The Staging of Agency in *Girls Gone Wild*

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This paper addresses the ambivalence produced by *Girls Gone Wild* (GGW) as both text and social practice by interrogating the ways in which it functions hegemonically by staging an effect of agency. I draw on Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque as a means to examine how contradictory spatio-temporal contexts of GGW function as spaces that offer the opportunity to momentarily transgress—yet simultaneously reify—white, bourgeois norms of femininity. The videos reinforce a neoliberalist mentality of personal responsibility through the inclusion of the consent—and dissent—processes on camera. After analyzing how postfeminist discourses emphasizing “individual choice” justify GGW as a mode of female empowerment, I turn to a complementary textual analysis of GGW’s role-reversal counterpart, *Guys Gone Wild* (2004), in an effort to show the ways in which this “mirror image” text ultimately reinforces the structure of exploitation in the original.

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Just about any night of the week, night owls with basic cable are likely to stumble upon scenes of partying college students coupled with the pulsating dance music soundtrack that characterizes the ubiquitous infomercial for *Girls Gone Wild* (GGW), the direct-to-video series whose signature images are of college-aged women exposing their bodies, to varying degrees, in public settings. The brainchild of 32-year-old media entrepreneur Joe Francis, the series originated out of unused footage from amateur porn producers, TV news cameramen who had shot nudity during Spring
Break assignments, or random tourists who captured exposed bodies with hand-held cameras (Grigoriadis, 2002). Compiling the images onto a reel, by 1998 Francis had produced his first GGW video. With $50,000 in cash advances from his credit cards, he launched his first infomercial on cheap, late-night cable airtime. The initial products were so successful that Francis began to deploy his own camera crews to capture gratuitous nudity on tape. Soon, thanks to regulatory changes in the television industry and subsequent successful infomercials (see Mayer, 2005), GGW became a household name. Now after eight years of production, over $100 million in direct-mail sales, and the release of at least 80 different videos (Eldredge, 2004), the popularity of the series suggests a continual pool of women fueling this media venture in exchange for little more than face-time on camera and a GGW silk-screened tank top.\(^1\) It is difficult not to level a charge of exploitation against the GGW operation. Most participants go home with only a t-shirt while its production company, Mantra Entertainment, banks millions and Francis boasts of his two mansions, a ski retreat, and two jets (Navarro, 2004). Yet a majority of the women featured on the videos and interviewed in the popular press describe their experience with GGW as “freeing” (Navarro, 2004), inconsequential (“I just don’t see what the problem is,” quoted in Grigoriadis, 2002, p. 53), pleasurable and “just having fun” (Lofaro, 2005, p. C1), and even “empowering” (Daum, 2004; see also Edgers, 2003; Garcia, 2003; Leahy, 2003; Levy, 2005). What accounts for the apparent discrepancy between this ostensibly obvious structure of exploitation and the self-reported personal accounts of choice and empowerment provided by GGW experience?

Popular press articles have similar queries about GGW. Headlines ask, “Why have these girls gone wild?” (Daum, 2004) and “What’s in it for these women?” (Lofaro, 2005). Journalist Ariel Levy’s recent book, Female Chauvinist Pigs (2005), opens with an exposé of GGW, based on personal observation and interviews with production teams and female participants. The consensus of such accounts is that GGW is both emblematic and instigator of the larger trend toward the “porno-ization of society” (Levy, 2005; for academic accounts of this cultural turn, see Mayer, 2005; McNair, 2002). I do not necessarily disagree that GGW can be taken as evidence of the mainstreaming of porn in U.S. popular media. Nonetheless, little attention has been paid to how the actual GGW videos—as well as the journalistic accounts of the enterprise—function as media texts. Therefore, this textual analysis of the GGW videos and popular press accounts interrogates the ways in which the representations of GGW both on- and off-screen function hegemonically to transform exploitation into consent. Specifically, I examine the first three volumes of GGW’s Endless Spring Break series, all released in 2003, because Spring Break-themed videos are most prevalent and the series’ launch date is contemporary with the majority of the mainstream press accounts about GGW. Following Foucault’s (1978) assertion that “power is tolerable only on the condition that it mask a substantial part of itself” and that “its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” (p. 86), I contend that GGW can be viewed as a site in which three sets of discourses converge to produce an effect of agency. First, I draw on Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque as a means to examine the ways in which the contradictory
spatio-temporal contexts of GGW function as spaces that offer the opportunity to momentarily transgress—yet simultaneously reify—white, bourgeois norms of femininity. Second, I scrutinize the ways in which the videos reinforce a neoliberalist mentality of personal choice and responsibility through the inclusion of the consent—and dissent—processes on camera. Third, I analyze the ways in which postfeminist discourses emphasizing “individual choice” inform and justify GGW as a mode of female empowerment. Finally, I turn to a complementary textual analysis of GGW’s role-reversal counterpart, Guys Gone Wild (2004), in an effort to show the ways in which this “contrasting” text ultimately reinforces the structure of exploitation in the original. By strategically evoking components of these discourses, representations of GGW both on- and off-screen successfully mask its exploitative power by staging an effect of agency.

**Privileged Subjectivities, Sanctioned Spaces**

As much as GGW emphasizes its “real girls” on its infomercials and website (www.girlsgonewild.com), this articulation of “reality” is predicated on a white, heterosexual, middle-class subject. GGW features very few women of color, and this conspicuous lack of racial or ethnic diversity has been publicly criticized. For instance, popular African American rapper Snoop Dogg, who at one time served as a GGW celebrity spokesman and was featured in his own version, Girls Gone Wild: Doggy Style (2002), has refused to participate in any further ventures with the series, because so few women of color have been featured (“Strip Videos Too White,” 2003). GGW evokes heteronormativity in a couple of ways. Not only are the GGW infomercials aired during times and on channels geared toward the profitable 18–34 male viewer but for a woman to perform a striptease for an all-male camera crew and/or kiss other women is only titillating under the presumption of a heterosexual norm (Mayer, 2005). Men, conversely, are not allowed to participate actively on camera.²

Joe Francis characterizes the “typical” GGW participant as “innocent” and “the girl next door” (Leahy, 2003, p. W16). If these are the girls next door, however, Francis lives in a homogeneous neighborhood. GGW production manager Mia Leist explains, “Joe’s looking for 10s. . . You know, 100 to 110 pounds, big boobs, blond, blue eyes, ideally no piercing or tattoos” (quoted in Levy, 2004). The women featured on the commercial tapes are not only almost always white, but also thin and firm—markers of not only a culturally (sexually) desirable body, but also a classed body, one that signifies adherence to a bourgeois “correct attitude” towards fitness and appearance (Bordo, 1993). Indeed, middle-class status is inferred from the ways in which the description of the Endless Spring Break tapes consistently refers to “hottest, sexiest college girls” (www.girlsgonewild.com). Most women featured on the tapes self-identify as college students or even name the college or university they attend. In addition, the bodies showcased on GGW are appropriately disciplined in their careful ornamentation and self-care. They are typically free of excessive tattoos and funky piercings; almost all are exceptionally suntanned, wear make-up, dress in
trendy—if revealing—clothes, and are usually free of body hair. This attentiveness to self-care and ornamentation is a disciplinary practice that produces a “proper” feminine body (Bartky, 1988).

Indeed, this conformity to appropriate norms of a middle-class, heterosexual femininity is exactly what Francis sees as the lynchpin to the series’ success. He explains: “A lot of guys aren’t turned on by nasty sex chicks with tattoos and piercings, and they’re not turned on by the airbrushed, unattainable Playboy girls either. . . . What we offer are girls you can touch. You can touch our girls!” (quoted in Grigoriadis, 2002, p. 52, original emphasis). Francis told another interviewer, “Our woman is a young woman who is very innocent and wouldn’t typically pose for anything” (quoted in Leahy, 2003, p. W16). A young Alabama woman in the first Endless Spring Break video (2003) exemplifies this characterization. Having quickly agreed to remove her bikini in exchange for the GGW tank top, she suddenly seems to realize she’s naked in public. “I’m fuckin’ gonna be naked on TV. Shit,” she states with a laugh, and grabs the tank top to cover herself. “I’m actually a good girl.” Levy (2005) profiles a woman who embodies the “bad girl” antics in the “good girl” body. After masturbating for the cameras in a Miami club, “Crazy Debbie” says, “People watch the videos and think the girls in them are real slutty, but I’m a virgin! I just think this is fun” (p. 10). The suggestion is that these women need not rely on sexuality to make a living. Rather, they are the “girls next door” who are assumed to adhere to heteronormative, middle-class standards of sexual propriety—at least most of the time.

By emphasizing party environments and the women’s middle-class status, participation in GGW is staged as a temporary breach of heterosexual and middle-class norms. As Jolles (2003) explains, “[T]he middle-class represents not only a cultural station but a lifestyle, as the crystallization of a set of behaviors, dispositions, preferences and choices that function hegemonically to suggest its neutrality and universality” (p. 166). This middle-class lifestyle ostensibly includes the entitlement to access to consequence-free spaces that legitimize certain performances and allow for a departure from these normalized standards. These times and spaces can be understood through Bakhtin’s (1968) notion of the “carnivalesque,” that is, a temporary liberation from the established order, a suspension of (bourgeois) cultural norms and prohibitions. While carnivalesque practices retain the critical and cultural tools of the dominant classes, these very tools are utilized to degrade and mock forms of high culture; they revel in this contradiction (Rowe, 1995). The theory of the carnival illustrates a type of spectacle characterized by bodily pleasure in opposition to morality, discipline, and social control. Thus, at such events, overtly sexual displays of the body are not only commonplace, but also deemed acceptable and constitutive features of the overall environment.

Because GGW usually takes place in carnivalesque environments, it can position itself as a form of mediated voyeurism, a chance for titillating peeks into bastions of drunken antics and general debauchery. Indeed, the majority of the videos available for purchase on the GGW website are compiled of footage from such carnivalesque events as Spring Break and Mardi Gras, spaces and times well-known for drawing
large, partying crowds and fostering risqué behavior. Events such as flashing, wet t-shirt contests, and “hot body” competitions have been considered rites of passage at both Spring Break and Mardi Gras since the mid-1970s (Grigoriadis, 2002; Maticka-Tyndale, Herold, & Mewhinney, 1998; Mayer, 2005). In one of the few academic studies of Spring Break and sexual behavior, a 1998 study reiterated the common assumption that these locales foster casual and blatant sexual activity that falls outside many students’ everyday behavior:

Activities on spring break . . . were described as exceptions to everyday experience—outside of usual standards, expectations, norms. Students used phrases such as “what happens in Daytona, stays in Daytona,” “nothing that happens here comes home” and “nothing counts.” They portrayed an atmosphere in which the usual rules and moral codes did not apply. Students provided detailed descriptions of how some had behaved “totally out of character” or in ways that “they never would at home.” These illustrations and the results of the statistical analysis support the picture of spring break as the environment in which personal codes are temporarily suspended. (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 1998, p. 262)

In addition, this type of behavior is often encouraged by a peer group, whether informally or more overtly in the form of a group pact. Therefore, with a heightened level of peer pressure, coupled with an atmosphere of perpetual bawdy activity situated outside everyday norms, Spring Break becomes an opportunity for college students to temporarily step outside typical middle-class boundaries with few social repercussions.

Many of the young women who appear on the GGW videos express the “what happens here, stays here” attitude afforded through the carnivalesque aspect of Spring Break. Twice during Girls Gone Wild: Endless Spring Break (2003), revelers commented directly about the opportunity to bare their bodies while on vacation. “Why not?” says one woman as she lifts her bikini top. “It’s Girls Gone Wild, it’s once a year, it’s Daytona!” Later, another woman strips fully naked for the camera, shakes her head, and laughs, “Only in South Padre!” Natalie, an 18-year-old Spring Breaker featured in the opening of Endless Spring Break Volume 2 (2003), describes her participation in a dance contest to a GGW cameraman:

I’m on [South] Padre Spring Break, baby. I just like to have fun. I was so drunk, I was like, I don’t give a fuck about any of those guys. I didn’t even notice anyone was there, I was just [onstage] like, shakin’ my thing.

These sentiments acknowledging the carnivalesque atmosphere echo in popular press articles. As one participant explained after peeling off her shirt for the cameras: “I just don’t see what the problem is. . . . I’m not going to be at clubs with my husband when I’m seventy. My motto has always been that life is short” (quoted in Grigoriadis, 2002, p. 53). Having initially told an on-site reporter she would never participate in such antics, another woman ended up flashing her breasts by the end of the night. “It was the heat of the moment,” she explained to justify her change of heart (quoted in Garcia, 2003, p. E1). The impression presented both within the videos and in journalistic accounts of GGW is that such sexual display is an innocent rite of passage for white, middle-class youth; swept away in the atmosphere of partying and revelry,
in a place where normal social consequences and perceptions are ignored, they can “go wild” in a way they wouldn’t at home.

Because GGW is situated in carnivalesque environments that already engender a paradox of social transgression—simultaneously breaking the rules yet reifying them—“going wild” is thus a relative term. On one hand, the partying, loose sexual mores, and general debauchery that take place during Spring Break, Mardi Gras, and, apparently, any trip to Las Vegas,³ do transgress many bourgeois norms. Indeed, given the intense disciplinary constraints under which many young women operate to sustain social acceptability (see Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993), these times/places may be among the rare places to experiment as “unruly women,” eschewing traditional norms of femininity with few negative social consequences (see Rowe, 1995). However, the idea that these women are subversively “going wild” is ultimately undercut by these environments, which can serve a socially conservative function as cordoned off spaces/times for the middle class to let loose, but redefine themselves. In other words, the carnivalesque—be it Spring Break or Mardi Gras—is simply too much for bourgeois life to endure except as a temporary, contained spectacle (Stallybrass & White, 2000). These cultural transgressions are fleeting moments in a liminal space. Once the festival period is over and/or one is away from the carnivalesque locale, bourgeois norms and standards will be reinstated. Hence, transgressions fostered in these environments may serve to reinforce middle-class norms; as a type of policing mechanism, the carnivalesque encodes “all that which the proper bourgeois must strive not to be in order to preserve a stable and ‘correct’ sense of self” (Stallybrass & White, 2000, p. 387, original emphasis). As one Spring Breaker reflected: “[Here] you see what everyone else is about. You learn if you have a lot of class, and they [girls participating in wet t-shirt contests or GGW] don’t” (quoted in Daum, 2004, p. 230).

Because carnivalesque environments are already construed as appropriate spaces and times for excessive and deviant behavior, the transgressiveness of “going wild” captured on GGW is neutralized. Moreover, the party atmosphere reinforces the perceived innocence of the enterprise. “It’s not like we’re creating this,” claimed production manager Mia Leist while her crews were working in Miami Beach. “This is happening whether we’re here or not. Our founder was just smart enough to capitalize on it” (Levy, 2004). Even the rhetoric of the series’ brand name lends itself to this interpretation. As Pollet and Hurwitz (2004) note, the phrase “Girls gone wild” “seems to claim innocence, as in, “Hey don’t blame me! I happened upon these girls, and, dang, they gone wild!” (p. 23). Though GGW may not have created these carnivalesque spectacles, it functions as a mechanism that incites them. After all, according to Francis, approximately seven out of 10 women approached by crews are willing to take their shirts off and/or perform sexual acts when asked, “Do any of you girls want a t-shirt?” (Edgers, 2003). However, the “what happens here, stays here” mantra of the carnivalesque does not seem to reconcile with an agreement to expose oneself for a potential audience of millions, providing an image that could circulate long after the trip is over. Thus, GGW showcases more than women temporarily “breaking the rules” or pushing boundaries. Rather, the text(s) of GGW
prominently feature an active seeking-out of the cameras by women who appear to “go wild” under their own desire, for their own ends, and by their own consent, thereby successfully producing an effect of agency.

“Everybody is Doing Everything by Their Own Free Choice”

Michel Foucault (1978) traces the incitement to discourses of sexuality during the Victorian era, as well as the establishment of confession as a technique for producing truth. As Foucault explains, the “obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us” (p. 60). Moreover, sex is a privileged theme. This compulsory sexuality is prevalent in the current “strip tease culture” (McNair, 2002) of sexual confession and self-revelation that has infiltrated modern media, primarily in the forms of amateur Internet pornography and reality television. Specifically, McNair (2002) explains that “strip tease culture frequently involves ordinary people talking about sex and their own sexualities, revealing intimate details of their feelings and their bodies in the public sphere”—in short, demonstrating what he calls the “democratization of desire” (p. 88). Andrejevic (2002) argues that the promise of interactivity in the reality TV era functions as an invitation to engage in the “work of being watched” in “the 21st century digital confessional: an incitement to self-disclosure as a form of self-expression and individuation” (p. 237). The opportunity to flash one’s breast on camera serves as a moment of interactivity, self-expression, and self-disclosure, all in one.

As an artifact of a media era that emphasizes interactivity and self-disclosure, GGW not only reproduces itself by generating a continuous labor pool of docile bodies voluntarily submitting to surveillance (see Andrejevic, 2002), but it encourages an understanding of these practices as desirable, pleasurable opportunities for self-expression and self-gratification—as acts of individual choice. Central to this staging of agency is that almost every scene of a GGW video features the consent process on camera. Most scenes conclude with the same rituals. The cameraman asks the woman how old she is, and every participant shown claims to be over the age of 18. Next, each woman is asked whether she knows what GGW is and whether the footage can be used; nearly all respond with an eager “yes!” Admittedly, many of the women featured on GGW appear to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs. On the videos, slurred speech and wobbly posture sometimes allude to inebriation. Some are actually holding beer cans or sipping cocktails, while others self-report that they are drunk or “wasted.” Jessie, a giggling flasher from Endless Spring Break Volume I (2003) said, “Thank God I’m drunk,” before pulling down her jeans to expose her backside. Shannon, a GGW participant profiled in The New York Times, was quoted as being “pretty drunk” when she flashed and claimed to be “pretty sure I’ll see a downside tomorrow morning” (quoted in Navarro, 2004, p. 1).

Even if a woman were to wake up with second thoughts about her appearance on GGW, the recorded consent process tends to trump complaints from disgruntled women—sober or otherwise. Three women in Louisiana filed suit in 2001, claiming
their rights to privacy had been violated because their half-naked images were being sold without their consent. The judge dismissed the case, saying:

It seems to me that there was consent ... because when you do it [expose your body] on Bourbon Street or in a club and you know there is an individual with a video, Certainly you must expect that this is going to be shown all over the place. (“Girls Gone Wild Producer Wins Lawsuit,” 2002)

The above quote is telling. The judge's comments allude to—and privilege—the pervasiveness of digital media and the ease of distribution of such images/footage, dismissing the women’s charge of exploitation in favor of the rights of the amateur or professional videographer. This dismissal reflects a neoliberalist mentality, which could be described as “a diffused approach to the ‘regulation of conduct’ that escapes association with a top-down agenda, and is instead presented as the individual’s ‘own desire’” (Ouellette, 2004, p. 233). Hence, the judge fixates on the women's initial choice to flash rather than their charge of exploitation against GGW. This attitude was reflected in the public opinion presented in a similar case regarding Florida State University student Becky Gritzke, whose breast-baring during Mardi Gras was featured in various promotions for GGW. She (unsuccessfully) sued in hopes of receiving compensation for her performance. A New Orleans newspaper reporter noted:

Local bootleg tapes fly off the shelves into the hands of salacious consumers from all over the country, so be advised: Now that you know where you may end up if you flash some flesh, well ... let’s be careful out there. (Rose, 2002, p. L1)

This illuminates Virilio’s (1995) explanation of the term “mediatized,” which is to be “stripped of one’s immediate rights” once an image is captured or “mediated” (p. 6). Once these women were “caught” on camera, the image was out of their control.

The neoliberalist idea evoked here is that subjecting oneself to mediatization—to be captured on film—constitutes consent. Although the upholding of the mediatization process has managed to keep Francis out of legal trouble, he has since enforced the rule that his staff obtain signed releases from the girls—“because getting them is too easy” (Grigoriadis, 2002). As Francis claims, “Everybody is doing everything by their own free choice” (quoted in Navarro, 2004, p. 1). Leist, the lone female GGW employee, explained it this way to a journalist:

I’ve had discussions with friends who were like, “This is so degrading to females.” I feel if you walk up to someone all sly and say, “Come on, get naked, show me your box,” that’s one thing. But if you have women coming up to you, begging to get on camera, and they’re having fun and being sexy, then that’s another story. (Quoted in Levy, 2004)

The image most often depicted on GGW certainly suggests that not only do these women willingly agree to participate in the spectacle, but often specifically seek it out for a variety of reasons—for the titillating pleasure of male attention, self-expression, or even the perceived potential for media exposure.

The illicitness of exposing one’s body on camera is one element that helps constitute the GGW experience as pleasurable, and hence as potentially powerful.
Foucault (1978) explains, “Pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement” (pp. 48–49). *Girls Gone Wild* could be considered one such mechanism that successfully constructs effects of pleasure and power—in particular, not only the privilege of stepping outside one’s typical norms, but also the opportunity to revel as objects of a consuming gaze. It is the potential for the fantasy of being watched by others that provides this potent force. Žižek (2002) explains,

> Fantasy proper is not the scene itself that attracts our fascinations, but the non-existent imagined gaze observing it. . . . [T]he most elementary fantasmatic scene is not that of a fascinating scene to be looked at, but the notion of “someone out there looking at us”; it is not a dream but the notion that “we are objects in someone’s dream.” (p. 225)

While the women stripping for the cameras garner male attention from those behind the lens, who constantly praise them for having “a hot body” or “unbelievable tits,” the possibility of an appearance on the popular series—and hence, continued exposure—seems to be one motivator for stripping.

A frequent juxtaposition shown on the videos illustrates the power of the “imagined gaze”: women voluntarily flash for the camera but then show embarrassment that real-life viewers in the vicinity watch the filming. In *Endless Vol. 1* (2003), a woman effortlessly unties and removes both pieces of her bikini within seconds of being approached by the camera crew on a crowded beach. After twirling around several times, wearing nothing but a straw cowboy hat, she notices several beachgoers heading toward her. She looks down at herself and cries, “Look at me naked. . . . Everyone’s lookin’ at me. . . . Shit!” then quickly dresses. Marie from St. Louis appears to have no qualms about showing her breasts to the camera on her hotel balcony, but goes to great lengths to make sure the crew stands in front of her: “There are totally people down there,” and she doesn’t want them to see her (*Endless Vol. 1*, 2003). In both instances, stripping for the video is preferable to doing it for those in the vicinity—the presence of the camera both invites and legitimizes a public striptease. Women understand that they are the objects of a consuming gaze, and for many young women, it is titillating to break the taboo and even more thrilling to think that millions of people might see them doing it (Grigoriadis, 2002). Leist, the lone *GGW* female employee, sees the opportunity to appear on the videos as a key motivating factor: “We’re not exploiting anybody here. I know why a lot of these women do it. They want their 15 minutes of fame. They want to look sexy on camera” (quoted in Leahy, 2003, p. W16).

A closer look at recent *GGW* videos indicates that this potential for one’s famous 15 minutes is an effective tactic the series uses to perpetuate itself; “People flash for the brand” (Levy, 2004). A number of women appear to seek out the *GGW* camera crews and perform in hopes of “making the cut” for one of the videos. Carrie and Cassie from Kansas are seen at a hotel room party, ready to bare their chests for the cameras. Their swimsuit tops are already untied and dangling around their necks as
the crew makes its way into the crowded room. The women perform an explicit striptease for both the cameras and numerous cheering guests. “Do you want us to kiss?” one specifically asks, “Will that help us be on it?” (Endless Vol. 1, 2003). Another duo who indulge in a similar display tell the camera(man) that they were “looking to find you guys before we leave” (Endless Vol. 3, 2003). Rachel and Merrill, also featured on Endless Spring Break Vol. 3 (2003), are shown entering a hotel room and engaging in a 20-minute display of full nudity and explicit activity, including oral sex. Throughout their extended scene, they repeatedly ask the cameraman, “What else do you want us to do?” As they get dressed, Rachel tells the cameraman, “We want to get on Girls Gone Wild.” While tying the strings on her bikini, Merrill concurs: “Yeah, either MTV or Girls Gone Wild. We wanna be on one of them at least.” These comments indicate an awareness of the basic GGW format, but also a presumption that the sexual ante has been “upped.” Making “the cut” requires an increasing amount of nudity and girl-on-girl action. This self-direction illustrates how GGW functions as a sort of self-reproducing feedback loop. Thanks to the brand recognition from media saturation, the women featured on tape seem to know what is expected of them, just as their peers have come to understand what a coveted GGW tank top signifies. In many cases, participants squeal with delight after successfully “earning” their tank top, holding it up as if it were a trophy (Leahy, 2003).

As the brand name and enterprise grows in popularity and mainstream exposure—such celebrities as Justin Timberlake wear GGW hats, and Brad Pitt reportedly gave GGW as presents to the cast and crew of a recent movie (Levy, 2005)—the submission to “mediatization” may have some material payoffs. GGW is working to synergize its brand name through several cross-media projects, including music, movies, a clothing line, and even a chain of restaurants. It hosted regional talent contests and had “representatives” featured on the E! network series Wild On (Levy, 2004; Navarro, 2004; Smalley, 2003). One woman told the camera crew she would flash because “I wanna work for Girls Gone Wild—I saw them on E!” (Endless Vol. 2, 2003). Given these circumstances, perhaps one young woman wasn’t totally delusional when she explained her rationale for flashing a crowd at a GGW event: “We’re looking to be famous!” (quoted in Garcia, 2003, p. E1). The series’ self-referential moments not only reinforce its popularity and notoriety among youth culture, but reinforce an effect of agency for the participants. The inclusion of these scenes depicts an active search for the GGW cameras, and an awareness of both the cultural practice and commercial name. These women appear to know what they are getting into and they actively choose to participate. This ultimately serves to highlight the discourse of personal choice so central to this text.

To help further legitimize and reinforce the appearance of “choice,” most videos contain at least one segment in which women resist or outright reject the appeals of the camera crews. Several scenes included in the videos reinforce this assertion of individual autonomy and control over the amount of self-exposure. At times, the cameramen are refused outright; in Endless Spring Break Volume 1 (2003), the camera literally zooms in on a tall blonde with large breasts in a red bikini. “What about
you?” the cameraman asks, “You have such amazing breasts.” But the woman just shakes her head and points to her short, dark-haired companion, who goes topless instead. Two other women are shown approaching the cameras on the beach. One tries to bargain: “Can we get a t-shirt? All we gotta do is kiss. But we want the T-shirt first.” Although the girls ultimately comply and kiss each other in order to “earn” their tank tops, the cameraman presses them to show more skin. “Come on, it’s Spring Break,” he says. The girls have none of it. “We don’t take off shit!” replies one of the women, who subsequently grabs her friend and runs off, shirt in tow (Endless Vol. 1, 2003).

Thus, the inclusion of both consent and dissent scenes strengthens GGW’s hegemonic function by fostering an impression that no one is forced to participate. GGW produces docile bodies through a dispersion of power onto consenting individuals. Foucault wrote in Discipline and Punish (1977):

> He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (p. 202–203)

This emphasis on the option again suggests participation is empowering rather than exploitative. As the privileged player in this power hierarchy, GGW effectively ensures perpetual victory and absolves itself from responsibility, as desire—the choice—to partake in this form of visibility is successfully cast to the individual. Again, this evokes the neoliberalist presumption of “free will,” meaning that those individuals who fail to thrive under neoliberal conditions can be readily cast as “the author of their own misfortunes” (Rose, 1996, as quoted in Ouellette, 2004). In this way, the GGW text exemplifies a type of cultural apparatus for neoliberal forms of governance (see Hay, 2000).

Such emphasis on individual choice is further conveyed as some women shown on GGW attempt to negotiate and draw boundaries about their own level of exposure, while simultaneously appearing eager to participate. Christina, a Baylor student, balks at the cameraman’s suggestion that she show more than her breasts. “I’ve seen the tapes,” she says. “You don’t have to get naked.” Natalie looks into the camera and proclaims she knows what Girls Gone Wild is: “I’m not gonna strip for y’all, but I can flash”—and she does (Endless Vol. 2, 2003). Another scene on what appears to be a dance floor features a young woman and a male companion, who cheers in approval when she flashes the camera. But before the cameraman can say more, she grabs a shirt and coyly states, “That’s all you’re getting” (Endless, Vol. 1, 2003). A similar interaction with Nikki, a peppy and extraordinarily tan blonde in an American-flag themed bikini, takes place in what appears to be a hotel room. Complying with the typical GGW request, she flashes her breasts by flipping up her bikini top for a few seconds. However, a request from the cameraman to take off her top gives her pause. “Huh?!?” she cries with a perplexed expression, as if this aspect of the GGW practice was unknown to her. She eventually removes her bikini top, but when the cameraman asks her to pull down her bottoms, she firmly shakes her head and says, “I’m
done. . . . We’re done,” and walks out of the frame, ending the scene (Endless Vol. 1, 2003).

Perhaps the most fascinating instance of this resistance and acknowledgment of control over the degree of self-exposure occurs in a segment with three college students. The scene opens with two of them eagerly chatting with the cameraman and flashing their breasts. One explains that she wants “to be an actress. . . . I’m a theater major.” At the coaxing of the cameraman, who tells the girls it would “be really hot if you made out,” the two begin kissing and touching each other on a couch. Rather abruptly, the camera shifts its focus to a younger-looking blonde (“I’m a freshman,” she explains), who ostensibly enters the room in the middle of the makeout session. She agrees to flash her breasts. But when pushed to reveal more skin or to join the others, she says, “That’s enough. . . . I’m done,” and moves out of the frame—but apparently not completely out of the room. Later, as the kissing duo get dressed and agree to let GGW use the footage, the cameraman asks, “Can we use footage of you, too?” Surprised, the freshman states, “But I didn’t do anything.” The disembodied voice of the cameraman explains, “But you flashed. . . . Here’s a shirt.” As this woman gleefully puts on her GGW tank top, one of the makeout girls looks over at her and laments, “Aw, I wish I woulda just fuckin’ flashed” (Endless Vol. 2, 2003).

Not only do these scenes illustrate the spectrum of “going wild” activities represented by the tank top, but the inclusion of scenes that show hesitation, doubt, and even regret ultimately helps GGW deflect its exploitative practices and instead place the onus of choice and self-responsibility on the individual. The on-camera consent and dissent process featured in the GGW videos reinforces the notion of personal autonomy and individual choice. After all, one can always choose not to participate. As the texts of GGW insist, the women of GGW can “call the shots” as to how much skin they show.

Postfeminism Gone Wild

The technology of “individual choice” so emphasized in GGW is a depoliticized model more closely grounded in consumerism than political emancipation (see Cronin, 2000)—and an issue at the heart of current debates on feminism. Joe Francis once compared an appearance on GGW to feminists burning bras; he claimed his enterprise offers titillation in the guise of liberation (Pollet & Hurwitz, 2004). While GGW arguably has some potential for alignment with third wave feminism,4 the videos and press accounts more often reflect discourse bearing a stronger allegiance to a postfeminist mentality. Dow (1996) describes postfeminism as hegemonic negotiation of second-wave ideals, in which the presumption of equality for women in the public sphere has been retained. Of course, this presumption of equality is predicated racially and economically; as is the case with GGW, the figure central to postfeminist discourses is a white, heterosexual, middle-class woman. Imperative to the discourses of postfeminism is individualized choice. “Postfeminism assumes that the women’s movement took care of oppressive institutions, and that now it is up to individual women to make personal choices that simply reinforce those fundamental
social changes” (Orr, 1997, p. 34). Because they operate at the individual level, personal choices become depoliticized as matters of style/expression, with a closer resemblance to commercial choices, rather than holding a relevance to a greater political or social project. Not only have postfeminist representations used “choice” to set up an equivalency between work and family as either/or options, but they have melded meanings of choice and individual freedom to images of sexuality, in which women apparently choose to be seen as sexual objects because they are liberated enough to do so (Goldman, Heath, & Smith, 1991).

While the on-screen negotiations featuring both consent and rejection frame appearances on GGW as a matter of individual choice, the off-screen accounts quoted in the popular press more clearly emphasize a form of empowerment tied to sexuality. One participant described a GGW striptease as a “very freeing feeling” (quoted in Navarro, 2004, p. 1). Another said she encouraged her friends: “If you have a beautiful body, why can’t you share it with everyone else?” (quoted in Garcia, 2003, p. E1). This attitude of “if you’ve got it, flaunt it” emerges repeatedly. In the words of one participant, “We’re not doing it against our will in any way. Not everybody has to like it. . . . We’re not porn stars” (quoted in Garcia, 2003, p. E1). “Crazy Debbie,” the virgin GGW participant profiled by Levy (2005), said: “The body is such a beautiful thing. If a woman’s got a pretty body and she likes her body, let her show it off! It exudes confidence when people wear little clothes” (p. 9). Another contended that “if people want to judge me, it doesn’t matter” (quoted in Navarro, 2004, p. 1). Even women who do not necessarily condone the practice are hesitant to chastise their peers; “I don’t look down on any girls who are wild enough to do that. To each her own, that’s just not my style” (quoted in Garcia, 2003, p. E1). In the press accounts of these women—all of whom either performed for the cameras or had the opportunity to do so—the emphasis on autonomous consent and personal choice leaves them more likely to level criticism against other women than toward the GGW enterprise.

In the postfeminist era such answers indicate a general hesitation to decry actions involving personal choice. The phrase “it’s my choice” has become slightly distorted and “synonymous with ‘it’s a feminist thing to do’—or perhaps more precisely, ‘it’s anti-feminist to criticize my decision’” (Wood, 2004, p. 22).

None of the commentary printed in the popular press or featured on tape refers directly to feminism. Yet this insistence on personal choice and “to each her own” indicates how postfeminist discourse informs and justifies participation in GGW. For not only does GGW structure itself around a process of consent that casts responsibility onto the individual, it also structures the choice so that willingness to participate on camera is to embrace a form of sexually assertive “Girl Power” that eschews an assumed “sex negative” attitude that dominates the image of feminism in the cultural imaginary. This is akin to what feminist media critic Charlotte Brunsdon (2005) describes as a dis-identification at the heart of feminism, “arguably the single trope through which feminism is most often invoked in popular culture. . . . Rather than sisterhood, not being like that other woman is central” (p. 113). Ariel Levy’s (2005) conception of the “Female Chauvinist Pig” also illustrates the popularity of such a dis-identification:
The Female Chauvinist Pig has risen to a kind of exalted status. She is post-feminist. She is funny. She gets it. She doesn’t mind cartoonish stereotypes of female sexuality, and she doesn’t mind a cartoonishly macho response to them. Why try to beat them when you can join them? (p. 93)

In a 2004 *Glamour* magazine article, author Meghan Daum corroborates, “A lot of the women I talk to characterize their experience here [in Cancun with GGW] as ‘something I had to go through’ . . . the survival of which will turn them into stronger, confident, classier women” (p. 239). Those who do bare their bodies are cast as “confident” women who utilize their “assets,” making the appropriate choice when faced with the option of public exposure of their (ideal form of) femininity.

In this way, GGW can be viewed as an artifact of some of the pathologies of postfeminist discourse. It defers to “individual choice,” but also shows choice as representing a successful, non-contradictory unification of femininity and feminism constructed in consumer culture, in which these become “interchangeable alternatives” and feminism becomes little more than a style, easily acquired and unproblematically worn (Projansky, 2001). Like postfeminism, GGW posits itself as an outlet for “Girl Power” (indeed, this phrase is the title of one of the GGW videos). However, any potential feminist power here is undermined by an emphasis on traditional femininity and hyper-heterosexuality. Thus, GGW is a site that is emblematic of the ways in which postfeminist discourses simultaneously incorporate and purge feminism from popular culture.

**Guys Gone Wild: The “Mirror Image”?**

Perhaps the best way to end this analysis of GGW is to look briefly at what has been called the “female answer” (Weinstein, 2004) and the “mirror image of . . . Girls Gone Wild” (Lemire, 2004). In 2004, Mantra Entertainment produced *Guys Gone Wild*, an all-male version of the GGW series.5 Ostensibly, *Guys Gone Wild* is an exact gender-role reversal of the original formula, spearheaded by producer Misty Nicole, who “uses her good looks and sexy voice to charm men out of their clothing” (Weinstein, 2004, p. 47). The series uses an all-female camera crew that, as with GGW, remains behind the camera, represented only by their disembodied voices. The sole subject of *Guys Gone Wild* is young men engaging in random antics while in varying degrees of undress. In this way, *Guys Gone Wild* does initially appear to be a mirror image of its predecessor. The videos feature white, college-aged men in party environments, almost all of whom are extraordinarily muscular; their bodies show the same fastidious self-care and discipline as the female bodies of GGW. The camerawomen also follow the original’s formula by flattering and flirting with the guys to encourage them to show more of their bodies or engage in certain activities. “Very nice,” coos Misty Nicole on *Introducing . . . Guys Gone Wild* (2004), as a man drops his swim trunks for a full frontal shot. “I wanna see you take a shower! You’re gorgeous, sweetie!” she exclaims.

However, overall, the same effect is not produced. First, given that most of the footage takes place on Spring Break, most men featured on camera are already bare
chested, and thus halfway undressed at the outset. Here, “going wild” constitutes dropping or removing their shorts or pants, then “mooning” the camera with their backsides or jiggling what’s in front. Scenes usually involve a single male or a group of cackling guys. Never, in any way, are men asked to touch (let alone kiss) each other. Instead, the videos bear a stronger resemblance to David Letterman’s “Stupid Human Tricks” or fraternity hazing rituals. The emphasis is on silliness and bodily humor, rather than sexuality. Throughout *Introducing . . . Guys Gone Wild* (2004), men run down hotel hallways, attempt cartwheels and somersaults, march in a conga line, and jump on motel beds—all either naked or with their full monty covered by a sock. Perhaps the funniest—and most interactive—moment of the video occurs when camerawoman Misty asks two guys what is in their hotel refrigerator. Within minutes, (unseen) Misty and other men in the room take turns throwing the slices of bologna onto a willing participant’s backside, hoping it will stick (and eventually, it does). While the video occasionally features guys simulating stripper-style movements, *Guys Gone Wild* ultimately highlights silliness and embarrassment.

In particular, the way *Guys Gone Wild* edits out the consent and reward process underscores the importance of the insistent inclusion of this footage in GGW videos. Although a press report claims all of the men had to sign release forms and produce identification that they were at least 18 years old (Eldredge, 2004), the consent process was featured only once in the hour-long *Introducing . . . Guys Gone Wild* (2004), and the information exchange occurred before the participant did anything on camera, rather than after the fact. In addition, the men of *Guys Gone Wild* reportedly receive a camouflage *Girls Gone Wild* hat in exchange for their “performances” (Eldredge, 2004), once again reinforcing the heteronormativity of the videos—and deflecting attention back to the women’s version. However, the video does not contain scenes featuring the negotiation and exchange for this reward. Indeed, moments of hesitation on behalf of the men are rarely shown. With the exception of one shy, blonde man who sheepishly claimed, “I have nothing [muscles] to flex,” the majority of the scenes on *Guys Gone Wild* cut to action already in progress; the presumption is that they have already consented to their participation, thereby eliminating the on-camera negotiation process. With a near complete erasure of both the consent process and reward structure, and a greater emphasis on montages of humorous scenes and banal banter with the female hosts, the aesthetic of *Introducing . . . Guys Gone Wild* (2004) is similar to a music video or an R-rated version of *America’s Funniest Home Videos* rather than a mechanism of exploitation.

Instead, the impression of the men in *Guys Gone Wild* is one of ambivalence; there is little sense of desperation or even desire to appear on the videos. In fact, a couple of scenes in *Introducing . . . Guys Gone Wild* (2004) show men mocking the women who participate in GGW. One prances around, rubbing his nipples, and in a high voice mockingly whines, “I’m half naked in a black room all by myself!” Another poses in a women’s string bikini, and teasingly flips the top half as his friends chant, “Take it off! Take if off!” If there are any concerns about negative repercussions to baring it all for a potentially large audience, they are never expressed. Rather, participation in *Guys Gone Wild* is a way to flirt casually with the camerawomen (“I’ll take a shower with
one of you!” a participant tells the camerawoman) and perform bawdy humor in the increasingly popular style of Will Ferrell or the MTV punk/stunt show *Jackass*. For these men, consent and agency is an unproblematic given, so much so it need not be included in the footage. Thus, even in a complete gender role-reversal format, *Guys Gone Wild* reinforces the ways in which voluntarily disrobing on camera entails little from men but requires an elaborate staging of agency for women. While *Guys Gone Wild* may be framed as the “mirror image” of *GGW*, its erasure of the consent and reward scenes ultimately highlights the distorted representation of agency that *GGW* fosters.

**Conclusion**

The intention of this project is not to condemn *GGW* participants, or to accuse them of false consciousness. For some, the experience may be powerful and/or pleasurable, as reflected in their reported comments. Instead, the goal of this paper was to interrogate how *GGW* media texts successfully replicate themselves by mobilizing discourses of the carnivalesque, the neoliberalist emphasis on autonomous consent choice, and the fetishized (post)feminist mantra of “individual choice” to stage an effect of agency. This mechanism of exploitation works so well that it functions as empowerment. This is not to say that *GGW* could not be alternatively read as a space or moment for women to temporarily challenge social norms, indulge in sexual and exhibitionist pleasures, and/or manipulate the gaze. Yet a quick look at *Guys Gone Wild*, where the gaze is supposedly reversed, ultimately shows that the power dynamics at play do not translate in reversal of gender roles. The problem is that these moments of empowerment are very limited, leaving women with tank top mementos and Joe Francis’s enterprise with millions. The “choice” to perform for *GGW* is already mediated by a capitalist, white, middle-class, heteronormative framework that helps reify the postfeminist celebration of assumed political emancipation for these particular women. Because of its pervasiveness in mainstream youth culture, *GGW* functions hegemonically in a number of ways—not only through its limited representations of “real” girls afforded the opportunity to step temporarily outside their self-constituted norms, but also as a mechanism that literally and figuratively banks on its consent process to serve its own ends. Ultimately, what makes *Girls Gone Wild* so seductive is that it functions as a purveyor of empowering female opportunity. It establishes participation as socially inconsequential, as pleasurable; and it appropriates a depoliticized, empty model of choice to produce the effect of agency.

**Notes**


[2] All of Francis’s camera operators are required to be under 30, male, and single. Men are not permitted to join women on-camera for *GGW* (Grigoriadis, 2002).
This logic has recently been appropriated by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority; their “Vegas Freedom” campaign targets middle-class professionals, and promotes tourism by capitalizing on the popular mantra, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas” (“Only Vegas,” 2005). A recent spate of promotions for the non-stop pleasure atmosphere of Las Vegas emphasizes escapism and deviation from one’s “normal” behaviors. In one commercial, a woman introduces herself under a false name every time she meets a man at a bar; another features an embarrassed woman and her laughing friends, in what appears to be the morning after a long night out. An interactive feature of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority’s website (www.onlyvegas.com) called the “Alibi Generator” is designed to “help you create your Vegas alibi” by providing information on apparently innocuous activities, such as dining, shopping, golf, and entertainment.

The definition of third wave feminism itself is contestable and has had an uneasy reception in academia. As a term that co-exists with poststructuralist emphases on deconstruction and indeterminacies of meaning, the notion of a discrete definition of a third wave branch of feminism limits the concept at the outset. GGW aligns with third wave feminism through the popular characterization that third wavers are adventuresome and playful, often making use of the pleasure, danger, and definitional capabilities of existing power structures (see Heywood and Drake, 1997). Third wave feminism is characterized as highly individualistic—absolved from the responsibility of the collective—and with a penchant for embracing contradictions, especially insofar as those inconsistencies have the ability to startle or shock (Shugart, 2001). Finally, many third wavers locate the beginnings of their struggle in themselves and in politicizing their bodies. The body becomes a primary site for practicing personal resistance (Fixmer & Wood, 2005). In this way, the momentarily transgressive, pleasurable, and potentially liberating practice of stripping in public/on camera for GGW can align with some tenets of third wave feminism.

According to the Guys Gone Wild website (www.guysgonewild.com), six titles of this series are in circulation. Titles such as Guys Gone Wild: The Big Easy and Guys Gone Wild: Spring Break suggest the footage was obtained in locales similar to Girls Gone Wild. All references here to Guys Gone Wild videos come from the first of the series, Introducing . . . Guys Gone Wild (2004).

Guys Gone Wild is described as a likely “gag gift,” or “bachelorette kind of gift” (quoted in Lemire, 2004), and is currently marketed as such in late-night commercials on the We women’s network; however, gay men have fast become a lucrative market (Vargas, 2004).

As of this writing, I was unable to locate exact sales figures for Guys Gone Wild.

References


