a sense of waifish surrender, allowing her boys to get their way or trying ineffectually to assert control over their behavior. This lack of control extends into her violently abusive relationship with Perry, in which she is trapped in textbook scripts of intimate partner violence: he beats her, they have rough makeup sex that she appears to enjoy, he apologizes, she forgives him, it starts over again. Her isolated *Rückenfigur* also telegraphs her lack of power and her sense of helplessness in the cycle of abuse, which repeats itself as regularly as the tides (Illustration 7). In these shots, her contemplation of the ocean through their bedroom's picture window could signify any number of meanings. Is she consumed with melancholy or self-destructive urges? Does the ocean instill a sense of insignificance in the face of its vastness, thus helping to calm her unquiet moods and aid her in hiding her distress? Does she grow to identify with its power, inspiring her to take more decisive action to extricate herself and her sons from the poisonous embrace of Perry?

The images of Jane on the beach also lend themselves to ambiguous interpretations. With her immediate proximity to the ocean, her bare feet caked with wet sand, the bedraggled condition of her hair and wardrobe, the shots contribute to the recurring scene's intense emotional power in bringing her (and us) back to the immediate aftermath of her rape (Illustration 8). We aren't sure what she's thinking, but the visual composition and its context within the narrative produce a powerful affective hit. Unlike Friedrich's "feminized" indoors-gazing-outward *Rückenfigur*

Illustration 6: Caspar David Friedrich, *Woman at a Window* (1821). This painting consitutes one of Friedrich's few female *Rückenfiguren* and employs a markedly different aesthetic approach to the human figure and the landscape upon which it gazes.

Image uploaded to *Wikimedia Commons* by user JarektUploadBot, from *Wikimedia Commons*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caspar_David_Friedrich_-_Woman_at_a_Window_-_WGA8268.jpg (July 1, 2019).

Illustration 7: Celese (Nicole Kidman) gazes at the ocean through her bedroom picture window following an assault and sexual encounter with her husband.

Frame capture from *Big Little Lies*, "Serious Mothering" (Season 1, Episode 2). *Big Little Lies* © HBO, 2017. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

Illustration 8: Jane stands at water's edge, poised before the Pacific Ocean.

Frame capture from *Big Little Lies*, "Serious Mothering" (Season 1, Episode 2). *Big Little Lies* © HBO, 2017. Image used in accordance with Austrian copyright law pertaining to the use of images for critical commentary.

standing at the window, and the contemporary revisions of that image, Jane's framing rather recalls his more famous *Monk by the Sea* (1808–1810; Illustration 9), which dramatizes, Koerner observes, "a yearning for transcendence, for passage beyond the materiality of earthly existence."[19] Precariously employed, tormented by PTSD, and seemingly on the edge of violence, Jane's character alternately fantasizes about suicide and murdering her (unknown) rapist. Her relationship to the ocean appears to be similar to Koerner's interpretation of the monk: a desire for peace, surrender, release, and possibly death.

I realize that this is not the place to rehearse feminist arguments about the history of the representation of women in visual arts; many scholarly works and activist groups like the Guerilla Girls already do that very well. My speculations here into a recurring visual motif in *BLL* and its genealogy in European painting is but one approach to the series, taking as its point of departure the striking shots of the ocean and the serial repetition of *Rückenfigur* iconography across four different female characters; the parallels underscore the collectivity of the women, even as it also allows for subtle distinctions among them. As if to resolve the paradox of shared isolation that the *Rückenfigur* signified throughout the season, the final scene in the finale places the women together on the beach, shot from many different angles and proximities, with their children playing together, seemingly safe and at peace with one another and the world. Reading female figures through the lens of the usually male *Rückenfigur* foregrounds the meanings of the ocean landscape and its implications and associations with femininity as well as humanity.

Conceptually, I would also argue that we can see the *Rückenfigur* applied metaphorically to the women behind the camera and behind the scenes of the series. In 2017, the ongoing feminist critique of the screen industries took center stage, calling more attention than ever to the position of the woman as both object and subject of the look of the camera and the look of the audience, and as workers in an often hostile workplace. The show's executive producers include Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman, who took prominent publicity roles leading up to its release in February 2017, mere months before what would, starting in October 2017, become the Harvey Weinstein scandal and #MeToo phenomena. Witherspoon is also active on Twitter and Instagram, and frequently posts messages and images that support feminist activist causes. Similarly, Kidman praised her mother's feminism for inspiring her in her acceptance speech upon winning Glamour Woman of the Year in November 2017,[20] and more emphatically when accepting her Golden Globe for Best Actress in a Limited Series.[21] Laura Dern's assertions of feminist solidarity and activism in her award acceptance speeches have also become important markers of the changes taking place in Hollywood that year. At the 2017 Emmy Awards, held in September of that year, she endorsed the "incredible tribe of fierce women" she worked

Illustration 9: Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk by the Sea* (1808–1810). One of Friedrich's most famous paintings depicts the self at the threshold of the infinity of Nature.
Image uploaded to *Wikimedia Commons* by user Johann-commonswiki, from *Wikimedia Commons*, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/ad/Monk_by_the_Sea.jpg (July 1, 2019).

with on the show.[22] Upon her win for Best Supporting Actress at the Golden Globes ceremony in January 2018, Dern passionately praised the #MeToo movement's rupture of the status quo surrounding sexual harassment and assault: "It was a culture of silencing, and that was normalized. I urge all of us to not only support survivors and bystanders who are brave enough to tell their truth, but to promote restorative justice."[23] As attention is rightly paid to the need for women to gain access to more industry power, Kidman, Witherspoon, and Dern, through their success with *BLL* as well as their work as well-established industry figures, have embraced the public role of advocating for feminist advances in the industry and for women coming forward to speak publicly about their experiences of discrimination, harassment, and assault.

And yet. For all the feminist momentum of 2017, including the significant push provided by the visual and narrative meanings of *Big Little Lies* and its critical and popular reception, the whiteness and class privilege on display in the series also demands critical attention. While the series features several actors of color in minor

roles including members of the police force investigating Perry's death, Bonnie, played by mixed-race actor Zoë Kravitz, is the only major character of color. As in many "token" roles, her ethnicity only asserts itself in her physical appearance, not in any social or cultural contexts: She is surrounded by whiteness, married to a white man, and integrated into a largely white affluent community, seemingly without family relationships or friendships with other people of color. Her role as a slightly eccentric, hippie-ish yoga instructor allows the white community to embrace her as a sign of their tolerance, an exotic and attractive "other" that causes them no trouble or discomfort. Notably, Bonnie is far less developed as a character than the other women, and never shot from behind facing the ocean as a *Rückenfigur*—her significance in the narrative is not pictured on a par with the other female characters.

Frightened and Aroused: *Wonder Woman*

The 2017 summer box office hit *Wonder Woman* also deserves a place in this conversation. In contrast to the "quality television" patina of the star-studded HBO series *Big Little Lies*, it is a superhero movie, following mainstream Hollywood conventions in its narrative and visual style, aiming to entertain and also uplift audiences with a positive image of (mostly white) female power leavened with pacifism and compassion in the character of Diana. Here, rather than a textual/visual analysis, I'd like to examine *Wonder Woman*'s surprising reception over the course of its record-breaking run. Like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Big Little Lies*, this film was produced before the Orange One occupied the Oval Office and before the #MeToo movement, so the timing of its cinematic release had a marked effect on its reception.

The film was open to the kinds of critiques familiar to feminist comics fans, starting with Diana's sexy (albeit armored) costume and conventionally attractive appearance, which led one male character to remark that her skill in a bar fight left him "both frightened and aroused"—a clever instance of comic relief, but also a telling combination for a film starring a beauty pageant winner that many viewers experienced as nevertheless feminist.[24] The film's lack of diversity compared to the decades-old source text, which featured black Amazon characters, including Diana's sister Nubia, also drew critical ire, as in Cameron Glover's excellent *Harper's Bazaar* review (2017).[25] Casting Gal Gadot, a former Miss Israel who has publicly expressed support for the IDF, led to its being banned in Lebanon and fueled speculations about why the story is transposed from the Second World War setting of the comics to First World War.[26] Jack Halberstam rightly laments *Wonder Woman*'s hetero-romantic storyline and its erasure of the Amazons' lesbian genealogy and the original comics character's bisexuality, as well as the missed opportunity of employing as a framing device the origin story of the comics through its creator, the polyamorous feminist William Moulton Marston—subject of Angela Robinson's

film *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*, which debuted to positive reviews at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival.[27]

Despite these and many other valid critiques, *Wonder Woman* met with an astonishing surge of enthusiasm from women of all ages. Indeed, the numerous media reports and op-ed pieces about audiences moved to tears were striking: Many viewers had underestimated the emotional effect the film would have and were stunned at how powerful they found it. Jill Lepore, author of *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (2014), admits in *The New Yorker*, "I am not proud that I found comfort in watching a woman in a golden tiara and thigh-high boots clobber hordes of terrible men. But I did."[28] Lepore's self-deprecating attitude at her own viewing pleasure watching a film based on the comics character she wrote an entire book about suggests that, at least for a relatively sophisticated viewer, this kind of mainstream genre film isn't expected to be moving. Many other female commentators and reviewers echoed Lepore's surprise at their own emotional responses. Among them, Jessica Bennett's op-ed describes her own responses; however, after quoting Lepore's remark, she counters that she was proud that "20 minutes into *Wonder Woman* . . . the tears came uncontrollably."[29]

These overwhelming emotional reactions themselves received plenty of coverage in the media. Bennett describes the "deeply visceral" experience she shared with "legions of women" who "walked out of theaters with a strange feeling of ferociousness" afterwards. She then intones, "Oh, this is what people mean when they talk about representation. This is why it matters."[30] Dana Stevens recounts her own epiphany about the power of screen images:

> [T]he moment Gadot first stripped down to her nonsexist skivvies and started beating the hell out of those civilian-targeting no-goodniks, I was shocked to find my eyes welling with tears and my mind toggling between the Great War and the Women's March. I suddenly glimpsed the value of our ongoing cultural debate about representation, even in genres one doesn't necessarily cherish.[31]

These responses indicate the need for us in American studies and the humanities to pay attention to how our current political moment has intensified the affective power of popular culture screen texts that might, in another context, have elicited less surprising responses and thus seemed less remarkable.[32]

At this point I would like to emphasize that Stevens is a movie critic for *Slate*, and Bennett a contributor to the *New York Times* on gender and sexuality issues. What should we make of the fact that these two professional white women journalists are reporting in 2017 that they have only just now realized why gender representations matter? If so, what will it take for them to recognize that racialized and other kinds of representation also matter? This brings me back to my argument that in these

times, educators in the humanities—specifically those of us in American studies and film and media studies—have something to offer: our continuing and rigorous investigations of power relations and systems of oppression, as well as our access to the histories of the politics of representation and its (apparently surprising) continued relevance. While among today's feminist scholars, the importance of representation has been largely taken as settled and "digested," as Ahmed might describe it, and superseded by more recent (and thus more sophisticated?) theories, those of us who teach ignore at our peril its relevance for our students and their peers.[33] Given the sea change now underway in public discourses about gender, our students need every advantage we can offer them as they struggle to make sense of the current debates and to pave the way for what we hope will be feminist futures.

Get Out!

In closing, I'd like to briefly emphasize another aspect of contemporary feminism that is particularly apt for American studies: intersectionality. Although what Jennifer Nash terms "the intersectionality wars" over the concept in contemporary humanities work show that it comes fraught with concerns about essentialism, identity politics, and appropriation, it remains central to the feminist futures of American studies.[34] The concept of intersectionality as James Bliss defines it can operate as not only as a process of self-criticism, but a questioning of wider social and disciplinary assumptions, as "an immanent critique of the institutional life of feminism: a critique not only of feminism's long-standing and continuing normative whiteness but of the very liberal multiculturalism that the incorporation of Black feminism is taken to signify."[35] The fact that in 2017 the invocation of "woman" still signifies primarily "white woman" demands attention in any proposition about feminism, particularly in popular culture. The prevailing whiteness of the two previous case studies, selected for their broad popularity and their explicit positioning within the contemporary resurgence of feminism (*qua* white feminism), should be a clear enough message that however popular feminism has become, it still frequently fails to adequately demonstrate intersectional awareness as a starting point. If these popular feminist texts are bringing people into the room, we still need to bring intersectional issues into that room. Today's feminist momentum's still-normative whiteness is all the more remarkable as it comes in the midst of the recent blossoming of African American film and television—including series such as *Insecure* (HBO, 2016–), *Atlanta* (FX, 2016–), *Empire* (Fox, 2015–2020), *Queen Sugar* (Oprah Winfrey Network, 2016–), *White Famous* (Showtime, 2015–2017), *Black-ish* (ABC, 2014–), *Dear White People* (Netflix, 2017–), and *The Chi* (Showtime, 2018–) that now crowd the television schedule along with important films like *Get Out* (2017), *Moonlight* (2016), and *Black Pan-*

ther (2018).

As scholars such as Amanda Lineberry have pointed out, the continuing elusiveness of a solid alliance between (white) feminism and the anti-racist struggle only underscores the necessity to insist on intersectionality in all conversations about feminism.[36] Indeed, the contentious tweetstorms and other social media trends that this year spurred the revival of the 2013 hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen attest to the continuing exclusion of women of color from (white) feminist discourse. This problem arose and was widely debated in the early planning stages of the Women's March, and in the belated recognition that the hashtag #MeToo popularized by white actor Alyssa Milano had in fact been coined earlier by a woman of color, Tarana Burke.[37] Elsewhere on Twitter, white actor Rose McGowan, embroiled in the #MeToo aftermath of Harvey Weinstein's public takedown, "went full white feminist," as Clarkisha Kent put it, in a tweet in which she redeployed the hackneyed racist analogy of woman = n*****, thus not only employing an offensive epithet, but also literally excluding black women from the category of women.[38] This same formulation on a protest sign at a 2011 New York Slutwalk had inspired the now-legendary 2011 blog post "My Feminism will be Intersectional or it will be Bullshit!" by Flavia Dzodan,[39] yet it still dogs the public discourses around feminism today. Cited by Sara Ahmed in her blog and in her latest book, Dzodan's motto of intersectional feminism has itself been adapted into a social media meme, which one hopes will lend it staying power. For all their feminist impulses and their ability to emotionally engage audiences through their aesthetic and affective power, *Big Little Lies* and *Wonder Woman* fail to live up to Dzodan's motto: Their feminism is not intersectional, and thus, in this sense, they are, indeed, bullshit. Their failure only underscores the need for today's feminist movements to fully take on board the concerns of the women of color they so often elide from the category of woman.

With this in mind, I close this meditation on the feminist futures of American studies with an argument for the necessity of intersectionality in our academic practice, whether research or teaching, by turning to the critique of white liberalism posited by the Oscar-winning movie *Get Out*.[40] In this 2017 film, Chris and Rose are a young straight couple visiting her white family for the weekend. After assuring Chris that her parents won't mind that he's black—they might even like him more, since they love Obama so much—they arrive, meet a lot of self-consciously "woke" rich white people, and things get strange very quickly. Adeptly carrying forward the venerable tradition of horror as social criticism—with clear nods to *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *The Stepford Wives* (1975; 2004)—*Get Out* flips numerous conventions by addressing a black implied audience rather than the usual unmarked white one. It opens with a racialized riff on the affluent leafy suburb as a place of dread, where a young black man doesn't need the threat of a serial killer to feel scared.

Simply walking down the street alone at night evokes horror—Peele comments on the fact that the film was made during the time when Trayvon Martin was killed for doing just that.[41] Taking clever gender-reversal liberties with the classic gaslight plot in which a romantic partner behaves as if the lover is delusional or mentally ill, the film manages to credibly incorporate a checklist of everyday micro-aggressions that black people endure. Placing the audience in a position to witness Chris's nerve-wracking experience of (at first) polite, (seemingly) unthinking white racism, *Get Out* cumulatively develops an insidious sense of discomfort that dovetails nicely with the (usually unquestioningly white-centered) horror genre.

As many reviewers noted, the scariest thing in this horror film is white people, especially white women. Rose's father and brother are also culpable as villains, but the real engine of evil here is the white mother-daughter dyad. *Get Out* dramatizes the elaborate evasions and self-justifications that enable white liberals to manufacture a facade of anti-racism to insulate themselves from criticism for their racist actions and inactions. Although Rose comes across at first as naive and well-intentioned, she shifts quickly into a more complicit and then an active role in manipulating and victimizing black men, including Chris. Counting on her ability to fall back on her white womanhood to the very end, Rose's impunity marks her as a "Becky," the pejorative term signifying "a white woman who uses her privilege as a weapon, a ladder, or an excuse" and immortalized in Beyoncé's lyric about "Becky with the good hair."[42] Rose in *Get Out* is clearly a Becky, wearing her liberal femininity as a mask that she hopes will conceal the horror of her whiteness.

As Allison McCarthy puts it, "Chris and Rose's relationship dynamic is as much a critique of white feminism as it is of 'post-racial' America."[43] Many reviewers of *Get Out* remind us that whiteness trumped feminism in the US 2016 election a couple of months before the film's wide release; the frequent mentions of President Obama in the film also call attention to the widely-held, self-congratulatory white liberal assumption that race no longer mattered in US society. Kendra James's review in the mainstream women's magazine *Cosmopolitan* observes that the film can be read as a warning: "White women have always played, and continue to play, a large part in upholding [white] supremacy. . . . Putting full trust in them has often been to our detriment."[44] The film mobilizes genre and spectatorship conventions to place African American subjects at the center of a film that literally as well as hyperbolically depicts white liberals', and especially white women's, betrayal of them. *Get Out* will likely prove to be a cornerstone text in academic conversations—in the classroom and in scholarly publications—about intersectionality and gender. American studies facing its feminist futures will do well to devise ways to address the concerns raised by this movie alongside white-dominated screen texts such as *Big Little Lies* and *Wonder Woman*, which garnered so much public and critical attention in 2017, that

notable year of feminist momentum.

Our American studies toolkit contains many options with which to facilitate the feminist futures I hope we have in store, and engagements with popular culture and media studies can only expand that repertoire. For example, we can learn from recent efforts in media studies to theorize gendered and affective dimensions of neoliberalism in research by feminists such as Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, and Julie Wilson.[45] Likewise, the continuing relevance of Marxist concepts like Raymond Williams's "structures of feeling" and methods like ideology critique also point to their continued, dare I say "residual," relevance in twenty-first-century Americanist research and pedagogy. In asserting the ongoing need for intersectional feminist critique, contemporary work by bell hooks and Sara Ahmed explicitly rejects the teleological model of academic progress that would relegate a concern for representation to the scrap heap of outmoded approaches, to be superseded by newer, more cutting-edge critical trends. The fact that feminist arguments today cover some of the same ground as our predecessors did twenty, thirty, or forty years ago should tell us something: not that the field has grown stale, but that the problems that motivate feminists still proliferate, albeit in novel as well as familiar forms. Indeed, hooks continues to publish accessible intersectional feminist work: Her bestselling *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000) extends the oeuvre that goes back to her published dissertation, long since a feminist companion text for many, *Ain't I a Woman* (1981).[46] While some scholars might have moved on to work that offers seductive new approaches, hooks's enduring success and multi-generational readership attests to the continuing demand for works of popular feminism even as a new generation of popular feminist writers extends the range of voices in ongoing feminist conversations: Lindy West, Roxane Gay, Laurie Penny, Andi Zeisler, and Jessica Valenti, to name only a few.[47]

These conversations also benefit enormously from the "affective turn" and other recent critical tools we can bring to bear on how films mobilize emotions and structures of feeling that arise out of the Trump era. The expression of surprise from film critics at how central those old-school "politics of representation" frameworks—a textbook example of Ahmed's "digested feminism"—are in discussing the popularity of *Wonder Woman* in 2017, and the continued need for intersectional critique of white-centric representations within "feminist" texts, point to our need to deploy the full armory of intersectional feminist theory, including the back list of our inspiring archive, to face the future.

Notes

1 An article based on Ralph Poole's keynote address is included in this issue: Ralph J. Poole,

"'Huck Finn at King Arthur's Court': F. O. Matthiessen, the Salzburg Seminar, and American Studies," *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* 1, no. 1 (2019): 1–26, https://doi.org/1047060/jaaas.v1i1.70.

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15 *Big Little Lies: Season 1*, created and written by David E. Kelley (New York: HBO, 2017), Blu-ray; *The Handmaid's Tale: Season 1*, created by Bruce Miller (Santa Monica, CA: Hulu, 2017), Blu-ray.

16 To name a few such US and UK television productions in 2017, *Apple Tree Yard* (BBC One, 2017), *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2013–2017), *Top of the Lake* (BBC Two, 2013–), *One Mississippi* (Amazon Video, 2016–2017), and *SMILF* (Showtime, 2017–2019).

17 Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 162.

18 Ibid., 112.

19 Ibid., 120.

20 Neha Prakash, "Nicole Kidman's Dress was a Metaphor at the Glamour Women of the Year Awards," *Vanity Fair*, November 14, 2017, https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/11/nicole-kidman-women-of-the-year-good-love.

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