

Sky Hirschcron

Book Review: *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity* edited by Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker



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Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity, a compilation edited by Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, serves as a companion piece to Negra and Tasker's 2007 compilation, *Interrogating Postfeminism*, couching its critique of postfeminist culture in the context of recession narratives in film, television, and literature. *Interrogating Postfeminism* dismantles the workings of narratives that, while investing women with the outward trappings of socioeconomic agency, still retain normative constructions of race, femininity, and consumerism as fulcra for self-actualization. *Gendering the Recession* applies this theoretical baseline to a deeply problematized recession narrative premised on *The Atlantic* writer Hanna Rosin's 2010 article "The End of Men." Rosin's piece suggests that men's recession-era losses entail commensurate gains for women; as Negra and Tasker observe in their introduction, this line of argumentation "[neglects] the ongoing exclusion of women from key realms of power."¹ Collectively, the essays in *Gendering the Recession* situate the concerns of its predecessor

in a present day both ripe for post-postfeminist critique, and profoundly changed, enmeshed in an epochal discourse that both excavates and rehashes the pitfalls of postfeminism. Negra and Tasker achieve the difficult feat of providing the reader with a diverse array of politically committed, intellectually rigorous perspectives, while centralizing them around a single premise: that ways the recession have been discussed have played a key role in foregrounding the individual and obfuscating the forces contributing to the ongoing disenfranchisement of women in realms of power. While the compilation is not divided into subsections, multiple pieces nonetheless explore themes like masculinity in crisis (Sarah Banet-Weiser and Hamilton Carroll), makeover narratives (Pamela Thoma and Elizabeth Nathanson), and documentary representation (Anikó Imre, Sinéad Molony and Hannah Hamad). Several essays in *Gendering the Recession* directly examine the recurrence of Rosin's narrative in contemporary media, and its privileging of individual achievement

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at the expense of institutional criticism. Suzanne Leonard's "Escaping the Recession" postulates that Rosin's formulation "[mobilizes] resentment toward women at large."² Leonard does an excellent job of illuminating the misleading undercurrents of "The End of Men," observing that "the fastest-growing jobs are concentrated mostly in low-paying service industries."³ Thoma's "What Julia Knew" notes how the "social anxieties" Rosin addresses, about the disruption of traditional socioeconomic gender relations, registers in media in terms of reconstruction, using the example of the protagonist's desire "for a traditionalist gender division of labor" in *Eat Pray Love*.³ Collectively, Leonard and Thoma illustrate how Rosin's argument both conceals and influences hegemonic culture.

Isabel Molina-Guzmán and Nathanson confront the implicit whiteness of the newly empowered recession-era woman, foregrounding race in their exploration of televisual narrative and fashion blogging tropes. Molina-Guzmán's "'Latina Wisdom' in 'Postrace' Recession Media" makes a persuasive connection between historical and fictional narrative, using the "narrative of white male disenfranchisement"⁴ surrounding Sonia Sotomayor's appointment to the Supreme Court in 2009 to contextualize *Modern Family*'s Gloria. In Molina-Guzmán's view, the character alternately "[disrupts] discourses of resentment" and embodies a "nuanced representation of Latinidad"⁵ through her navigation of complex sensitivities with the show's white gay male couple, Cameron and Mitchell. By using YouTube makeup tutorials and Michelle Phan's entrepreneurial success story as a case study, Nathanson takes a more straightforward critical stance than Molina-Guzmán, exploring the imbrication of new media and consumption in "Dressed for Economic Distress." Nathanson argues that new platforms, rather than promoting progressive collaboration, generate avenues for "participation that constitutes fashion as a site of productive consumption."⁶ While Twitter and Facebook are curiously absent in *Gendering the Recession*, these contributions are clearly situated in today's vibrant social media landscape and its rapid-fire proliferation of intersecting activist movements.

Banet-Weiser and Carroll sidestep the trope of the empowered recession-era woman to examine its counterpart, the male worker in

crisis, respectively, in the realms of advertising and literature. Banet-Weiser's "We Are All Workers" examines advertisers' valorization of the "individual authentic worker"⁷ as imbued with gendered and racial meaning, affirming the male as "primary breadwinner"⁸ and "[celebrating] a specific kind of whiteness."⁹ Carroll's "Stuck Between Meanings," in a somewhat adulatory mode, uses Jess Walter's *The Financial Lives of the Poets* and Sam Lipsyte's *The Ask* as models for novels' "self-aware narratives of masculine disempowerment."¹⁰ While Carroll's literary analysis defers to authorial intelligence and Banet-Weiser decidedly does not, both critique an overriding narrative of disempowered maleness.

Molony, Hamad and Imre hone in on exploitative and exclusionary practices in documentary and reality television. In "House and Home: Structuring Absences in Post-Celtic Tiger Documentary," Molony highlights the systematic reductiveness with which Irish womanhood is conveyed in the documentary *His and Hers*, observing that despite its inclusion of seventy women, the film allows "no room for historical change, no space for diversity, difference or disruption."¹¹ Similarly, in "Fairy Jobmother to the Rescue," Hamad identifies the reality show *Fairy Jobmother*'s use of the "disingenuous rhetoric of choice and empowerment," and its "[sidestepping of] any imperative to confront the entrenched inequalities of gender, class and race" in supposedly confronting recessionary culture in the UK.¹² Imre's "How Long Can the Party Last?" explores how *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* disguises racism and classism by couching its images in "political neutrality and educational intent," via universalizing symbols of wedding culture.¹³ Each author shows that, beyond entrenched fictional structures, gendered recession-era narratives manifest in the methodical arrangement of documentary images.

Gendering the Recession would serve a variety of classes well: while Leonard's essay, a broad overview of the book's focus, is appropriate for an undergraduate class on gender studies or critical theory, more specific essays may function better in the context of graduate courses on subjects like Latina/Latino studies (Molina-Guzmán) and documentary ethics (Molony). Carroll's "Stuck Between Meanings," Banet-Weiser's "We Are All Workers," and Imre's "How Long Can the Party

Last?” are particularly relevant to related fields like, respectively, literature, men’s studies, and Eastern European studies. The compilation is particularly successful at splintering a cohesive critical project into several discrete lines of inquiry, illuminating its premises in all their complexity.

Sky Hirschcron recently completed his M.A. in Critical Studies at USC’s School of Cinematic Arts. His research interests include Argentine and Romanian cinema, and authorship in contemporary TV comedy.

Notes

1. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, “Introduction,” in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 22.
2. Suzanne Leonard, “Escaping the Recession,” in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 40.
3. *Ibid.*, 38.
4. Pamela Thoma, “What Julia Knew,” in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 121.
5. Isabel Molina-Guzmán’s “Latina Wisdom’ in ‘Postrace’ Recession Media,” in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 61-62.
6. *Ibid.*, 77-78.
7. Elizabeth Nathanson, “Dressed for Economic Distress,” in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 142.
8. Sarah Banet-Weiser, “We Are All Workers,” in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 93.
9. *Ibid.*, 82.
10. *Ibid.*, 89.
11. Hamilton Carroll, “Stuck Between Meanings,” in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 204.
12. Sinéad Molony “House and Home: Structuring Absences in Post-Celtic Tiger Documentary,” in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 193.
13. Aniko Imre, “How Long Can the Party Last?,” in *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in the Age of Austerity*, eds. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 258.