



The Work of Relatability: 'Girlfriendship Narration' in Postfeminist Fiction

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Introduction: Narrative Intimacy, 'Metaleptic Felicity' and 'Girlfriendship Narration'

In a seminal work of feminist narrative theory, Susan S. Lanser called the confessional female voice one of “the novel’s most marketable commodities” (1992: 33). Having been shaped over more than two centuries of literary history, this “voice that modeled not public proclamation but private confidence” (ibid.) continues to sell women’s popular fiction today. Reaching out, sharing, offering intimacy instead of laying claim to authority: the properties of this historically gendered voice prevails in our contemporary era in which postfeminist femininity has to navigate the tensions between strategic accommodation of liberal feminist demands in the service of a neoliberal economy and resurgent patriarchies. As one of the most persistent patriarchal norms of femininity, Eva Burke identifies the “social obligation of female likeability” (qtd. Evans 2021: 36), which may sound quotidian but is in fact a key requirement for most successful performances of emotional labour (*sensu* Hochschild). The “lubricat[ion] of emotional worlds” (Berlant 2008: 5), this most invisible domain of women’s work, is still urgently required “as women disproportionately remain the invisible infrastructure” for supplying care and sustaining family and community networks in a post-recession era of “the shrinking, privatization, and/or dismantling of public infrastructure supporting families, children” and the elderly (Brown 2015: 105). As long as ‘relating’ and ‘networking’ for the purposes not of professional advancement but of sustaining (social) life are feminine work, it is not surprising that the confessional voice of popular fiction remains influential. Chick lit is the most widely studied genre of women’s confessional narratives of recent decades (see e.g. Ferriss and Young 2006; Harzewski 2011; Hurt 2019; Mißler 2016; Peitz 2010; Smith 2008; Whelehan 2002, 2005), which makes it a useful case study for my discussion here. Yet I do suggest that the model of postfeminist poetics outlined in this essay is applicable to other types and examples of contemporary confessional texts.



In the terms of narrative theory, chick lit novels are quickly summarised: prototypically, they feature an autodiegetic narrator who constructs an intimate relationship with a narratee by disclosing to her everyday life struggles. In a highly mimetic, intermedial fashion, many chick lit novels update the established forms of confessional diary and epistolary fiction for the twenty-first century through reprints of e-mails and messenger chats (see Martens 1985: 24).¹ The disclosures of the usually overt narrating 'I' to an unidentified and yet trustworthy, somehow familiar readerly 'you' mirror the narrative situation of nonfictional autobiography as "feigned reality statements" in the words of Käte Hamburger (qtd. *ibid.* 32) and thus offer themselves as seemingly authentic, factual narratives about contemporary life. Such a reading experience hinges on the mimeticism of both narrative content and form, as the instantly recognisable, often richly detailed everyday world is brought to the pages of women's confessional novels which in turn tend to emulate conversational media. Suzanne Jahusz has discussed "dailiness", "immersion", "a sense of process" and attention to detail as principles structuring both women's real lives of domestic management, care work and the maintenance of emotional relationships as well as the episodic, fragmented 'feminine' fictional worlds of diary and epistolary fiction (qtd. in Hogan 1992: 98-99). Women's confessional narratives and non-fictional gendered experience are hence closely entwined in a relation of "circularity", which Lauren Berlant deems characteristic of what she has famously called "intimate publics":

What makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience. A certain circularity structures an intimate public, therefore: its consumer participants are perceived to be marked by a commonly lived history; its narratives [...] are deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging. (Berlant 2008: viii; original emphasis)

In intimate publics, "narratives and things" (*ibid.*) appear familiar and literally 'close to home' because they are regarded as expressing universal truths of gendered experience. The boundaries between narrative and extra-textual experience become permeable, thus driving home the point that the description of a narrative as 'feeling' intimate, relatable or authentic is at least as much a social and cultural as a semiotic function. The blurring of boundaries between real and fictional worlds is certainly not restricted to but particularly relevant for the narratives circulating in women's intimate

¹ As such, chick lit closely conforms to the historical conventions of women-authored confessional writing, which according to Rita Felski's comprehensive definition

typically include[s] an unrelativized first-person perspective, a thematic concentration upon feelings and personal relationships, the frequent reliance upon an informal and non-literary style which establishes a relationship of intimacy between author and reader, and a tendency to deemphasize the aesthetic and fictive dimension of the text in order to give the appearance of authentic self-expression. (1989: 100-01)



publics; those narratives perceived by (female) readers as compelling instant sympathetic recognition or even identification. Chick lit is a case in point: readers frequently report strong identification with character-narrators (the much-quoted ‘that’s me!’ phenomenon that made *Bridget Jones’s Diary* a runaway success) and (perhaps more commonly) conflate narrators with their authors (see e.g. Ferriss and Young 2006: 5; Hurt 2019: 2; Peitz 2010: 47; Whelehan 2002: 69). Authors’ PR, meanwhile, avidly recreates the intimate rhetoric of narrator-narratee-relationships that readers have come to expect from their novels (see e.g. Mißler 2016).

Cultural narratologist Sara K. Day demonstrates that the effacement of the distinct ontological planes in narrative communication, i.e. the extra- and intradiegetic levels of author-reader versus narrator-narratee, should not be ascribed to the naivety of undiscerning readers. Instead, it needs to be taken seriously as a deliberately deployed feature of narrative communication. Investigating a wide range of contemporary American YA fiction, she coins the term “narrative intimacy” to capture a reading experience that is modelled on the social conventions defining teenage girlfriendship, namely mutual trust, authenticity and the unconditional sharing of personal experience.² Although she is interested in a different genre of popular fiction and applies a different thematic focus, the significant overlap in the conventions of confessional writing makes Day’s conception of “narrative intimacy” highly applicable to chick lit. Whereas her initial definition of narrative intimacy as “established through constructions of the narrator and reader” that see “a first-person narrator [...] self-consciously disclose information” to a “reader of whom she is acutely aware” (2013: 4) rehearses the usual, matters become interesting when she explores it from the angle of rhetorical narratology. The rhetorical approach to narrative draws on pragmatic linguistics in its treatment of “any narrative as a speech act produced and received within, although not wholly determined by, a rule-governed context” (Kearns 1999: 10). What is emphasised is “the ‘social process’ rather than the text’s ‘formal structure’” (ibid. 11) in its production of meaning. Following Phelan’s maxim that “[g]iven the emphasis on communicative action, the approach pays special attention to the relations among tellers, audiences, and the something that happened” (qtd. Day 2013: 12), Day further explores how the roles involved in narrative communication, especially those of narrator, narratee and reader, are actualised in the specific rhetorical situation of narrative intimacy. She concludes that while the distinction between extra- and

² With a view to the cultural potency of (women’s) popular fiction, it is noteworthy that Day conceives of intimate narration not just as a rhetorical ploy for its own sake but associates it with heightened social efficacy in doing – or learning how to do – gender: relations of intimacy in narratives which are primarily marketed to adolescent girls mimic real-world performances of intimacy. She shows how not only on the level of content but predominantly through the design of narrative communication, girl readers are compelled to vicariously navigate the rewards, challenges and risks of intimate relationships and thus acquire expertise in this normative feminine skill set (see 5-12).



intradiegetic levels of communication necessarily informs academic approaches to literature,

narrative intimacy depends on the efforts of authors, narrators, and readers to navigate the boundaries between real and fictional worlds in ways that *insist upon the possibility of impossible relationships that cross the real/fictional divide*. [...] [T]he author actively constructs the narrator with an eye toward minimizing the reader's awareness of [this divide], allowing for the (at least temporary) possibility that the narrator's fictional status may be ignored or set aside in favour of the implicit relationship within which narrative intimacy may function. (17; my emphasis)

In stubborn defiance of the academic endeavour to neatly distinguish between the story, discourse and extradiegetic levels of narrative communication, the great popularity of confessional genres with their readers depends precisely on their successful erasure of these diegetic boundaries and hence the levelling of the different agents' ontological status. For chick lit, Lisa Guerrero sums this up poignantly, writing that narrative communication in and around the novels

work[s] to create a familiar relationship between the reader and the protagonists. The appeal, and the power, of these genres [...] is the remarkable ability to make the reading experience *nearly indistinguishable from a conversation with our best girlfriends*. It isn't fiction as much as it is the comfort of community. (2006: 91; my emphasis)

Even if Day herself does not use the term, this discursive effect – here especially the illusion of narrators' 'crossing over' as 'real people' or more specifically 'girlfriends' into the world of actual (female) readers – recalls Gérard Genette's seminal concept of "metalepsis". Metalepsis captures an effect of imagined proximity between narrative agents who technically exist on distinct ontological planes. I would be cautious to apply the term in its full original sense and reserve it instead, for example, for those classic metafictional instances when a homodiegetic narrator temporarily leaves the confines of story-world existence and claims extra-fictional status on par with the actual reader. Genette clearly indicates that metalepsis is a deliberately deployed narrative strategy when he writes that "[a]ll these *games* [of changing narrative levels]" (1979: 236; my emphasis) derive the intensity of their effect from overstepping the "boundary *that is precisely the narrating (or the performance) itself*: a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells" (ibid.; original emphasis). Since with chick lit the liquidity of this boundary between narrative levels is an affective convention of gendered reading rather than self-conscious (meta-)diegetic play on the part of a narrator, I propose 'metaleptic felicity': in this case, metalepsis is a context-dependent, rule-governed *pragmatic* rather than *diegetic* effect of closing the distance between fictional and real-world agents. Like Austin's speech acts, popular



confessional fiction is ‘felicitous’ when it manages to create a situation of intimacy that transcends the fictional utterance as such.

‘Metaleptic felicity’ is the pragmatic core of a specific narrative act that I will theorise, to take my cue from Guerrero’s formulation, as ‘girlfriendship narration’. This choice of term also serves as a reminder that the specific form of narrative communication that Sara Day calls ‘intimate’ is closely associated with narrators who are not only adolescent, but also without exception female. Comparable constructions of the narrative voice and of narrator-narratee/reader-relationships as “engaging” (Warhol 1986, 1989) or “immediate-engaging” (Schwenke Wyile 2003) have likewise been overwhelmingly attributed to female and child narrators. In perhaps a more literal sense than we would like, then, chick lit can be said indeed to fictionalise a “conversation with our best girlfriends” (Guerrero). It is these constructs of the ‘girlfriend’ and ‘girlfriendship’, with their innocuous suggestion of connectivity, companionship and identification that I want to translate into a critical theoretical concept which enables us to conceive of chick lit as postfeminist fiction from a feminist-narratological point of view. I will proceed in three steps that broadly correspond to three distinct disciplinary angles: to begin with, I revisit key insights from Foucauldian feminist literary studies about the power dynamics of confession to complicate the largely unquestioned notion of narratee and reader as ‘confidantes’ in women’s confessional writing. I will then draw on research in cultural and media studies to scrutinise (power) relationships between women in a postfeminist cultural context and how the ostensibly shared experience of neoliberal gender regulation can be communicated – or ‘confessed’ – within these relationships. Finally, I use this reworked critical notion of ‘girlfriendship’, which captures the distinctively postfeminist affective and rhetorical relations between adult women, as a model for narrator-narratee/reader-communication in chick lit. Contrary to the more affirmative tendencies in chick lit scholarship, I will argue that as a cultural template ‘girlfriendship’ makes readily available positions that enable female readers to read beyond chick lit narrators as habitually self-deceiving, unreliable neoliberal subjects who are comically out of control and in urgent need of self-improvement. Falling along the border of cultural studies and narrative theory, ‘girlfriendship narration’ is my attempt at a systematic description of postfeminist poetics. With its careful consideration of interdisciplinary research on neoliberalism and postfeminism, it tries to heed the call “of feminist-narratological research [...] to understand the interaction of form and content within a specific cultural and historical context” (Allrath 2005: 14; my emphasis).



Foucault's Theory of Confession and Women's Confessional Writing: Questions of (Em)power(ment)

Feminist perspectives on women's confessional writing³ have been shaped by the reception of Foucault's influential work on confession. With the exception of his latest work, where he begins to explore various forms of self-writing as resistant practices in the formation of the ethical subject (especially volumes II and III of his *History of Sexuality* and essays and interviews)⁴, Foucault discusses confession as a practice central to the operation of what he calls pastoral power. Pastoral power is derived from the allegorical relationship of the 'flock' of believers following the 'shepherd's' moral guidance and was first institutionalised in the medieval Christian church.⁵ In characteristic sweeping periodisation, for Foucault it leaves the bounds of religious institutions in later centuries and becomes the model for the exercise of secular governmental power as the "conduct of conduct", the predominant form of power in modern society from the late eighteenth century onwards.⁶ As is well known, governmentality operates not primarily as a disciplinary force that singles out the unruly or transgressive subject but 'invisibly' by inculcating in subjects the desire and perceived need to alter their conduct and work on the self in alignment with standards and norms defining, for instance, health, wealth, well-being or happiness. Rather than acting directly on the subject, governmentality is predicated on defining the field of the normal and the desirable in relation to which subjects are compelled to measure, assess and position themselves. This requires a subject who is constantly being made knowable, a describable and analysable object, to themselves as well as to political government and society at large. Governmentality becomes manifest as a "process of individualization [that] ties one to one's identity through normalising discourse" (McLaren 2002: 149), a socio-psychological routine that seamlessly intertwines the two famous Foucauldian senses of 'subjectivation': becoming a socially intelligible and 'valuable' subject and at the same time – in fact by virtue of – being subjected to (or subjecting oneself to) normalising discourse.

³ I use this as an umbrella term that comprises 'factual' self-writing such as memoir and autobiography as well as 'fictional' self-writing such as chick lit because a distinction is neither philosophically tenable nor relevant for my argument. To begin with, the narrative turn in the humanities has amply demonstrated that even purportedly 'factual' genres of writing such as historiography or autobiography are narrativised (for example by following certain ingrained plot conventions) to a degree that the boundary between 'facts' and 'fiction' becomes extremely blurred. The Foucauldian approach to confession, which I am most concerned with here, treats it as a discursive act that easily embraces both fictional and factual discourse. Finally, from the perspective of narrative theory, the leading discipline in my discussion, "fiction in the personal voice [i.e. autodiegetic fiction, such as confessional writing] is usually formally indistinguishable from autobiography" (Lanser 1992: 19-20). Their difference is solely referential, not formal, namely in autobiography's claim to extra-textual veracity, which can be – and here we are back with the narrative turn – hard to substantiate on closer inspection.

⁴ See especially Foucault's contributions in the edited collection *Technologies of the Self* (Martin, Gutman and Hutton 1988): "Technologies of the Self" and "The Political Technology of Individuals".

⁵ For a lucid summary of pastoral power, see Ludwig 2011, esp. ch. II.2.3.

⁶ For an excellent overview of Foucault's governmentality theory, see Lorey 2015, ch. 2.



The criteria needed to guide the perpetual “self-inspection, self-problematization, self-monitoring” (Rose qtd. Radstone 2006: 173) and self-assessment in the modern subject’s quest for normality and desirability increasingly came to be provided by scientific instead of religious authority. The ascendance of governmentality is therefore concomitant with ecclesiastical institutions’ gradual loss of the privilege of knowledge production to what Foucault calls the ‘life sciences’ – in particular the natural sciences such as biology and chemistry, medicine and a little later psychology, with psychoanalysis as the pioneering disciplinary field. It is within these changing regimes of power and their emphasis on (institutionally and discursively compelled) self-normalisation at the onset of secularised modernity that we have to place Foucault’s paradoxical claim that the practice of confession gained more, not less, social and cultural traction through its secularised migration to medicine and psychoanalysis. As its scope expanded “from what the confessant knew and kept secret to ‘what was hidden from himself, being incapable of coming to light except gradually and through the labor of a confession’” (Foucault qtd. Bernstein 1997: 17), it became even more transparent that as a discursive act confession is by no means the free expression of a pre-textual truth to which the self can lay full claim.⁷ Rather, it is a ritualised production of truth-telling that is “generated and sustained [...] by the discursive relationship between speaker and reader (confessant and confessor)” (J. Gill 2006: 4) – a relationship defined by a (hermeneutical) power imbalance which grants the speaking subject no or little authority over the meaning of her utterance. Put in narratological terms, we encounter here an autodiegetic narrator who speaks but has no credibility or authority to interpret the events and her own or other characters’ actions in her story. In Foucault’s words,

[t]he confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to *judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile*. (1981: 61-62; my emphasis)

Performing an “assimilation of the transgressive into the normative” (Bernstein 1997: 32), the confessional speech act after Foucault is characterised by a fundamental power imbalance between interlocutors. On the one hand, the confessor/reader is vested with the power to elicit, interpret, judge and to punish or console depending on

⁷ This intensification of secularised confessional labour and the expanded domination of the troubled subject/confessant it entails is perhaps most visible in psychoanalytical practice and Freud’s infamous phrase that ‘the neurotic has to tell more’ than what she knows. Irene Gammel writes that “Sigmund Freud institutionalized the paradigms of confessional reading in the in/famous case of Dora (alias Ida Bauer), whom he treated in 1900. In the course of her analysis, Bauer endeavored to articulate the ways in which she felt sexually traumatized, while Freud consistently re/read her story as a classical personal confession, in which a woman’s word cannot be trusted but needs the hermeneutical expert to complete the act of truth telling” (1999: 3).



“the transformation effected *by* confession” (Radstone 2006: 175; original emphasis). The impressive range of verbs which Foucault assigns to the confessor (emphasised in the quote above) testifies to his discursive authority over the speaking subject and to the complex affective register that this authority or domination may take: the disciplinary force of “punishing” forecloses forms of commonality that the benign, even sympathetic stance of “consoling” may enable, at least for the moment of the social interaction, even if the overall normalising function of confession will remain either way. I will return to the hermeneutic and affective options open to the confessor when thinking about possible reader positions offered by – or anyway ready to be occupied in – popular confessional fiction such as chick lit. On the other hand, the confessant is compelled to produce discourse by which she is impassively defined – she is emphatically *not* authorised to assign meaning or truth value to it. As Gammel writes, it is this Foucauldian “notion of confession as a power relationship that has preoccupied feminists and has led them to urge women to avoid the confessional genre” (1999: 5-6). While, as will become clear, feminist critics’ stance towards women’s confessional writing has been far more nuanced and conflicted than Gammel allows for here, two thorny issues have indeed marked their reception of the Foucauldian critique of confession: one is its gendered dimension and the other – this infamous Foucauldian legacy – the question of the (im)possibility of non-conformity and resistance.

Unacknowledged by Foucault himself, the confessor’s power has been a masculine prerogative well into the twentieth and, albeit less exclusively, even into the twenty-first century. Women were and to some extent still are accorded, judging by the disproportionately masculine occupation of high-ranking positions in the areas mentioned to the present day, no or less “authority to license them to grant religious absolution, to make a medical diagnosis, or to deliver a legal verdict” (Bartky qtd. Bernstein 1997: 36). In the nineteenth century, “[w]omen could confess, that is, they might testify against themselves, but rarely did they have the requisite cultural power to effectively bear witness” (ibid.). Hence, for Sandra Bartky, women were historically “disempowered by the act of confession”, turning “woman as confessor” into “a political oxymoron” (qtd. Bernstein ibid.). According to many feminist critics, this historical legacy has persisted into the realm of contemporary fictional and cinematic art, where the confessional readers still “assume the roles of hermeneutical ‘experts,’ with the right and obligation to provide more truthful (male) versions of the female experience” (Gammel 1999: 4) as they read against and beyond the devalued feminine form of confessional speech:

[C]onfessional readings frequently entail a process of devaluation of the female voice. The female voice relating personal experience, like the sinner’s and the patient’s, belongs not to the realm of abstract and official *langue* but to *parole*, to familiar and intimate speech, and is thus characterized by a low degree of formality and authority, as it is perceived as ephemeral or trivial. [...] A history of



confessional readings has created the perception of women obsessively confessing their secrets, reinforcing stereotypes of the female psyche as fragmented and, what is perhaps even worse, as 'needy.' In western society, in which the self-sufficient, self-reliable bourgeois subject remains the ideal norm, confession easily becomes a measure of mental immaturity and emotional instability. (Gammel 1999: 4)

Susan Lanser's scepticism of the emancipatory potential of what she calls the "personal voice", referring to autodiegetic female "narrators who are self-consciously telling their own histories" (1992: 18), mirrors this concern with the social and textual authority of women's confessional writing from a narratological point of view. She writes that "[t]he use of personal voice [...] risks reinforcing the convenient ideology of women's writing as 'self-expression,' the product of 'intuition' rather than of art" (ibid. 20) and problematises the risk that such harmful gender ideologies attach themselves most forcefully to female narrators who forfeit the "gender-neutral mask" and "superhuman privileges" of the detached "authorial voice" (ibid. 19).

This gender-inflected Foucauldian approach to the power dynamics involved in confessional writing remains influential and continues to throw into doubt commonsensical assumptions about the confessor/narratee/reader as a confidante in fictional genres of intimacy. However, various political and academic developments combined in the latter half of the twentieth century to shift attention to the potential of redressing confession's power imbalance. To name but a few, the second-wave feminist movement elicited and valorised (certain modes of) sharing personal, intimate experience in the 1970s; there was a growing interest in trauma and witnessing in the humanities from the late 1980s onwards; and around the same time, Latina/o/x scholars were among the first to engage with the genre of *testimonio*, a literature of witnessing human rights infringements that grew out of a confrontation with the violence of the US-backed Latin American dictatorships of that time.⁸ Departing from the focus on processes of introspection and the problem of self-knowledge in confessional self-writing, testimony describes acts of witnessing, a "movement of that which troubles the subject and the text from its place within the confessional subject to a location external to the traumatised subject" (Radstone 2006: 176). This has important implications for the sociocultural weight or value attached to the speaker/confessant's discourse, because she is no longer the transgressor seeking validation for self-reform but an onlooker addressing vaster social inequities and transgressions, often committed by those in positions of authority that are equipped with the confessors' hermeneutical prerogative.

Given the centrality of the disclosure of personal experience as a starting point for political action to the second-wave feminist movement, most notably in the context of

⁸ For more comprehensive, contextualised definitions and a short history of *testimonio* as postcolonial women's literature of resistance, see Bernstein 1997: 37-38.



consciousness-raising (CR) radical activist groups of the 1970s, it is hardly surprising that women's self-writing has since occupied "a special place in the feminist canon" (McLaren 2002: 151). The purpose of 'confessional' speech and writing in such a feminist-political context and among members of a socially marginalised group is not the expression of unique individuality but the shared recognition of the typicality of only seemingly individual – and often, pathologised – experiences and problems that bind women together and thus may become the basis for a collective political identity. The confession of the personal voice, then, self-consciously resonates with the communal voice of a political movement. Rita Felski explains how feminist literary criticism has had a tightrope to walk in distinguishing between what she calls the "feminist confession" that is expressive of these identity politics and confessional writing "that uncritically reiterates the 'jargon of authenticity' and the ideology of subjectivity-as-truth" (1989: 86) associated with the rise of therapeutic popular culture. Although she does not elaborate the point, it is not too far-fetched to associate the therapeutic variant of the confessional with the power imbalance described by Foucault – not least because he had psychoanalysis in mind as a key secularised function of confessional discourse – while the feminist confessional replaces the historically male sovereignty over interpretation with the shared response of a female community (see also Guenther 2006: 94-96). Unlike the isolated confessional self seeking re-entry into society by submitting her attempt at redemption to (male) authority, "the primary function of the CR group was to provide a space in which the isolated 'I' could, by means of identification, collapse into collective, rescuing 'we'" (Siegel qtd. in Guenther 2006: 95). Likewise, Felski stresses that while the consciousness of the writing self is of course foregrounded in all kinds of autofiction, the feminist confessional is distinct because it

self-consciously addresses a community of female readers rather than an undifferentiated general public. This sense of communality is accentuated through a tone of intimacy, shared allusions, and unexplained references with which the reader is assumed to be familiar. The implied reader of the feminist confession is the sympathetic female confidante and is often explicitly encoded in the text through appeals, questions, and direct address. The importance of the reader's role is directly related to the belief that she will understand and share the author's position. (1989: 99)

I will come back to the important issues that Felski raises here pertaining to the affective and rhetorical relations making up a female public, the construction of the narratee and the actual reader's identification with that position later in this discussion. What interests me for the moment is that contra Foucault, Felski's term "feminist confessional" encapsulates the possibility that the solitary, confessing narrative voice will not be judged from the moral high ground but heard empathically as representative of distinctively feminine experiences. Putting the narrator/confessant on equal terms with the narratee/reader of the confession or even elevating the former's status to that



of spokesperson for a shared experience, such a communicative situation would create a gendered community around the act of confession. In these contexts of production and reception, the circulation of confessional practice among women may create, in Felski's words, a "feminist counter-public sphere" in which the discursive codes saturating patriarchal publics are suspended, exposed and critiqued (1989: ch. 5). Leah Guenther, in her reading of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, picks up on author Helen Fielding's own explanation of her narrator's enormous cultural resonance⁹ to argue that akin to "the CR ideal of self-revelation building community" (2006: 96), "female readers unite around and celebrate Bridget's confession of a failed self" (ibid.) in shared humorous response to the impossible pressures of postfeminist gender normativity. In her reading of the novel, Guenther interprets the inconsistency and routine spectacular failure of Bridget's attempts at self-reform as confessing "sins of gender" (ibid. 93) and not, as in earlier feminist confessional writing, sexual transgressions. Rather than chronicling and censuring herself for such gender transgressions as outlined by Fielding in order to ultimately arrive at normative postfeminist subjecthood, Guenther argues, Bridget "is far more likely to absolve herself, to accept herself as flawed and unchanging, often using the most outlandish criteria" (ibid. 88). It is in this sense that her diary seeks and evidently successfully reaches an "audience sympathetic to the same pressures of attempting to achieve idealistic standards but consistently falling short" (ibid. 95). Unlike the community built around Felski's feminist confessional or around the female subject speaking up in a CR group, however, Bridget's diary "is that of a failed feminist and the community that replaces a supposed feminist community is one that seeks a new feminism to more fully accommodate the full facets of the self" (ibid. 93).

I want to carry this tension between the (Foucauldian) power relationships involved in confessional speech and writing and the idea of a mode of confessional narration that redresses this power imbalance by creating a "feminist counter-public sphere" around the resistance to gender normativity into the next section, where I subject idealised notions of a female recipient community to critical scrutiny. This is especially significant in a postfeminist cultural context, where an abundance of media texts in which close 'girlfriendships' that seem to replace the priority given to heterosexual intimacy sit side by side with a deep distrust of women connecting in (political) solidarity.

⁹ Copying her narrator's trademark telegraphic writing style, Fielding explains: "Point is not that women are retrograde ditzes, but feel that they have to be so perfect in every area that become incredibly hard on selves: trying to live life of non-independent and independent woman at same time, haunted by media images of anorexic teenage models running from gym to board meeting to nuclear family and cooking elaborate dinner parties for twelve. Vision of someone else – Bridget – trying so hard and spectacularly failing, ending up when guests arrive in underwear with wet hair and one foot in pan of mashed potato is comic release from pressures of overreaching role models" (Fielding qtd. Guenther 2006: 96).



Postfeminist Girlfriendship: Intimacy, Affect Management and 'Friendly' Surveillance

Feminist media critics unanimously agree that postfeminist culture's exclusive focus on individual empowerment and choice, even when it comes to such clearly systemic matters as career pursuit or sexual health, strongly discourages women from forming social bonds beyond personal relationships – such as family, romantic partners and (same-sex) friends – that could bleed into collective action. Angela McRobbie coined the term “new sexual contract” (2009: 54) to capture the neoliberal inflection of feminist ‘empowerment’. It allows individual women who conform to a restrictive set of social identity markers (relatively young, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, mostly white) and are willing to make the ‘right’ biographical choices to “come forward and make good use of the opportunity to work, to gain qualifications [...] and to earn enough money to participate in [...] consumer culture” (ibid.). A more radical feminist politics that emphasises collective action against gender oppression, however, is fiercely disavowed. Both ideological components reinforce each other in isolating women within the realm of private, intimate social relations: the promise of merit-based personal advancement that has only recently been extended to women under the postfeminist ‘sexual contract’ positions them as competitors, whilst the “disarticulation” of feminism “works as a kind of dispersal strategy” (ibid. 27) which further “defuses the likelihood of cross-border solidarity” (ibid.) and women’s identification as collective agents.

To understand the extent and intensity of individuating governmental address to young women as subjects of capacity in neoliberal times, we need to be aware of the all-encompassing, distinctive nature of *work* required for the production of female entrepreneurial subjectivity. Rather than just earning a wage, entrepreneurial subjects “invest in their own human capital, contract out their own labour and take on the risks and cost of such investments [...] as well of the risks and costs of their whole lives and life-times” (Adkins 2016: 2). In post-Fordist economies in which the quest for ‘employability’ and generalised optimisation erases all distinctions between public and private or work and leisure, self-surveillance and self-monitoring become pervasive in all areas of life, from professional performance to social media presence to dietary choices and fitness regimes. In the context of such unbounded work on the self, “all experiences and relations may constitute a form of human capital” (Adkins qtd. Kanai 2019: 7), thus intensifying imperatives on young women in particular to present themselves as “pleasing, lively, capable” (McRobbie 2007: 722) investors in the self at all times. At the interface of ‘old’ heteronormative femininity and ‘new’ entrepreneurial subjectivity a significant additional amount of emotional labour is expected from young women only. In Arlie Hochschild’s famous terms, emotional labour “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces



the proper state of mind in others” (1983: 7).¹⁰ I would extend this classic other-oriented understanding of emotional labour, historically as well as in a postfeminist context, to include women’s offsetting of the threat of egotism and aggressiveness inherent in what may be considered ‘excessive’ ambition. This is primarily accomplished through cultivating heterosexually pleasing as well as socially required dispositions and skills, such as desirability, girlish approachability, the readiness to practice intimacy and “to lubricate emotional worlds” (Berlant 2008: 5).

Yet there is another, equally important dimension to gendered emotional labour under neoliberalism when women feel the need for a mindset that enables them to optimistically invest in the self as seemingly equal market participants while in fact they still have to negotiate the (symbolic) violence of resurgent patriarchies (see e.g. Banet-Weiser 2018; R. Gill 2016). These structural inequalities have to be resolved individually under the “new sexual contract” that pre-empts overtly political feminist address of such issues. According to Rosalind Gill, gendered neoliberalism has recently placed heightened emphasis on the production and sustenance of positive affective orientations, especially with a view to the conversion of negative or painful experiences into feel-good outcomes. She writes that neoliberalism has become even more internalised as a psychological, affective mode of governance that

pathologize[s] affective responses such as vulnerability and anger that register the injurious nature of neoliberal capitalism. [...] The ‘right’ to feel angry (or hurt) is questioned not just politically but also seen to represent ‘ugly’ – that is psychologically and aesthetically unappealing – subject positions of female complaint. [...] Women may occasionally note such feelings but are required quickly to ‘move on’, reframing their experiences in an upbeat, forward-thinking and positive manner. (R. Gill 2016: 619)

In her study of feminine digital culture, specifically the Tumblr blogosphere, Akane Kanai demonstrates how female bonding is generated through the collaborative affective labour of transforming the painful or at least uncomfortable experience of postfeminist gender regulation into comfortably bite-sized, light-hearted accounts of personal mishaps. The blogs feature GIFs and memes whose entertainment value is mostly sourced from mildly trying struggles in quotidian situations, such as underperformance at university, tipsy disorientation, laziness in the face of an ambitious

¹⁰ Hochschild reserves “*emotional labour*” for market contexts where it “has *exchange value*” (her example are flight attendants) and uses the terms “*emotion work*” or “*emotion management*” to “refer to these same acts” – such as, to replicate Mirjam Müller’s illustrative list here, “listening to the other’s worries, sensing that something is going on and providing space for the other to talk about it, keeping in touch, remembering important things in the other’s life etc.” (2019: 848) – “where they have *use value*” (Hochschild 1983: 7; original emphasis). The defining features of neoliberalism, however, are, firstly, the extension of market logic to all domains of life and, secondly, the virtual inseparability of labour and capital. For *homo economicus*, all conduct is economic and all labour is an investment in the self. Hence I consider it fitting for the discussion here to use both terms interchangeably.



to-do-list or uncontrolled eating defying better dietary intent (see 2019: 17). Importantly thus, the blogs are not a straightforward reproduction but rather a parody of neoliberal governmental norms and standards of perfection – educational and professional aspiration, strict body monitoring to achieve and maintain thinness, a strong work ethic –, which can be invoked with a humorous or even ironic twist. Around a shared social imaginary of the gendered trivia of neoliberal life, feelings and experiences of inadequacy and failure that are presumed to be generalisable for a wide, unknown female audience are ‘confessed’ only to be made light of. The “feeling rules” (Hochschild 1979)¹¹ according to which young women may communicate their awareness and experience of neoliberal (govern)mentality aim at and safeguard the construction of “relatability”. “Being relatable”, in Kanai’s lucid exploration of an often undertheorised term, means

telling the self via a careful moderation, articulating presumably shared negative affects such as frustration and disappointment, but correcting the affective balance by deploying humour to resecure such hiccups into an overall sense of wellbeing. As such, minor struggles and failures are continuously recounted, but downplayed. Producing a self to which other girlfriends might want to relate requires the articulation of a continuous attachment to the perfect as well as ongoing struggles to achieve it, but in ways that suggest a capacity to manage such struggles. (2019: 31)

Two insights in particular can be mined from this rich definition: the first is that although Kanai conceives of relatability as a normative affective relation, we can gather from her own formulation an additional sense of it as a *rhetorical relation* between authors/narrators and audiences or readers. Since relatability concerns self-representation – autofiction, in other words –, it is a feeling rule as much as a *narrative convention* governing the confessions of a ‘flawed’ or ‘imperfect’ self whose “moderate unruliness and sunny failures” (ibid. 17) are registered in an upbeat and self-deprecating manner in the blogs. In short, the failures and inadequacies reported are safely contained in an affective and rhetorical register averse to ‘angry’ systemic critique. I will expand on the applicability of relatability to narrative communication in chick lit in the last section of this paper, but will for now turn to the second key issue here, namely the ambiguous, complicated negotiation of feminine standards of perfection. McRobbie has written about “the ‘perfect’” as “a horizon of expectation” in postfeminist sociality, which is less a good-life fantasy because of the rigid self-disciplining techniques it involves, but “a kind of neoliberal spreadsheet, a constant benchmarking of the self, a highly standardised mode of self-assessment, a calculation of

¹¹ Hochschild famously defined “feeling rules” as “the side of ideology that deals with emotion and feeling” – i.e. social norms prescribing appropriate feelings on a given occasion – and emotion work or management as “the type of work it takes to cope with feeling rules” (1979: 551).



one's assets, a fear of possible losses" (McRobbie 2015: 9-10).¹² Kanai points out that being "the subject to whom others want to 'relate'" (2019: 54) requires being buoyed by a reassuring proximity to 'the perfect' "even and precisely when avowing minor transgressions, failures, and troubles" (ibid. 17). Indeed, the fact that a restricted and seemingly solvable yet never resolved "set of problems associated with managing femininity is expressed and worked through incessantly" (Berlant 2008: 5) in the blogs testifies to "a continuing attachment to the regulatory aspects of contemporary youthful femininity", an "affective entanglement [...] required for relatability" (Kanai 2019: 4).

Self-deprecating humour, which is a characteristic property of narrative politics not only in the blogosphere but also in contemporary chick lit and historical women's confessional fiction,¹³ ultimately contributes to maintaining this affective entanglement while purporting to distance subjects from it. Rosalind Gill considers a display of humorous and ironic 'knowingness' about sexist standards of self-regulation a hallmark of the "postfeminist sensibility" because it plays down the persistence of systemic wrongdoing by celebrating the capacity of the progressive, emancipated female subject to be witty and funny enough to 'rise above' (see R. Gill 2007: 159-61). In fact, proving not to be hurt or disenfranchised by (neo-)patriarchal norms of gendered perfection by treating them with humour and irony becomes the new quasi-feminist norm for the youthful woman who does not want to appear out of sync with the progressive times. It is in this sense that we might think of self-deprecating humour as one of the major rhetorical and affective rules with which young women are expected to navigate (the pain inflicted by) postfeminist life. Humour safeguards the absence of transformational politics from a public which, after all, is characterised by the circulation of feminine dissatisfaction, disappointment and failure. With her refusal to laugh along, Sara Ahmed's powerful figure of the "feminist killjoy" would be unwelcome to this sphere because she threatens to politicise – to create serious disturbance – out of this carefully

¹² Reading McRobbie's example of such a spreadsheet induces immediate exhaustion at the sheer endlessness of the labour involved:

Various technologies bring the perfect into life, or vitalise it as an everyday form of self-measurement. How well did I do today? Did I manage to eat fewer calories? Did I eat more healthily? Did I get to the gym? Did I achieve what I aimed to achieve at work? Did I look after the children with the right kind of attention? Did I cook well after the day's work? Did I ensure that my family returned from school and work to a well-appointed and well-regulated home? Did I maintain my good looks and my sexually attractive and well-groomed body? The constant calculations and the sense of 'being in control' have the effect of seemingly putting the woman in charge of her affairs. (McRobbie 2015: 9).

¹³ In her discussion of the particular problems and conflicts attached to autobiographical writing for women and other marginalised groups, Felski writes that "[t]his phenomenon of a strongly negative self-image can be a particular problem for women, whose socialization typically endows them with feelings of inadequacy" (1989: 105). A "self-deprecatory stance" (ibid.), according to her, typifies this problem. In her study of public women's 18th- and 19th-century autobiographies and letters, Patricia Meyer Spacks concludes that "consistent self-deprecation", often comic "disclaimers of the self's significance", are no "mere convention" of this feminine self-writing but "reflect a profound 'bashfulness' inflecting the writer's entire life" (1988: 188).



curated affective negativity. Other than its conventional usage as a privately owned and managed emotion designates, Ahmed proposes to understand happiness as a shared social orientation towards a narrow range of objects, states or situations, so that happiness is ultimately seen to follow from the “relative proximity to a social ideal” (2010: 53). Even though it is negotiated through a register of struggle, it is precisely this notion of happiness around which the (digital) female cultures of relatability convene and which needs to remain uncontested. The danger that feminist subjects represent to these spheres does not consist so much in their raising of “unhappy topics such as sexism but [in] exposing how happiness is sustained by erasing the very signs of not getting along” (ibid. 66). If we understand humour as a key rhetorical and affective practice of such erasure – and therefore of the collective sustenance of happiness –, then we can see how the feminist subject’s reputation for humourlessness is intimately connected to her killing of joy in yet more unsettling ways. Her refusal to laugh along threatens to politicise the affective negativity that is usually made bearable and reigned in as a happiness risk through conventionalised uses of humour. The caricature of “feminist killjoys” throughout the media of girlfriend sociality, including chick lit, testifies to the threat these figures pose: “Feminists are typically represented as grumpy and humorless, often as a way of protecting the right to certain forms of social bonding or of holding onto whatever is perceived to be under threat” (ibid. 65).¹⁴

Relatability thus becomes productive of a form of female sociality that is, to borrow Lauren Berlant’s useful term, “juxtapolitical” (2008: xi) vis-à-vis neoliberal modes of gender regulation: their existence, inconsistencies and potential harm are humorously acknowledged at the level of personal experience but this acknowledgement is immediately offset with the optimistic expectation and tenacious desire to ‘get by’ nonetheless. That authors/narrators as well as the audiences making up this feminine digital public overwhelmingly enjoy class and race privilege (see Kanai 2019: 55) – and from this position are easily forgiven already minor detractions from neoliberal standards of success – further ensures the public’s general “optimism” (Berlant 2008: xi). This restrictive, privileged demographic to which the great majority of participants belongs belies the public’s claim to the inclusivity of the social imaginary ostensibly shared within it.¹⁵ Although with a generous outlook the confessions circulating in the feminine blogosphere and popular fiction such as chick lit do illuminate the “faultlines”

¹⁴ See also Lauren Berlant (2017) for an investigation of the role of humourlessness in opposing neoliberal pressures of self-optimisation.

¹⁵ This is exemplified by university-themed memes, whose authors can afford to “downplay achievement and success on the basis of having *already* demonstrated classed value through acceptance into university. The citation of university experience that is expected to be recognisable and understandable indicates the situation of the blogs within middle class culture. The declared unwillingness or inability to make diligent efforts [...] [and] articulating discontentment through being ‘stupid’” is a “confessable, relatable struggle or flaw” for the ‘aspirational’ young, white, middle-class (and ideally also thin, ‘hot’) woman (only) (Kanai 2019: 47; original emphasis).



of the neoliberal gender order “through which its own criteria fall into contest and disarray” (Sinfield qtd. Allrath 2005: 45), I am inclined to argue that because of their exceedingly mundane content and their heavily conventionalised narrative form – both owing to the affective regulations of the intimate space in which they are produced and received – these kinds of speech acts range far below “disclosures of transgressive acts” (Bernstein 1997: 33) in terms of counter-hegemonic efficacy.¹⁶

At least as long as young women stay within the narrow affective boundaries demarcating the intimate, relatable juxtapositional from the ‘angry’ feminist political, Kanai’s analysis of the feminine blogosphere suggests in principle benign relationships between them. By comparison, in her study *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood* Alison Winch is even more sceptical of possibilities for genuine connection and solidarity among women in postfeminist culture. Although usually couched in female-friendly rhetoric of intimacy and empowerment, she understands “girlfriendships” (2013: 2) as an aggressively strategic, competitive form of female sociality that is patterned by relentless assessment under the “girlfriend gaze” (ibid. 8). Women’s mutual policing in the homosocial “gynaepicon” (ibid. 5) of visual culture, from magazines to blogs to cinematic culture, is typical of an ostensibly progressive, post-patriarchal historical moment in which heterosexual norms are not externally, visibly enforced by men or the male gaze but are a matter entirely left to women’s own ‘choices’.

Winch looks at UK women’s magazines’ discourses of celebrity bodies to anchor her understanding of the complexity of the “girlfriend gaze” as a technology of power. Networks of homosocial surveillance constitute the “gynaepicon”, a gendered neoliberal variant of Bentham’s/Foucault’s panopticon in which the patriarchal male gaze that objectifies the female body is transformed into the girlfriend gaze. This gaze likewise centres on the female body but critically assesses it as (competing) erotic capital. For the postfeminist body to be converted into erotic capital (coded as “hotness”; Winch 2013: 22), sexuality is neither straightforwardly repressed (which would be frowned upon as ‘dowdy’ or ‘frigid’) nor freely encouraged (which would count as ‘sluttish’), but must be harnessed for empowerment through tight control over fat and libido. Only the careful, calculating cultivation of sexual(ised) display enables women’s relations to their bodies

¹⁶ Kanai’s argument about relatability as an affective (and, as I have added, a rhetorical) relation structuring the Tumblr feminine blogosphere seems to apply to wider parts of postfeminist digital culture. Writing about the burgeoning area of food blogging (with the number of active bloggers estimated at over 20,000, 85% of them female), Alane Presswood finds that “[f]ood bloggers’ discussions of their personal and professional failures presents perhaps the most interesting departures from the depictions of domesticity common in past eras” (2020: par. 4.65). In alignment with Kanai, she continues that “this expressiveness [of failures and emotional challenges] does not expand to the portrayal of anger, which remains a characteristically masculine state of mind and feeling” (ibid. par. 4.77). She also draws attention to the striking underrepresentation of women of colour as both producers and consumers of food blogs, which she traces back to their historical exclusion from the unthreatening, emotionally restrained ethics and the white-coded ‘girlhood’ aesthetics perpetuated through the design and communication styles of the blogs and the blogger personae (see ibid. par. D01.18).



as feminine (social media) assets or brands to be marketed, as aesthetic and ethical objects of pleasure – ethical because those objects have been crafted through taxing “aesthetic labour” (Elias, Gill and Scharff 2017), which is a moral imperative under neoliberalism, especially for women. Again, it is only a certain exclusive strata of desirable ‘girlfriends’ who are able to successfully monitor this entrepreneurial work on the self. Relationships with women who potentially devalue one’s own femininity, such as fat, working-class (with the two usually represented as inextricably connected), often also non-white women, are foreclosed from a strategic viewpoint.¹⁷

In contrast to Kanai’s concept of relatability with its focus on the social conventions of communicating the experience of postfeminist normativity, it might be harder to see what the concept of the “girlfriend gaze” that is attuned to visual media and specifically their representation of the female body has to contribute to the analysis of confessional fiction. What I find noteworthy in this regard is that it expresses a different and more complex affective positioning to gender norms (with entrepreneurial body work being only one example) as foundational to postfeminist sociality than ‘relatability’ does. A case in point is Winch’s analysis of a photo series in UK *Heat* magazine that initially reacts to celebrity women’s weight gain at the beginning of new relationships with a sympathetic “[w]e’ve all been there”, celebrates their “happier bodies” and even promotes “loosening the reins’ on food control” as the gateway to happiness if not health (qtd. Winch 2013: 15). While this is in ostensible defiance of harsh postfeminist regimes of body surveillance and hence comparable to the rhetoric of relatability, ultimately skinniness is advocated in no uncertain terms as the ideal and in fact only permissible body image (see *ibid.*). The volatile, hostile and “complex assemblage of affect” from which the girlfriend gaze is generated as it “is intricately bound up with feelings of envy, desire for status and identification” (*ibid.* 26) derives from its veiled but uncompromising complicity with the patriarchal male gaze. “Girlfriend media”, Winch

¹⁷ The girlfriend gaze as a model for strategic affective relationality in postfeminist neoliberal culture strongly resonates with Rachel Greenwald Smith’s work on “the affective hypothesis” and the “personal feelings” which are acknowledged under its reign (2). The affective hypothesis describes the public and scholarly consensus, renewed since the ethical turn of the 1990s, that the value of literature lies in the depth of interiority of character representation that elicits emotional and empathetic response from readers. Observing that this new impetus for the affective hypothesis coincides historically with the consolidation of neoliberalism in the Global North, Greenwald Smith argues that both phenomena share an approach to feeling that is defined by the logics of entrepreneurialism and privatised ownership. The act of reading becomes a transaction of emotional investment and return, with personal feelings “allow[ing] for strategic emotional associations to be made between readers and characters” and hence “ideally ... enrich[ing] the individual through their carefully calculated development, distribution, and expansion” (*ibid.*). Whilst Greenwald Smith’s argumentation suffers at times from lack of differentiation between the various ontological levels involved in narrative communication and therefore from imprecisions in mapping the circulation of affect within and between textual and readers’ worlds, her overall point that literary feeling is privatised as an investment asset in the neoliberal era is intriguing. It certainly speaks to Winch’s observations on strategic alliances between girlfriends and their mutual surveillance of the most promising investments in erotic capital as well as to the potential values of consuming fiction that so intensely relies on the representation of emotional and psychological interiority – on personal feelings – as chick lit.



writes, “internalize and perpetuate male regimes of looking while acknowledging and humorously disrupting this appropriation” (ibid. 27). Chick lit is clearly part of this convergent girlfriend media culture, “instances across media platforms where (predominantly heterosexual) female sociality is used as a representation and/or a marketing strategy” and which are essentially “interconnected resources for self-work” (Oullette and Wilson qtd. Winch 2013: 4). I will argue in the next section that ‘girlfriendship narration’ in chick lit functions similarly to the girlfriend gaze and its complex affective register by tacitly offering a (masculine) position of unreliability judgement to the female reader that enables her to read against and beyond the girlfriend narrator’s own self-representation and projections of a ‘girlfriend narratee’ as a sympathetic confidante. The reader would then slip into the cultural mould that projects her as a highly critical, even malignant policewoman who compliantly enforces patriarchal (symbolic) politics. This is a different, grimmer perspective on the affective politics of the female recipient community from the one that relatability represents.

Rather than deciding between or synthesising these two different approaches, it is precisely the indissoluble tension they articulate – between friendly intimacy over shared experience with gender regulation and the power-ridden quest for self-advancement, between empathy and affective domination – that typifies the kind of female sociality encouraged in postfeminist culture. This perennial ambivalence is what has long been considered the nature of girlfriendships in Western culture (see e.g. Day 2013: 5-12; Winch 2013: 12-14). As models for social bonding, however, these were seen as restricted to a pubescent or perhaps adolescent age range and to a corresponding cultural niche, whereas the ‘girlification’ of postfeminist culture consists in their persistent extension to adult women and as such is indicative “of discomfort with female adulthood and power” (Winch 2013: 28). In a similar vein, McRobbie explains that

while the qualities of girlishness are not in themselves inherently harmful or dangerous to womanhood, they nevertheless play a kind of boundary-marking function, leaving seriousness, angry humour, and being perhaps old for one’s age rather than by necessity youthful at 32, in some other undesignated space. (2009: 24)

I suggest that this conception of ‘girlfriendship’ as a cultural and rhetorical model for (adult) female sociality under a postfeminist regime ties up several loose strings in chick lit research. Most generally, it draws together into a culturally specific and power-critical shape the terms that have been routinely used to characterise, criticise and celebrate chick lit, foremost among them intimacy, identification and relatability. More specifically, it plausibly addresses both the power relationships atomising and the sparks of camaraderie uniting women faced with negotiating postfeminist gender regulation. Finally, it provides us with a more refined theoretical understanding of chick



lit's participation in 'girlification' and 'girl culture' that moves beyond the common usage of these terms as denoting cross-media instances of recurrent themes (consumption-as-empowerment), rhetorics (the 'can do' girl) and aesthetics ('pinking'), which together reflect a limited commercialised appropriation of feminist politics. In the final section, I will demonstrate how girlfriendship can also function as a context-sensitive model of gendered narrative communication and thus not only put a different inflection on the genre's embeddedness in postfeminist culture but also on its operation as literary narrative.

Postfeminist 'Girlfriendship Narration': A Feminist-Narratological Perspective

Reformulating relatability as a model for 'girlfriend narration' in the contemporary confessional requires some initial technical considerations. Unlike blogs in which real authors and real audiences directly engage in (written) conversation, the defining feature of fictional narratives is the mediacy of their transmission, which describes a layered rhetorical situation distinguishing between textual and real-world levels of communication. On the level of narrative discourse, a narrator tells her story to a narratee – an equally fictional entity, the textually inscribed “someone whom the narrator addresses” more or less overtly (Prince 1982: 214) – whereas the actual author (the historical person holding the pen) and the actual reader (any person holding the book at any given point in time) are agents who do not directly participate in the fictional discourse. To track down relatability and intimacy in chick lit's narrative communication, therefore, we need to look more closely at the narrator-narratee-relationship.

As mentioned before, one defining feature of most confessional fiction is an overt autodiegetic narrator who becomes clearly tangible as a textual persona through the “subjectivity markers” (Fludernik qtd. Allrath 2005: 24) that almost necessarily accompany intimate disclosure and that may concern her biography, attitudes, misconduct, desires etc. The rhetorical situation of confidential disclosure also means that the narrator tends to “establish overt contact with the corresponding narratee” (Lanser 1981: 174) through “extrarepresentational acts” exceeding the factual report of story events, such as references and addresses to the narratee (Lanser 1992: 16). While the (female) narrator, the originating voice of the story, has unsurprisingly been a research priority in feminist narratology since its inception, there is still relatively scarce critical attention focused on the narratee, the fictive “agent which is at the very least implicitly addressed by the narrator” (Rimmon-Kenan qtd. Allrath 2005: 30). This is perhaps not surprising as the narratee cannot communicate herself, but can only be identified indirectly through her relation with the narrator as the latter constructs it, to the point that “the individual who relates the story and the person to whom the story is



told are more or less interdependent in any narration” (Prince 1982: 215). Even in the absence of direct forms of address to ‘you’, ‘dear reader’ etc., there is a range of textual indications from which a relatively clear portrait of a narratee is implicitly deducible. These include the narrator’s (unexplained) intertextual references or references to extra-textual experience (see *ibid.* 222), which may be phrased as clarifying or confidential “asides addressed to the narratee ” (*ibid.* 229); rhetorical questions or “questions to the narratee himself, some of whose knowledge and defenses are thus revealed in the process” (*ibid.* 221); the narrator’s reaction “to utterances and actions of a narratee” (Allrath 2005: 31); or her ascription of “certain interpretations of or reactions to the narrative events and existents to the narratee” (*ibid.* 32).

While these textual indicators enable us to detect the narratee at all in a given text and from there gauge the relationship she has with the narrator, they are silent about its potential nature. Feminist narratologist Susan Lanser is one of the few theorists to have developed a more systematic approach to “the range of attitudes” that a narrator may display “toward the narratee and toward the activity in which narrator and narratee are textually bound” (1981: 178). Her category of “contact” (*ibid.* 174) that the narrator seeks with a narratee subsumes three axes. The first, “confidence vs. uncertainty”, “marks the method of communication between narrator and narratee” (*ibid.* 178). Secondly, “deference vs. contempt” measures the “power relationship” between them (*ibid.* 179). Finally, “formality vs. intimacy” is “an affective index recording the degree of formality or intimacy that the narrator expresses through her/his tone and register, through the forms by which s/he addresses the narratee and, indeed through the characterization of the narratee” (*ibid.*). With the latter two, the degree zero or unmarked case of contact is at a medial position between the two poles, whereas the degree of confidence that at least a narrator in the twentieth century conventionally displays ranges much closer, according to Lanser, to confidence than uncertainty. What is particularly significant for confessional fiction and chick lit is that Lanser specifically lists “self-deprecation” alongside “[i]nsecurity, defensiveness” and “apology” among those indicators of “reticence not conventionally expected of a narrator” (*ibid.* 178). In the face of what has been said earlier about the power imbalance intrinsic to confessional writing as well as about self-deprecating humour’s role in the rhetoric of relatability, I would modify Lanser’s classification to say that all three axes in fact reflect rhetorical dimensions of power relationships. Indeed, Lanser herself notes that “there may frequently be a correlation between the narrator’s status and the manner of contact s/he establishes with the narratee” (*ibid.*), with ‘status’ referring to the authority and reliability accorded a narrator that is determined not only by formal but also by social and contextual characteristics such as gender (see *ibid.* 168). While she does not elaborate the point, feminist scholarship from diverse fields such as linguistics, psychology and literary studies has before and since amply demonstrated that the devaluation of female speech continues, albeit in subtler forms than a century ago, as



one important feature of gender hierarchy (see Allrath 2005: 270-75 for a useful overview). This research suggests that the unmarked case of narrator-narratee contact varies according to the gender of the parties involved, so that for a feminine narrator we would need to shift the degree zero (considerably) closer to uncertainty, deference and intimacy. Having said that, of course this can only describe a tendency, whereas the exact kind of contact that a narrator makes in any given text depends on a range of other factors including genre conventions. Given that any form of contact involves two interlocutors, it will also be dependent on the “identity of the narratee”, which “includes [her] social characteristics, his or her relation to the story, and whatever beliefs, attitudes, knowledge experience, and so on he or she is implied to possess” (ibid. 179), as much as on the narrator’s identity. Even a short passage from *Bridget Jones’s Diary* illustrates the gendering of the narrator-narratee-relationship according to these parameters:

Midnight. Ugh. Completely exhausted. Surely it is not normal to be revising for a date as if it were a job interview? [...] Since leaving work I have nearly slipped a disc, wheezing through a step aerobics class, scratched my naked body for seven minutes with a stiff brush; cleaned the flat; filled the fridge, plucked my eyebrows, skimmed the papers and the *Ultimate Sex Guide*, put the washing in and waxed my own legs, since it was too late to book an appointment. Ended up kneeling on a towel trying to pull off a wax strip firmly stuck to the back of my calf while watching *Newsnight* in an effort to drum up some interesting opinions about things. My back hurts, my head aches and my legs are bright red and covered in lumps of wax. Wise people will say Daniel should like me just as I am, but I am a child of *Cosmopolitan* culture, have been traumatized by supermodels and too many quizzes and know that neither my personality nor my body is up to it if left to its own devices. I can’t take the pressure. I am going to cancel and spend the evening eating doughnuts in a cardigan with egg on it. (59)

Although she does not address the ‘you’ inscribed in the text directly at any point, Bridget, the autodiegetic narrator, showcases herself as highly relatable for her narratee through a manner of contact that is oriented much further to the poles of uncertainty, intimacy and deference than Lanser’s degree zero at the medial point of the three axes. The rhetorical question opening the diary entry establishes direct contact with a narratee who we can already safely presume to be female, judging from the fact that the narrator rather helplessly turns towards her in insecurity, even mild despair over what constitutes ‘normal’ feminine investment in dating practices. Her narratee then emerges as well-versed and interested in the minutiae of feminine beauty regimes and able to make sense of unexplained pop cultural references to women’s self-help guides and magazines, which strongly suggests a (young) feminine addressee familiar with contemporary culture. Bridget’s reference to reluctantly watching BBC’s *Newsnight* in order to be able to impart informed opinions on political matters that she remains vague about, reaches out to a ‘middlebrow’ rather than ‘highbrow’ narratee, an ‘everyday gal’



more at home in feminine forms of popular culture than in serious, intellectual – masculine – world affairs. Yet the proximity to educational credentials is close enough that the seriously informative BBC programme is understood to be a must-watch – which (only) the securely middle-class subject can afford to skip and to rather ‘be stupid’. In fact, Bridget’s patchy, rather resistant engagement with politics is merely in the service of impressing a male lover, whom she regards as her intellectual superior (see *BJD* 59; not in the passage quoted). On a formal level, easy familiarity with the narratee manifests itself in a colloquial, unpolished register that is primarily marked by Bridget’s trademark elliptical syntax. Yet a discussion of the “degree of intimacy cannot be restricted to [...] formal aspects, because the question of intimacy in any relationship will always be related to the contents of the communication as well” (Allrath 2005: 103). In this case, the narrator “appeal[s] to the narratee in terms of shared (gendered) experience to create greater intimacy, thereby lessening the distance between them whilst stressing the authenticity [...] of her narrative” (ibid.). The rhetorical question about dating practices, the pop cultural references, the detailed account of feminine aesthetic and domestic labour all work to signal to the narratee – and here Kanai’s conception of relatability finally comes into play – a shared wry awareness of and struggle with postfeminist standards of perfection. The narrator’s ultimate admission of defeat, her comic failure at performing normative femininity – “I can’t take the pressure. I am going to cancel and spend the evening eating doughnuts in a cardigan with egg on it” – is vindicated by its triviality¹⁸ and the narrator’s secure white and middle-class identity as well as her compliance with body normativity, all of which safeguard desirable proximity to postfeminist horizons of gendered perfection. To appreciate how the self-deprecating humour packaging performance hiccups is a function of the socially privileged position of both narrator and narratee, we only have to imagine for a second how the same utterance would be received if made by, say, a fat single mother of three children who has trouble walking from years spent on cleaning jobs. Narrator-narratee intimacy is created here in exactly the terms outlined by Kanai over the confession of narrowly circumscribed white, middle- and upper-middle-class gender norm infringements, whose affective relatability is produced by self-deprecating narrating behaviour that signals the expected feminine deference and humility to a narratee. In Bridget’s case, the narrator’s insecurity that surfaces in the initial rhetorical question carries over into a highly visual portrayal of the grotesque body that shows how great intimacy in content – for it really needs the sympathetic eyes of a confidante to keep safe

¹⁸ Susan Lanser helpfully introduces an “index of the degree to which a particular opposition to the culture text is perceived as threatening or is easily tolerated”, which ranges from “crucial” to “trivial” (1981: 219). I would argue that anti-normative resentment in instances of painful leg-waxing or unhealthy, messy eating clearly falls into the second category once we imagine what else would be possible, such as maternal regret or issues of reproductive justice.



such a relentlessly exposed, vulnerable body – almost invariably harbours a risky potential for the symbolic violence of patriarchal ridicule and humiliation.¹⁹

In a narrative situation of relatability, then, the narratee is construed as a confidante of the narrator-girlfriend, with a degree of intimacy defining the narrator-narratee-relationship that is decisively higher than what Lanser suggests as a neutral form of contact. As a necessary prerequisite to this close contact, the chick lit narratee does not only know “the language of the narrator” and “the grammar of a story”, as in Prince and Piwowarczyk’s conception of the “degree zero narratee”, but is also very likely familiar with the affective and rhetorical “customs/conventions associated with particular group”, namely a narrowly defined ‘ideal’ postfeminist demographic (Piwowarczyk and Prince qtd. Lanser 1981: 181). A successful actualisation of narrative intimacy and relatability – making chick lit the “conversation with our best girlfriend[s]” – depends on the actual reader’s filling the position of the confidante created for the narratee. This rounds out further the term ‘metaleptic felicity’: we have understood it earlier as referring to the narrator crossing the threshold into the reader’s extra-fictional world as the ‘girlfriend’ whom one seems to know already and wants to relate to. If we now look at the other party in this conversation, we can extend it to what Robyn Warhol has described as the “engaging narrator’s” success in “encourag[ing] identification” of the actual reader with the narratee through a particularly intense manner of contact (Warhol 1986: 812).²⁰

Yet I have also suggested that all three of Lanser’s indexes of contact are invariably shot through with gendered power relations that work to erode the authority of female narrators. So if we accept that narration in chick lit is marked on at least two of these scales – that of uncertainty (vs. confidence), particularly with a view to the ‘relatable’ rhetorical fixture of self-deprecating humour, and intimacy (vs. formality) –, then there is a power advantage vis-à-vis the narrator implicit in the narratee position of the confidante that may be actualised by readers. I speculate that narrative relatability (the narrator’s assumption of the narratee’s sympathetic listening to or reading *with* her) can easily shade into the more complex affective register of the girlfriend gaze. Rather than identifying with the narratee position, the actual reader would then tend to read

¹⁹ This is a highly visual narrative dynamic that exploits the comic potential of slapstick comedy, a point to which I will return later.

²⁰ Even though it is important to keep in mind the analytical distinction between narratee and reader, I consider the likely collapse of the two entities in the reading experience as vital to the operation of narrative intimacy. Wolf Schmid sees such close factual correspondence between the reader or recipient and his or her textual construction by the narrator that he even subsumes both under the term “narratee”: “The narratee is to be divided into two entities which differ *functionally* or *intensionally*, even when they coincide *materially* or *extensionally*: the *addressee* and the *recipient*. The addressee is the narrator’s image of the one to whom the message is sent; the recipient is the actual receiver” (Schmid 2013; original emphasis). Although such comprehensive usage of the term ‘narratee’ might not be a very common narratological position, it ideally suits the narratological and ideological work of narrative intimacy to effect complete coincidence of textual and actual readership.



critically *beyond* or *against* the narrator's self-representation in habitual policing of the (non-)alignment of that other woman's conduct with the norms of postfeminist patriarchy. This scenario is not unlikely considering Alison Winch's claim that "the affective social relations evoked and courted in girlfriend media are extended to viewers and users in order to engage them in systems of surveillance" of a vulnerable narrator whose "desire for intimacy, normativity and belonging often means submitting [herself] to regimes of looking by the girlfriend gaze" (2013: 5). Specifically, I argue that the girlfriend gaze operates as a cultural primer for the decision to read female narrators as unreliable, particularly in terms of plotting, i.e. of their meaning-making capacity with regard to their own story. In other words, I am concerned here with the possibility that chick lit's appeal and potency rest in its mobilisation of the complex affective register of girlfriendship that allows for competitive, superior reading *against* a funny, pleasingly and predictably failing narrator as much as for compassionate or sympathetic identification *with* her. What exactly does this mean in terms of narrative communication?

Susan Lanser follows her general remark that "[g]ender and other categories of social identity may affect presumptions of authority and reliability" with a definition of what she calls "mimetic authority", which combines "[s]ocial identity and textual behavior [...] to provide the reader with a basis for determining the narrator's" credibility, reliability and competence (1981: 169). Mimetic authority thus acknowledges the necessarily intimate link between diegetic and social authority, the foundation on which Alison Case builds her exploration of "feminine narration" (2001: 176, 1999: 5) in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British novel. Feminine narration is neither an essentialist description of a narrative style in which actual women tell stories nor of one exclusively used by female authors, but a gendered literary convention that has been shaped over centuries and "is characterized by the exclusion of the narrator from the activity of shaping her experience into a coherent and meaningful story" (2001: *ibid.*). Although it is a literary convention, it is – like Lanser's notion of mimetic authority – relative to gender ideologies that have historically granted women less discursive authority by associating feminine intelligibility with demureness and passivity. Again in keeping with Lanser's explications of marked and unmarked narratorial behaviour, Case approaches conventionality as less a matter of "frequency or likelihood, but [...] most significantly a question of 'marking'" (*ibid.*) in the sense that feminine narration "represents the 'unmarked' case for a female narrator, just as narrative confidence, competence, and control do for the male narrator" (1999: 6). Female narrators who conformed to historically and culturally specific codes of such (social and literary) conduct were typically cast as a "witness' who presents experience in a more or less 'raw' and unmediated way" (*ibid.*). By contrast, female narrators' attempts at meaning-making, at control over their stories signified by their active



“plotting” (ibid. 177)²¹ tended to be marked as a deviation. What makes plotting and its absence a particularly valuable yardstick of mimetic authority is that it has a bearing on both narrators’ stance “toward the fictional persons and events” (Lanser 1981: 174) as well as on the contact they make with narratees/readers:

[I]n relation to the story [plotting] is a purposive activity, because plots in themselves are, as Brooks says, ‘intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving.’ In relation to the reader, plotting is an act of authority: the narrator poses as the one to assign the shape, and hence the meaning, we are to derive from the story. (Case 1999: 13)

Inasmuch as it is firmly dissociated from such plotting activities, “[f]emininity’ in narrative is a function of the narrator’s relation to the perceived structure and meaning of the narrative as a whole” (ibid. 30). Such gendered conventionality – literary or otherwise – can be depressingly immune to the passage of time, which another look at *BJD* (and here I replicate Case’s textual example) will demonstrate. An exemplary case of feminine narration, the comedic pleasure of the novel as a whole rests on the “contrast between what the [diary] writer understands, expects to happen, or intends to make happen and both our own sense of likely narrative trajectories and actual subsequent developments in the story” (2001: 178; original emphasis). Unlike the narrator herself, the reader, being familiar with similar breathtaking lapses in Bridget’s assessment of events and herself by that point, will anticipate her extremely elaborate menu vision for her birthday dinner party and her enthusiastic hope “to become known as brilliant cook and hostess” (*BJD* 82) as a certain road to (comic) disaster. And sure enough, the diary entry dated to her birthday at 6.30 p.m., 90 minutes before her guests are scheduled to arrive, finds the narrator having “just stepped in a pan of mashed potato in new kitten-heel black suede shoes from Pied à terre [...] forgetting that kitchen floor and surfaces were covered in pans of mince and mashed potato” (ibid. 82-83). Bridget reacts by rushing through, in the illusion of complete coincidence of experience and narration, an emergency schedule that allots five minutes to the preparation of Grand Marnier soufflés and ten minutes to the complicated garnish of the main course, whose name she cannot remember as it morphs into a confused “frisse lardon frizzled chorizo thing” (ibid. 83). As she tries to outrush this fiasco of planning and foresight in increasing desperation, she is left very much where she began, humiliatingly exposed at the ringing of the doorbell “in bra and pants with wet hair” and “pie [...] all over the floor” (ibid. 84). Instead of blaming her own shortcomings (an absence of self-reflection required for the repetition of such slapstick comedy), Bridget “hate[s] the guests. Have had to slave for two days, and now they will all swan in, demanding food like cuckoos” (ibid.). Even

²¹ Case usefully distinguishes between “a first-person narrator’s capacity for *retrospective* plotting (the mapping of cause and effect into a shapely and meaningful narrative) in narration, and his or her capacity for *projective* plotting within the story – for planning out patterns of cause and effect in the future” (2001: 177; original emphasis).



though Case does not systematically explore connections between the literary convention of feminine and/as unreliable narration, the pleasures that she sees attached to it arguably point in this direction:

[F]emale narrative witnesses [...] are likely to be more interesting for what they do not know – about the people or events around them, or about themselves – than for what they know. Indeed, a great part of the pleasure feminine narration provides is that it thus appears to reverse the power relations in narrator and reader. [...] Feminine narrators [...] share in common the fact that we are expected to take our narrative pleasure at their expense. Rather than being subjected to their narrative authority, we are invited to assume narrative authority over them – to construct plot and a meaning out of their words that they themselves cannot understand, or do not wish us to know. (1999: 30)

What Case describes here is clearly the pleasure of dramatic irony or discrepant awareness, a concept that has migrated to the study of prose narrative from drama theory and refers to situations in which the audience enjoys the privilege of knowing more about events or characters than the speaking character on stage does. All of her utterances and non-verbal actions therefore acquire an additional meaning for the audience that the character herself is not aware of and has not intended (see Pfister 1988: 49-54). Ansgar Nünning notes that “[i]n the case of an unreliable narrator, dramatic irony results from the discrepancy between the intentions and value system of the narrator and the foreknowledge and norms of the reader” (1999a: 58), so that a second layer of meaning is created through the narrator’s unwitting foregrounding of her mental or moral inconsistencies. To be clear, the deficits accounting for unreliability in chick lit narrators are not, as we have seen, serious disturbances of either cognitive faculties or affective dispositions such as psycho- or sociopathologies. The unreliability of stance towards their own narration that their plotting failure betrays locates the discrepancy, in Nünning’s terms, between the narrator’s intentions and the reader’s (soon) divergent foreknowledge rather than in a disturbing chasm of moral values. The characteristic, comically exploitable self-deception – or lack of self-reflexivity – from which Bridget and her narratorial kin suffer falls along the axis of “knowledge/perception”, which compromises their role as readers and interpreters primarily of themselves (doubling as protagonists) and other characters as they are implicated in story events (Phelan and Martin 1999 qtd. Marcus 2007: 78).²² This is a

²² Amit Marcus convincingly argues that self-deception combines moral and cognitive dispositions in accounting for unreliable narration: “[T]he self-deceived narrating character [as one who does not *know* the truth and as one who bears some *moral responsibility* for this lack of knowledge because of his or her motivation not to know] [...] proves that the traditional connection between the moral and the cognitive aspects of the unreliable narrator is contingent, being neither arbitrary nor necessary. Self-deception is often a combination of two kinds of fallacies, cognitive and moral, which depend on and foster each other, consequentially making it difficult to differentiate between them” (2007: 196; original emphasis). – Understanding self-deception as a breach of moral responsibility follows logically from the neoliberal moral and ethical imperative of self-knowledge and -work in pursuit of ideal postfeminist subjectivity. It is



low-key type of unreliability that is certainly closer to the incompetence of youthful, unexperienced or naïve narrators – again, the ‘girlification’ of the entire cultural context that gave life to chick lit as a genre strikes – than to the artful scheming of the criminal or immoral narrator. Greta Olson introduces the type of the “fallible narrator” for those morally unsuspecting kinds of misperceiving, misreporting or misjudging which are attributable to “the narrator’s young age, his limited education and experience, or his biased sources of information” (2003: 101).

A pragmatic rather than purely semiotic conception of unreliable narration which builds on the notion of dramatic irony or discrepant awareness helps us to see how narratorial behaviour that is traceable in the text as such and readers’ so-called cognitive frames interact in the interpretation of a female narrator as unreliable. This approach to narratorial unreliability was pioneered by Ansgar Nünning (1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b) and explains it as an interpretive decision on the part of readers instead of an intra-diegetic tension between the narrator’s and the implied author’s norms and values. Readers ‘naturalise’ textual discrepancies and inconsistencies by drawing on extra-textual norms and knowledge, cognitive frames that represent readers’ literary (e.g. generic conventions) or real-world (e.g. ethical convictions, personality theories) knowledge of what is ‘normal’, ‘rational’, ‘moral’ etc. Yet although according to the pragmatic understanding there cannot be an unreliable narrator prior to or independent of the reader’s interpretation, certain textual features or narrative strategies must be identifiable that make this interpretation likely; unreliable narration is “a phenomenon situated at the interface of narrative and interpretive strategies” (Allrath 2005: 8). Gaby Allrath points out that gender factors importantly in both the creation of the textual basis of unreliable narration as well as the construction of the cognitive frames applied by readers to gauge a narrator’s reliability (see *ibid.* 96).

The first group of textual indications for unreliable narration refer to the story level, on which the narrator-as-protagonist interacts with other characters, whose “facial expressions, gestures, and utterances may [...] function as a corrective of the narrator’s distorted world-view, thereby literally putting things into (character) perspective” (*ibid.* 87). I will show in my readings of chick lit novels that such corrective perspectives – signalling to us as readers in turn the need for correction of the misguided actions or distorted interpretations of the female narrator-protagonist – are taken by both male and female characters. Their normalising perspectives are not necessarily expressed verbally but rather, in an affective register ranging from benevolent to contemptuous, through the male gaze or its homosocial variant, the girlfriend gaze. The gaze as a concept borrowed from visual media is in fact particularly apt here because, as we have seen in both brief excerpts from *BJD*, comedy in chick lit often at least partly relies on a

this moral norm infringement inherent in self-deception rather than the lack of cognitive abilities it indicates that invites the punitive scrutiny of the reader-girlfriend’s gaze.



slapstick dynamic with its typical exposure of the grotesque (female) body. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines slapstick as “a type of physical comedy characterised by broad humour, absurd situations and vigorous, usually violent action” (qtd. Peacock 2020: 50), specifically involving in the case of chick lit, which largely shies away from humorous depictions of interpersonal violence, “falling and tripping; throwing of objects (often, but not always, food, particularly pies); malicious props (the falling piano and the collapsing ladder” (ibid.). These definitions already suggest that the slapstick body, especially when it is female, is never just an occasion for benign laughter but also an easy target with a “weak status shield” (Hochschild 1983: 163) against judgmental, disparaging gazes from other characters’ as well as the reader’s position of perhaps more controlled, ‘rational’, ‘able’ embodiment. Questions not of factual or moral reliability but certainly of narrative competence and authority loom large here as in autodiegetic fiction the character’s clumsiness and exposure to ridicule necessarily reflect back on the narrator.

As a second group, Allrath identifies markers on the discourse level. She suggests that although it is not usually an analytical focus for unreliable narration, the “*kind of relationship* that binds the narrator to [...] her [...] narratee” has “*effects* [...] on the assessment of the narrator’s reliability” (2005: 104; original emphasis). Hence, it “is particularly relevant to a feminist-narratological conception of unreliable narration because it can often be interpreted in a semantic way as a means of a narrative staging of questions of competence, authority, and reliability” (ibid. 98). I have used ‘relatability’ as a gendered designation of the narrator-narratee-relationship in chick lit and drawn on Lanser’s categories of status and contact to show how uncertainty (and self-deprecation in particular), deference and intimacy continue to be marked as narratorial qualities that are fraught with the historical depreciation of feminine speech. Not only does this form of contact seriously discredit the “mimetic authority” of the chick lit narrator, her chronic plotting failure that constitutes the focus of Case’s account of feminine narration is a gendered convention of ignorant stance towards the story. The persistent inconsistency between the narrators’ anticipation, planning and resolve and actual subsequent plot developments (“projective plotting”) as well as their frequent misinterpretation of story events and other characters that prevent them “from [...] mapping [...] cause and effect into a shapely and meaningful narrative” (“retrospective plotting”) may well prompt readers to opt for the unreliability hypothesis and thus ‘empower’ themselves to read against and beyond narrators’ discourse. It is certainly not a coincidence that Case associates feminine narration predominantly with diary and epistolary fiction, since both fictional genres almost by definition adopt a perspective of immediacy and immersion that necessarily divests the narrator of the temporal privilege of hindsight and the interrelated epistemic one of reflection and interpretation (see Case 1999: 39). This brings us to what I suggest is another, as yet unexamined



gendered feature of narrative discourse in chick lit that invites the interpretation of unreliability: the representation of temporality .

In her seminal study of the representation of consciousness in narrative fiction, Dorrit Cohn also sheds light on the temporal politics of autodiegetic narrative situations. More to the point, she is concerned with “dissonant” and “consonant” self-narration as two temporal modes of relationship between the narrating and the experiencing self, or narrator and character. “Dissonant self-narration” (1984: 155), which constitutes the “classical’ model of the distanced memorialist who retraces from the point of view of a later time the earlier course of his life”, presents us with more or less pronounced temporal (and epistemological) gaps between the typically more lucid, mature narrator and their earlier incarnation: “[T]he experiencing self [...] is always viewed by a narrator who knows what happened to him next, and who is free to slide up and down the time axis that connects his two selves” (ibid. 145). By contrast, “consonant self-narration” designates a relationship and attitude of the narrating toward the experiencing self that is marked by “near-cohesion” between the two; we have a “narrator who closely identifies with his past self, betraying no manner of superior knowledge” (ibid. 143). Even when story events are presented in the past and not the present tense, typically generalisation, analysis and reflection – “all manner of cognitive privilege” (ibid. 155) that would draw attention to the narrator’s hindsight – are renounced in favour of recording the dynamic of inner and outer experience, often simply “juxtaposing [happenings] in incongruous succession, without searching for causal links” (ibid. 156). Formal tense notwithstanding, key to the reading experience of consonant narration is “this quasi-annulment of the narrative distance” (ibid. 157) that eschews corrective hindsight and instead tends to be fascinated with psychological incongruities and the rapid pace, the unchecked dynamic of raw experience. As we have seen in the dinner party passage from *BJD* and as Abbott notes more generally, temporality in diary and other non-retrospective fiction is exploited for “the effect of immediacy: that is, the illusion of being there, of no gap in time between the event and the rendering of it” (1984: 28).

Two points seem important to add to Cohn’s account of consonant narration when applied to chick lit.²³ The first is that the erasure of narrative distance and its repercussions for narrative authority come with greater historical baggage for feminine

²³ Even the most superficial survey of chick lit novels will reveal that present-tense narration is dominant in the genre (see also Miyahara 2009: 252-53). It can, therefore, be considered in line with – or perhaps even at the popular forefront of – the trend noted by Carolin Gebauer that “the fictional present has become a popular aesthetic feature of women’s literature” in the twenty-first century. In the limited space of this article, I am trying to heed her call that “[i]t would be an interesting endeavor to (re-)investigate, through the lens of feminist narratology, the functional potential of the present tense with respect to concepts such as narrative authority (cf. Lanser 1992) or gender-inflected unreliable narration (cf. Allrath 2005)” (2021: 308).



than masculine narrators. Susan Lanser (1981: 198) posits a tentative connection between what Genette calls “simultaneous narration”, a usually present-tense mode of close coincidence of narrated time and the time of narration, and a narrator’s psychological stance of strong “affinity” or “involvement with the various subjects (events, objects, places, and especially personae) which constitute the story world” (ibid. 202). This is not insignificant in view of the persistent gendered associations in Western culture of physical closeness with ‘too much’ emotional involvement at the expense of a detached, rational perspective and hence interpretive authority. In this vein, Gaby Allrath summarises linguistic properties of the narrator’s speech that put his/her reliability at risk as those that “mark his/her high degree of emotional involvement in the narrative” (2005: 90). The vital point here is not whether such descriptions of unreliability as ‘unhealthy’, ‘excessive’ emotional immersion themselves perpetuate essentialist gender norms, but the fact that they are still out there for immediate cultural mobilisation, whether by narratologists or non-academic readers. Secondly, Lanser (1981: 198) adds “the pace of the narration” as the other dimension (besides the relation between narrated time and the time of narration) of a narrator’s temporal stance toward the story world. As for the pace of contemporary popular narratives, Diane Negra speaks of a distinctive “postfeminist temporality” which comes to define “female adulthood as a state of chronic temporal crisis” (2009: 47). Women’s lives in postfeminist cultural and media texts “are regularly conceived of as timestarved, women themselves are overworked, rushed, harassed, subject to their ‘biological clocks,’ etc.” (Tasker and Negra 2007: 10). Negra argues that this is emblematic of a broader cultural temporal shift characterised by an extension of the relentless ‘efficiency’, short-termism and general sense of time anxiety reigning in neoliberal corporate culture to all domains of life. Under this temporal regime, “even those whose daily lives are only indirectly structured by institutional affiliations begin to convert to this sense of time as a threat, sometimes directly adopting institutional techniques of productivity and time management” (Negra 2009: 47-48). Although the pervading sense of time crisis is by no means restricted to the feminine experience of neoliberal culture, Negra contends that it is nonetheless gendered because of its coupling with a neoconservative streak that places heightened emphasis on (feminine) conformity with the various stages of the heteronormative life course. “[T]ime panic” (ibid. 47) haunts hegemonic femininity from the edges of representability as “crisis and fulfilment in virtually all of these life stages center upon the discovery of personal destiny, the securing of a romantic partner and motherhood, and the negotiation of the problem of paid work (seldom its rewards)” (ibid.).²⁴

²⁴ With regard to time panic as a gendered experience in postfeminist cultural texts, Negra makes the intriguing observation that “[w]omen are depicted as particularly beset by temporal problems that may frequently be resolved through minimization of their ambition and reversion to a more essential femininity. That reversion is often expressed through corporeal concepts and procedures” (Negra 2009:



Both dimensions of temporality in chick lit, simultaneous or consonant narration and the portrayal of time panic impair the narrator's ability for detached reflexivity, interpretation of past events and foresight of future developments – and hence literally deprive her of the authority to put things into perspective vis-à-vis the narratee. Lorna Martens excellently summarises the connection between such temporalities and the potential unreliability of a narrator. For all the immediacy and vivacity in the presentation of the narrator's sentiments that they make possible, at the same time they “make it exceptionally easy for an author to present a deluded or ‘unreliable’ narrator – one whose insights are undermined by a dissenting second voice, such as the voice of the implied author, or the reader's common sense, or of dramatic irony in the plot” (1985: 37).

Conclusion

I have argued here that the girlfriend gaze as a well-rehearsed cultural template exacerbates the historically deplorably stable questioning of women's mimetic authority because it fosters a female readership's inclination to critically, competitively evaluate other women's success or failure at becoming a ‘good’ postfeminist subject. Not only do chick lit plots and discursive strategies perennially represent the out-of-control situation of their narrator-protagonists, they often hold them out as unaware of that literally unbecoming situation for any neoliberal self-entrepreneur. Self-deception has the gravity of original sin in neoliberal culture because its antonym, unflinching self-knowledge, is at the heart of any successful work on and transformation of the self-as-project. “Reflexive modernization” (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994) neatly expresses the sociological consensus that the capacity for “extended self-reflexivity” (Adams 2003: 222) is crucial to processes of identity formation in post-traditional, (late) modern societies where individual identity has been unmoored from culturally fixed positions and the “relatively rigid boundaries to the options for one's self-understanding” (ibid.). Giddens writes that while “the reflexive monitoring of behaviour” has probably always been “expected by all ‘competent’ members of society of others”, the “self today is for everyone a reflexive project – a more or less continuous interrogation of past, present and future” (Giddens qtd. ibid.). Although neoliberal psychological theories have arguably shifted emphasis to its economic, entrepreneurial ‘cousins’ rational calculation and strategic assessment, reflexivity – reviewing past, monitoring present, and realigning future behaviour with the insights gained – as a cognitive process and a moral

48). The ubiquitous “narrative of adjusted ambition” or “downshifting plot” (ibid. ch. 4) dramatises precisely this reversion of the stressed-out, urban-dwelling, ‘brainy’ career woman into a more corporeal, essentially feminine version of herself, often in a rural context and/or in connection to ‘rediscovering’ domestic feminine crafts and skills.



obligation still forms the core of that reformed conception of self, too. Rather than seeing others' bodies transformed into erotic capital, as Winch's original formulation of the girlfriend gaze and the gynaepicon has it, I have tried to show that the girlfriend gaze penetrating the chick lit narrator's self-deception about her failure to take proper control – or care – of herself takes pleasure in the unfolding of a narrative that sets this self on the path to becoming a better neoliberal subject. Akin to the *aesthetic* labour on the celebrity body that is under intense surveillance from the other girlfriends, the gerundival, “belabored” self (McGee 2005: 14) is watched over for the success or failure of her *psychological* labour. Radstone sees the description and performance of “becomingness” as the defining feature of the confession as a practice of penitence as well as a literary narrative: “At the heart of the diegetic movement of the confession is a subject on his or her way, a subject ‘becoming’, a subject characterised, indeed, by this forward movement towards becoming someone identical with yet markedly different from his or her former self” (2006: 171). Prerequisite to this reformed becoming is the “release from self-deception” (Marcus 2007: 209), which is, contrary to the rather static, binary conception of unreliable versus reliable narrators in literary criticism, “not a constant state of mind or a final stage, but a mental process that is always *transitional and dynamic*” (ibid. 208; original emphasis). This romance of resilience, the postfeminist variant of the popular domestic romance, with the spectacle of self-transformation at its heart is the master plot imposed on chick lit narrators; it is a plot not of their own making, but the girlfriends see it coming and know it is what needs to happen for the narrator-girlfriend to eventually come into her ideal postfeminist own.

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