“It’s my turn, Babe”: Postfeminism and the Dual-Career Marriage on *Friday Night Lights*

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Perhaps the most interesting fact about the sports-themed drama *Friday Night Lights*, which ran on NBC and the 101 network from 2006-2011 (and remains a popular “binge-watching” choice on many streaming sites today), is that, as TV-critic Alan Sepinwall argues, "it had always been a show about marriage as much as it was about football" (298). [1] Ostensibly focusing on a high school football team in Texas, the show places its emotional center, not upon the football players themselves, but upon the characters of Coach Eric Taylor and his wife, Tami. In fact, throughout the show’s five-season run, the fictional Taylors were uniformly lauded within the popular press as “the best portrayal of marriage on television …” (Fernandez).[2] What critics seemed to admire most about the Taylor marriage was its sense of realism and nuance; a result of the producers’ decision to eschew overly dramatic narrative strategies and focus instead on the day-to-day struggles endured by married couples (Basinger 331). But while such praise is well-deserved, I would argue that it elides the most important aspect of the Taylor marriage: the fact that it is built upon a progressive representation of gender equality unique within

[1] Created by Peter Berg, the show is also a remake of his 2004 film of the same name.

[2] Such assessments were echoed within academia as well. In her 2012 historical account of marriage on film & TV, Jeanine Basinger reserved her highest praise for *FNL*: “It’s possible that there’s never been a more honest and natural marriage portrayed in film and television” (328).

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 4, No. 1&2
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contemporary, mainstream media culture. Specifically, *FNL*'s depiction of the Taylors offers a unique challenge to the ways in which contemporary media depictions of dual-career, heterosexual couples work to reinforce patriarchal notions of gender relations.

This aspect is crucial because, as many scholars have argued, we are currently living within a "postfeminist" media age (Gill; Levine; McRobbie; Negra; Tasker and Negra). Here, postfeminism is defined as a hegemonic process that undermines feminist gains, not through direct opposition, but rather through discursive tropes that pay lip service to notions of female empowerment and "personal choice," while simultaneously re-framing those concepts in ways that present traditional gendered relations as the only legitimate options.[3] More often than not, it is through mainstream media narratives that such postfeminist logic is cultivated and reinforced.

For instance, Diane Negra has described a host of postfeminist tropes that have arisen across the mainstream film & television landscape, from domestic "retreatism" to "housewife chic," in which well-educated, successful female protagonists find personal fulfillment by "choosing" to pull back from their careers and return to lives of domesticity (*What a Girl Wants*). Such tropes represent what Negra calls "canny distortions of feminist dogma," in which the feminist concept of "choice" is now utilized towards traditionalist ends, encouraging women to "opt-out" of their professional careers and back *into* the domesticated life that feminism has purportedly left behind ("'Quality Postfeminism?").

[3] Here it is important to point out that the term, postfeminism, has been hotly debated by scholars in recent years. However, Levine argues that "a consensus is beginning to emerge" around "the increasingly widespread usage of 'postfeminist' to describe the hegemonic gender politics of contemporary western culture …" (139-140). For a more detailed accounting of the term's various definitions, and a defense of the definition employed here, see: Gill.

As Sarah Whitney argues, the problem with such tropes is not simply the notion of "choice," itself, but rather its rhetorical (re)framing. As she explains:

> It is my contention that in post-feminist rhetoric, the framing of choice with regards to occupation is undergoing a significant shift in meaning. *Being able* to choose your vocation, while still important, is being nudged aside in favor of the idea that a choice *between* career and family is inevitable.

In this way, the discourse of postfeminism transforms "choice" from a right, to an *imperative*. More than this, however, it is an imperative *only* for women: "Choice has historically been an occupational wedge word, squeezing between 'career' and family' on the presumption that, for women, only one may be successfully sought" (Whitney). Such framing only serves to reinforce a gendered double-standard in which women *must* choose between work and family, while men have an implicit right to enjoy *both*. In this way, postfeminist discourse celebrates a particular notion of female autonomy while simultaneously deflecting any real engagement with the concept of gender equality.

Such discursive strategies, of course, help to define the cultural context within which *actual* women must negotiate their everyday experience. For instance, a recent study of Harvard Business School graduates revealed that, even for married (heterosexual) couples involving two professional partners, traditionalist notions of gender relations still held sway. The study found that the male partner's career usually took precedence, while the female partner slowed her professional ambitions to provide the majority of childcare labor (Ely, Stone and Ammerman). The study's authors suggest that one reason such traditionalist arrangements continue to endure has to do with the ways in which popular discourses influence how we think and talk about gender:

> At a certain point the belief that a woman's primary career obstacle is *herself* became conventional wisdom. From "opting out" to "ratcheting back," the ways we talk about women's careers often emphasize their willingness to scale down or forgo opportunities, projects and jobs. The very premise seems to be that women value career less than men do, or that mothers don't want high-profile, challenging work (Ely, Stone and Ammerman 108).

Thus, while the authors don't invoke the term, "postfeminism," their study suggests the real-world consequences of this discursive structure. As Diane Negra puts it: "the overwhelming ideological impact that is made by an accumulation of postfeminist cultural material is the reinforcement of conservative norms as the ultimate 'best choices' in women's lives" (*What a Girl Wants* 4).

It is within and against such postfeminist discourse that I situate this analysis of *Friday Night Lights*. Specifically, I argue that the depiction of the Taylor marriage offers an important challenge to postfeminist logic; especially where contemporary television is concerned. Television, of course, has often been a space within which popular forms of feminism have taken root through the representation of strong, professional female characters, from the likes of Mary Tyler Moore and Murphy Brown, to Carrie Bradshaw, Sidney Briscoe and Carrie Mathison (to name but a few). However, as Amanda Lotz has argued, the vast majority of TV's feminist heroines have shared one specific attribute: being *single* (88). And while representations of strong, single women have provided what Diane Negra calls a crucial corrective to the mainstream media's "pathologization of single femininity" ("'Quality Postfeminism'?") Lotz argues that this tendency to embrace *only one kind* of feminist heroine threatens to, once again, impose constraints upon women in terms of gender identity:

> The uniformity with which [these characters] work outside of the home and in most cases are unmarried establishes a new construct of what women should be rather than increasing the uninhabitability of confining gender roles. Is it impossible for a dramatic character to have a meaningful, committed, romantic relationship? … Are feminist characters and married characters mutually exclusive? … Regardless of the old rules and frameworks, such uniformity should require concern and debate (173).

Indeed, the exclusionary nature of such a representational strategy threatens to reinforce the either/or choice (career vs. home) that undergirds postfeminist culture in the first place. In addition, I would argue that such a dichotomy (single vs. married) can often serve to sidestep the part that *men* have to play in challenging and transforming contemporary gender relations – a convenient slippage that patriarchal logic is only happy to oblige.

Which brings us back to *Friday Night Lights*. Ultimately, I argue that *FNL*'s depiction of the Taylor's relationship makes the unique contribution of challenging postfeminist logic from *within* the institution of heterosexual marriage. It does so through a series of narrative strategies that overturn four contemporary narrative tropes indicative of today's postfeminist culture: the trope of feminine "retreatism" (Negra, *What a Girl*); "masculine crisis" (Beynon; MacKinnon); the "new momism," (Douglas & Michaels); and the "rhetoric of choice" (Vavrus "Opting Out Moms"; Whitney). In so doing, I argue that *Friday Night Lights* helps to widen the range of possibilities for feminist media representations beyond those offered within the contemporary context of postfeminist culture.[4]

[4] Of course, it should be noted that the show's progressive depiction of a dual-career marriage should not be taken as evidence of a newfound commitment on the part of

A "Working" Relationship: FNL as Anti-Retreatist Narrative

As many scholars have argued, one of the basic hallmarks of postfeminist discourse is its reframing of the notion of "choice" (Whitney; Vavrus 2007). According to this logic, second-wave feminism's work is complete; the ability for women to choose their own life-path has resulted in full-equality and the obliteration of gender-discrimination. However, such an emphasis on the "freedom to choose" masks the discursive context within which women must make such choices. More often than not, those choices are defined as *between* career and home; *between* professionalism and domesticity (Whitney). As such, the message is clear: while men have always enjoyed an authoritative presence in both the professional and domestic spheres, women have to choose. They can't, as the saying goes, "have it all."

Moreover, as Diane Negra has argued, the postfeminist response to such stark pronouncements has been to move in the opposite direction: if second-wave feminism focused on the freedom to pursue a career, postfeminism would focus on the freedom to return home. The result, she argues, has been the rise of female-centered narratives within popular film

network executives to challenge television's history of deploying gender stereotypes. As Jennifer Gillan has detailed, NBC liked the show for different reasons: its sports-themed generic elements created synergistic opportunities through which to cross-promote NBC Sports programming such as the Super Bowl and the Olympics, for which they had recently acquired the rights. At the same time, the show's relationship-driven narrative elements helped reinforce NBC's brand identity as a "prestige" network, offering critically-acclaimed dramas (Gillan). It wasn't until the show began to struggle in the ratings that NBC shifted its marketing strategies to emphasize those relationship-driven aspects over the football, in an explicit attempt to attract more female viewers (Ryan). That said, the show's creators have always maintained that the depiction of a realistic "marriage of equals" was central to the show's initial vision (Mays). Indeed, creator Peter Berg sites the transformation of Coach Taylor's wife away from the much more stereotypical version found in the original film as one of the key elements to the show's original conception (Mays).

and television that revolve around a fantasy of "retreatism," in which the heroine "unlearns the insights of feminism" (Negra). Such characters are often depicted as jaded, regretful professionals who rediscover their true selves only by returning to domestic settings and the familiar roles "of daughter, sister, wife or sweetheart" (Negra). Thus, while the feminist notion of "choice" is upheld, one particular choice is clearly idealized over any other. Through narrative strategies such as this, gender equality is rendered in distinctly unequal terms, as femininity is repeatedly equated with the domestic sphere, *even when* female characters work outside it.

This is the perfect place to begin a consideration of the gender politics of *Friday Night Lights* because, in many ways, the narrative arc of Tami Taylor turns the tables on such retreatist narratives. Throughout the show's five seasons, Tami's storyline sees her move from the role of "devoted coach's wife" into the positions of guidance counselor, high school principal and, finally, college dean. Thus, while many postfeminist texts focus on women rediscovering the joys of domesticity, *FNL* focuses on a woman for whom "domestic bliss" is clearly not enough. But what makes Tami's anti-retreatist journey so unique is that the show does not depict her career simply as a choice she makes for herself, outside (or against) her familial role. This represents an important shift in the way that dual-career marriages have typically been represented on mainstream TV. For example, in his analysis of 1990s television, Robert Hanke argues that when female characters left the home to work, such decisions were usually construed in *personal* terms, depicted as something women chose to do *for themselves*, rather than as an integral facet of the couple's life and well-being (81). In this way, a woman's choice to pursue a career did not threaten the traditional gender norms governing heterosexual marriage; husbands retained their patriarchal position of authority via their status as household provider, while wives were allowed to "dabble" in careers that

were defined as existing outside and apart from the traditional family structure.[5]

Such is not the case for Tami and Eric Taylor. Instead, the show makes clear that Tami's choice to pursue a career is a *family* decision that has a crucial impact on the Taylors' fortunes. For instance, the first time we visit the Taylors in their home comes in the second episode of Season One ("Eyes Wide Open"). Eric storms into the kitchen to tell Tami that the AC is broken and he can't fix it. "Sugar," replies Tami, "I think it's time for me to get a job." This scene establishes the fact that, while Tami is certainly following her own professional ambitions, she is also taking a job out of financial necessity; the Taylors can't make ends meet on Eric's salary alone. This move works to challenge the either/or logic of career vs. domesticity. Rather than frame Tami's career as somehow against or "outside" the family structure, it is articulated from the outset as being integral to the Taylor family, itself.

Perhaps more importantly, however, such a depiction also challenges Eric's patriarchal claim to familial authority by allowing Tami to step into, and ultimately take over, the dominant financial role in the family. As the series progresses, the power dynamic between the Taylors shifts dramatically in terms of which partner commands the role of "breadwinner." Over the course of the show's five seasons, Eric experiences what can only be described as a downwards career trajectory; briefly breaking into the ranks of Division 1-A college football, only to quickly return to the high school level in Season Two, be subsequently demoted to a bottom-tier school district at the end of Season Three, and ultimately let go towards the end of Season Five. As such, *Tami's* career progression – from guidance counselor, to principal, to Dean – positions

[5]In fact, this is not unlike the arrangement the Harvard Business School study found within contemporary dual-career marriages; women who downgraded their careers to focus on child-rearing while their husbands' careers took precedence, both in terms of familial importance *and* personal ambition.

her, unambiguously, as the primary financial "provider" for the Taylor family.

But more than challenge Eric's role as patriarchal provider, Tami also challenges his *symbolic* position as head of household. No where is this challenge more overt than in the series' final episodes, when Tami receives the offer to become Dean of Admissions at (fictional) Braemore College, an elite Liberal Arts school halfway across the country in Philadelphia ("The March"). The Braemore offer comes at a moment of professional precariousness for Eric, who has just been let go from one coaching job and forced to take another with an administration he doesn't trust. As such, the Braemore job offers the Taylors the kind of financial stability Eric can no longer provide – crucial for a couple just starting to raise a second daughter. But perhaps more importantly, the job also offers Tami the kind of professional prestige that *Eric* had long enjoyed as beloved town football coach; prestige he would now have to relinquish were he to follow his wife to Pennsylvania.

Initially, this is a reality that proves too painful for Eric to accept. He regards Tami's desire to take the job as a personal threat, even accusing her of "rooting against" him ("Texas Whatever"). But to the show's credit, it does not let Eric off the hook for such a response. Tami ultimately prevails during an emotional conversation in which she defines the issue, not simply as one about geography and finances, but ultimately about equality and fairness: "Its my turn, babe," she tells him. "I have loved you, and you have loved me, and we have compromised. Both of us. For *your* job. And now its time to talk about doing that for my job." ("Always"). Here, Eric's initial response, and Tami's rejoinder, are crucial for the way they reveal a certain underlying truth often masked by the kind of dual-career narratives presented on mainstream TV: that Tami's ability to pursue her professional dreams *will necessitate* Eric's relinquishing of his own patriarchal privilege. And this is precisely what he does. The series

ends with Eric giving up his job to follow Tami as she pursues hers; a far cry from the retreatist fantasies of today's postfeminist culture.

Perhaps the most important aspect of their dual-career marriage, however, is the fact that, for most of the show's five season run, Tami's job is located within the same local high school for which her husband coaches. As such, Tami's work-life becomes a central aspect of the Taylor's home-life. This move is crucial since the distinction between *home* and *work* has always been central to the maintenance of traditional gender relations, and a central tenet of postfeminist "retreatist" narratives. As Diane Negra argues, retreatist narratives often focus on a kind of "epiphany in which the professional woman comes to realize that the self she has cultivated through education and professionalization is in some ways deficient unless she can rebuild a family base" (*What a Girl Wants* 21). These narratives reinforce a traditionalist notion of "essential femininity that is deemed to only be possible in domestic settings" (72).

Such a depiction is rendered impossible on *Friday Night Lights*, given the fact that many of Tami and Eric's interactions happen at work, rather than at home; and more often than not, in *Tami*'s office. Throughout much of the first season, Eric is shown vying with his own players for a few minutes of "Ms. Taylor's" time, while many of their subsequent conversations take place across Tami's desk, with Eric sitting in a chair usually reserved for her students. Indeed, given her role at the school, Eric often finds himself in a position of subordination to Tami, such as when she discovers his star fullback has been cheating and Eric is forced to beg her for "leniency" ("Nevermind"); or when Tami unilaterally decides to reroute a large sum of money earmarked for the football program towards academic needs instead ("I Knew You When"). Ultimately, what these workplace narratives do is construct an image of marriage based upon an ideal of collegiality – a type of relationship that exists outside the kinds of gender norms that so often define married life for heterosexual couples.

The most poignant example of this comes early in Season Three when, agonizing over whether or not to replace his veteran quarterback with a younger, more talented player, Eric drives Tami over to the local bar for some good old-fashioned venting (“Hello, Goodbye”). The location of this conversation is crucial for, in the parlance of *Friday Night Lights*, “the bar” is specifically coded as masculine; it is the place where football players come to drink, team boosters come to gloat, and where Eric usually comes to engage in “man-to-man” talks with the likes of Buddy Garrity (a former football player and friend). As such, the natural way in which Eric and *Tami* now occupy this space, as both husband and wife *and* as professional colleagues, represents a unique image of gender equality; one that is not often seen on mainstream television.

The Coach’s Wife and the Principal’s Husband: (Re)Mediating “Masculine Crisis”

The affable sense of collegiality that develops between Tami and Eric exemplifies another important shift in the way that *FNL* portrays gender relations against today’s postfeminist culture. As many scholars have argued, patriarchy has often responded to feminist challenges made against its authority via a narrative of “masculine crisis.” This is a trope with a long cultural legacy, perhaps best exemplified during the mid-late 1990s, when a spate of popular “male paranoia” films arose, that sympathized with male characters who found their masculine authority under attack by newly professionalized women (MacKinnon 46-7; Beynon 84). The narrative of masculine crisis was also prevalent on mainstream TV, though depicted in a somewhat more benign form, through a series of well-worn tropes such as that of the sensitive “new man,” often found in 1990s sitcoms like *Home Improvement* and *Coach* (Hanke). Such shows purported to satirize notions of hegemonic masculinity through a “battle of the sexes” motif in which “macho” males like Tim Taylor and Hayden

Fox reacted to the mild feminism of their wives and girlfriends by trying – (usually halfheartedly, and without much success) to get in touch with their "sensitive" sides. Such depictions hardly encouraged male viewers to give up patriarchal notions of gender identity, however. As Robert Hanke argues: "these shows articulate a particular discursive strategy … which is to reverse neocynicism (popular feminism from below) into its opposite, cynicism (the male power bloc tells the truth about themselves and denies any ability to do anything about it)" (3).

Such cynicism has only become more overt in recent sitcoms, as evidenced by shows like *Two & a Half Men*, which openly mocked the "new man's" sensitive turn by contrasting it with a more powerful, hegemonic version (Hatfield); or marriage-based shows such as *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *King of Queens*, which are built around what Jennifer Reed calls the trope of the "beleaguered husband and demanding wife." Through such representations, the narrative of "masculine crisis" is reinforced, giving the impression that "true" masculinity is under attack by demanding, powerful women; and undermined by acquiescent, sensitive men. Of course, as many feminist scholars have argued, the very notion that a loss of masculine authority represents a "crisis" to be resolved is, in and of itself, a hegemonic strategy geared towards recouping that very privilege (Beynon 94). All such narratives do is allow male characters to "perform their anxiety, irritation and exhaustion" over women's increased power (Reed). It would therefore seem only natural for a program like *Friday Night Lights* to exhibit a similar tendency; offering up Eric Taylor as the quintessential "man in crisis."

But while Tami's job at the school certainly leads to tension between the Taylors, it never leads to any kind of gendered anguish on the part of Eric. Nor is his willingness to let go of his masculine privilege depicted as a form of masculine capitulation to be satirized and/or ridiculed. Instead, the Taylor's ability to negotiate an egalitarian relationship (both at home and at work) represents an important shift away from the "masculine

crisis" mentality that has so often defined narratives about contemporary gender relations within the mainstream media.

This shift becomes apparent during one of the most dramatic narrative arcs of the series, in which Eric's assistant coach makes a racist comment to a local reporter. Struggling with the decision of whether or not to fire him, Eric goes to Tami for advice, clarifying that what he needs is not spousal support, but her professional opinion: "I want to talk to the guidance counselor, not my wife" ("Black Eyes and Broken Hearts"). This is a verbal game played by the Taylors at various times throughout the series, as when, in Season Three, Eric vents his frustration with Tami by saying: "You know who I miss? The coach's wife." To which she replies, "You know who I can't wait to meet? The principal's husband" ("How the Other Half Lives"). Such conversations belie the tension felt by Tami and Eric as they negotiate the shifting nature of their relationship; but their playfulness also reveals a willingness on the part of each to accept and work through their complicated relationship together, as co-equals.

This is especially important given the fact that, as indicated above, in Season Three, Tami becomes the school principal, making her Eric's *boss*. Such a development would have been ripe for a narrative of masculine crisis, but Tami's promotion is never portrayed as afflicting Eric's sense of masculine pride. Instead, Eric assumes the role of support system – carrying out her executive decisions at work, while commiserating with her professional frustrations at home. In an ironically apt metaphorical sense, Eric becomes Tami's biggest cheerleader.

This relational development is perhaps best exemplified by the aforementioned storyline depicting Tami's decision to reallocate funds away from the school football team and towards academics, where the extra money is sorely needed ("Hello, Goodbye"). Her decision puts her into direct confrontation with the town's local Boosters organization, who are fiercely protective of their local football team's well-being. But more importantly, it also puts her into direct confrontation with Eric, himself, as

the team's head coach. In a typical mainstream narrative, such a move would likely have been depicted as *emasculating*. Tami is clearly pulling rank on Eric, the football team and, by proxy, the entire cult of masculinity that is often built up around high school football in towns like Dillon, Texas. But rather than view her decision as a threat to his own sense of masculine pride, Eric responds in collegial fashion, siding with Tami against the boosters. In a powerful scene, he gives Tami a pep talk:

> You're right, and they're wrong. … They're gonna get the JumboTron [eventually], and in that sense you lose tomorrow. But you stood up for what you believed in. And in that sense, you win tomorrow ("Hello, Goodbye").

What is especially touching about this scene is that Eric's impromptu pep talk with his wife sounds identical to any number of talks we've seen him give his football team over the course of the first two seasons. Thus, the masculine logic of the locker room is transferred to the Taylor bedroom, where it is now used to buttress Tami's heroic bid at challenging masculine authority. Thus, by refusing to pit the Taylors against one another in a stereotypical "battle of the sexes," *FNL* rejects the trope of "masculine crisis" that so often frames television depictions of strong, professional women.

Ultimately, within mainstream media narratives the trope of "masculine crisis" often works as the mirror image of the trope of feminine "retreatism," discussed in the last section. In both cases, the freedom for women to choose is framed within a logic that legitimizes only *one* particular choice; to remain in traditional gender roles. To choose otherwise, it is implied, will only lead to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety on the parts of *both* partners. By refusing such narrative tendencies, *FNL* offers the unique depiction of a dual-career couple whose rejection of traditional gender roles is not portrayed as a threat to their relationship, but rather, as the key to its very strength.

Meanwhile, Back at the (Raised) Ranch: Tami Taylor and the Trope of the "New Mom"

Of course, the mere fact that Tami and Eric manage to negotiate a relationship based upon an equivalent work/life balance is not the end of the story. Negotiating such a relationship with a partner is one thing, but doing so with *children* is quite another. The issue of parenthood isn't as pronounced in the first season of *FNL*; the Taylor's daughter, Julie, is in High School and thus, in many ways, fairly independent. But all that changes in the final episode of Season One, when it is revealed that Tami is pregnant, much to the surprise of both herself and Eric ("State"). As such, Season Two takes its depiction of gender relations one step further, as childcare suddenly becomes the Taylor's primary concern, and greatest obstacle.

Of course, this is an age-old dilemma that, once again, threatens to reinvigorate the professional/domestic divide so central to postfeminist culture. For, as many scholars have pointed out, women's (provisional) victories regarding equitable treatment in the workplace have hardly translated into a comparable shift at home. While the number of men actively involved in childcare has certainly increased over the past two decades (Douglas & Michaels 321), many studies indicate that women are still expected to do the lion's share of child-rearing, not to mention housework, despite their heightened access to the workforce (Beynon 101; Hochschild; Offer & Schneider; Petrosky & Edley; West 6).

Such a situation has been reinforced by another hegemonic trope cultivated by the mainstream media – what Susan Douglas and Meredith Williams have termed the "new momism." According to Douglas & Michaels: "The new momism has become the central, justifying ideology of … 'postfeminism,'" asserting that:

> no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to

> be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual well being 24/7, to her children (4).

Douglas & Michaels document the initial rise of the "new momism" in the late-80s/early-90s, especially on television, where working moms, such as the yuppie wives of *thirtysomething* and the famously-single Murphy Brown, found true happiness only by rediscovering their maternal instincts. But this discursive logic has only solidified over the years, they argue, becoming ubiquitous in the current tabloid obsession over "celebrity moms" (Douglas & Michaels 16-17) and the popularity of stay-at-home-mom websites (314). As Diane Negra sums it up:

> The postfeminist celebration of mothering [has] reache[d] heights that would have been unimaginable a generation ago. In a range of films and television programs, in journalism, and in advertising, motherhood redeems, it transforms, it enriches, it elevates (*What a Girl Wants* 65).

This constant romanticization of the motherly-bond makes it increasingly difficult to imagine a woman who *wouldn't* welcome such a role. And it is here that *Friday Night Lights*' is, perhaps, at its most transgressive.

Far from redeeming, transforming and enriching, newborn Gracie Bell's arrival creates an enormous amount of emotional tension, stress and turmoil for Tami, especially since Eric has recently accepted a university job in Austin – a plane ride away. The very fact that the birth of their second daughter creates emotional *tension* for Tami, rather than feelings of maternal joy and fulfillment, is extremely significant, for it works against the romantic function of birth in many mainstream narratives in which "women repeatedly discover themselves when they experience an immediate and powerful sense of enchantment with their newborn" (Negra, *What a Girl Wants* 66).

Turning the new momism on its head, the surprise arrival of Gracie Bell is not represented as an opportunity for self-discovery through mother/child bonding. Instead, her arrival represents a serious destabilization of the Taylor family structure, with Tami's career in danger of becoming the collateral damage. In order to highlight this tension, the writers introduce a new character to the narrative; Glen, the science teacher who has been tapped to take over Tami's counseling duties while she is on maternity leave. Stressed and overwhelmed, Glen arrives at the Taylor home, just days after Gracie's birth, to beg for Tami's advice. Up until this point, Tami has been depicted as harried, exhausted and anguished; the house is a mess, her relationship with Julie is fraying at the seams, and she seems to have lost the self-assurance we have grown accustomed to seeing her exude. That is, until Glen enters the picture, at which point Tami regains some semblance of her old, confident self. Despite having a baby on her arm, Tami slips effortlessly back into the professional guise of "Ms. Taylor," calmly doling out professional advice ("Bad Ideas").

Through scenes like this, it becomes apparent that *FNL* is not going to paper over Tami's personal anguish with a romanticized depiction of motherly instincts trumping all. Instead, the only activity that seems to re-center Tami, emotionally, is a return to her professional life. This point is underlined in a scene that depicts Tami responding to a panic attack at home by literally *fleeing* to her office. Clearly at her wits end, Tami races through town – on foot, in 100-degree weather, stroller in tow – finally arriving at her office with a clear sense of relief ("Bad Ideas"). The fact that Tami finds peace in her office chair – rather than the rocking chair – represents a clear shift away from new mom discourse.

The character of Glen also fulfills a second function. Beyond standing as a cipher for Tami's lost professional identity, he serves as a kind of Greek Chorus for what traditional society might have to say about Tami's struggle with motherhood. For, while Glen is clearly more than happy to

accept Tami's professional aid and advice, he also espouses normative gender assumptions that criticize Tami's reaction to motherhood, thus bringing her emotional struggle into high relief. For instance, when Tami bursts into her office in the scene referenced above, Glen seems appalled, rather than grateful, that Tami has returned:

> You just walked all the way from your house?!? It's105 degrees out there. That's completely insane! … You're profusely sweating; you've got a new-born baby; you're walking in 105 degree temperatures. I mean … I might need a little bit of help … [But] I think what's more important is your behavior. You're bringing this baby here … ("Bad Ideas").

Here, Glen espouses the popular, traditionalist critique of working mothers that arose alongside the new mom discourse (Cobb; Douglas & Michaels). As Douglas & Michaels explain, as representations of working mothers began to proliferate within the mainstream media, so too did troubling depictions of the "effects" such a choice would have upon a family. According to this narrative, the freedom for women to "have it all" was leading to exhausted, stressed-out mothers, as well as neglected kids. Such a pronouncement, of course, contained a kernel of truth; the notion that one parent can and should "do it all" is patently absurd. However, the blame for such a scenario fell not upon the myth, itself, but upon the women who strove to achieve it. Suddenly, the media was filled with accounts that villified high-profile women (such as O.J. Simpson prosecutor Marcia Clark and British physician Deborah Eappen) for making the decision to pursue both career and motherhood simultaneously (West 7). Thus, while the new momism romanticized traditional notions of natural motherhood, it also cultivated a full-throated backlash against working moms who were shamed for putting their own careers and desires before their kids.

It is just this kind of shaming discourse that Glen articulates when he espouses shock and dismay that Tami would come to work, despite having a newborn at home. Tami, however, has none of it, firing back:

> I'm sorry – I don't need you talking about my perspiration … I came here to talk about the *job* – which, it seems to me, *you* might need a little bit of help with. … So I don't appreciate you going on and on about what a bad mother I am. OK? … Don't you go and judge me – on what kind of mother I'm being! ("Bad Ideas").

Thus, by having the character of Glen voice such traditionalist assumptions, to Tami's shock and dismay, this scene brings the unfairness of her situation into high relief. Furthermore, Tami's subsequent accusation that Glen is "judging" her reveals the way in which postfeminist discourse delimits women's options by pre-judging the choices they make. By aligning viewer sympathies with Tami, through a clear enactment of the frustrations that motherhood has wrought, *FNL* undermines the new momism, revealing it to be nothing more than an elaborate guilt trip foisted upon women who dare desire something apart, or in addition to, the "natural" joys of being a mom (Akass 57; Cobb).

"Where in the hell is your father?" Gender, Choice, and (Shared) Responsibility on FNL

Of course, the real problem with Tami's situation is not simply the difficulty of balancing a baby with a career – it's the fact that she has been forced to do so *alone*, despite the fact that she is in a committed relationship. This theme is foregrounded in the opening moments of the second season's first episode, when Tami goes into labor. The birth scene is cross-cut with images of Eric belatedly trying to get back home from Austen, prompting Tami to exclaim to Julie: "Where in the hell is your father?!?" ("Last Days of Summer"). This narrative decision – to combine

Eric's absence with the baby's arrival – allows *FNL* to challenge one of the most troubling, yet powerful, concepts underlying postfeminist logic: what many scholars have dubbed the "rhetoric of choice" (Akass; Vavrus 2007; Whitney).

As Sarah E. Whitney explains: "'Choice for women' is the concept trotted out in post-feminist culture as the major accomplishment and legacy of feminism." This concept stems from the legacy of second-wave feminists who "opened walks of public life once reserved only for men." However, as Whitney argues:

> in post-feminist rhetoric, the framing of choice with regards to occupation is undergoing a significant shift in meaning. *Being able* to choose your vocation, while still important, is being nudged aside in favor of the idea that a choice between career and family is inevitable.

It is this framing of choice – as an "inevitable" decision every woman must weigh – that opened the door to the kinds of neo-traditionalist narratives discussed in previous sections. However, it has also served to reinforce a pernicious double-standard that conveniently leaves men off the hook when it comes to enacting change. According to the postfeminist rhetoric of choice, not only do women have choices when it comes to balancing family with career, but it is *women alone* who must choose; and most importantly, the consequences of those choices will be theirs, alone, to bear.

In Tami's case, her "choice" has left her at home with a baby on her arm and a career stuck in limbo, while Eric is off in Austin pursuing his dream job, unfettered by such heartrending decisions. As such, Season Two frames Tami and Eric's struggle around the postfeminist rhetoric of choice – but in a way that reveals the political bankruptcy of such a notion.

For instance, shortly after Gracie is born, Eric receives a call from TMU informing him that he must cut his paternity leave short. Rather than balk at such a request, Eric simply accepts it as natural, bluntly telling Tami: "The fact of the matter is, I don't have a choice" ("Last Days of Summer"). Here, Eric's claim, that he "has no choice" when it comes to work/home balance, implies that Tami *does*. Gracie Bell's arrival means that there will have to be some sacrifices made within the Taylor household – but what those sacrifices are, and how they will be enacted, is Tami's problem to figure out.

Eric's casual adherence to such patriarchal views literally leaves Tami speechless. The conversation ends with Eric simply walking out of the house, leaving Tami alone in tears on the living room couch. Given the Taylors' established propensity to continuously talk through their problems, her silence during this scene is deafening. Once again, viewer sympathies are clearly aligned with Tami, who bears the brunt of this unfair double-standard. Thus, as with the earlier scenes depicting Glen's caustic espousal of traditionalist values, these scenes between Eric and Tami work to reveal the hypocrisy inherent within the postfeminist rhetoric of choice.

The only equitable solution to this dilemma is for Eric to relinquish such patriarchal privileges and beat his own sort of "retreat" back home. To the show's credit, this is precisely what he does. Three episodes into Season Two, Eric quits his job at TMU to reclaim his old high school position in Dillon ("Are You Ready For Friday Night?"). Importantly, however, Eric's choice to return home is not depicted as an heroic one. For, to lionize Eric's return as a benevolent "sacrifice" on his part would be to reinforce the notion that he was giving up something that was naturally his by virtue of his gender. Mary Douglas Vavrus (2002) has made this point clear in her analysis of "Mr. Mom" narratives; stories about the rise of stay-at-home-dads which became trendy within mainstream news media throughout the 1990s. According to Vavrus,

while these news stories sought to legitimate "feminized practices of nurturance and domesticity" within representations of masculinity, they also focused intensely on the difficulties stay-at-home dads had with taking on such a "feminized" role, thus reinforcing the notion that "stay-at-home parenting is simply not 'natural' for men" (365). Indeed, as Vavrus points out, "the very appearance of stay-at-home fathers as *news* items suggests that their activities deviates from what is typical for parents" (365).

But on *Friday Night Lights*, things are different for Eric. There are certainly no moments in which Eric is congratulated for returning home to "pitch in," and we are spared the to-be-expected plotlines involving Eric "comically" trying to negotiate diaper changes and naptimes. Instead, Eric's presence in the home is depicted as typical and routine; a fact emphasized by Tami's nonchalant reaction to his return. For example, when Tami gets ready to go out with her colleagues for the first time in months, Eric tries to play the martyr, exclaiming: "Well, I do have to work tonight, but [instead] I'm babysitting!" To which Tami replies: "It's not babysitting when it's your own child, sweetheart" ("Seeing Other People"). Such matter-of-fact reactions to Eric's return home help to normalize a notion of shared familial responsibility where parenting is concerned. Eric isn't "sacrificing" his masculinity by taking on an equal share of the child-rearing; he's simply holding up his end of the bargain.[6]

This ideal of shared familial responsibility is finally solidified towards the end of Season Two when it comes time for Tami to go back to work. As Tami prepares to send Gracie Bell to daycare, she finds herself with a

[6] Tami isn't the only character to treat Eric's duty to be home as a matter of common sense. Humorously, this idea is set up the episode before, when Eric unsuccessfully tries to have a phone conversation with Tami while taking one of TMU's star football players to a legal hearing. When Eric gets off his cell, the young football player looks at him incredulously and says: "I just want to ask you one thing. What you doing in the car with me when you got a new baby at home?" ("Bad Ideas").

severe case of separation anxiety. Eric responds to her anxiety in telling fashion: "There are other options," he says. "One option could be, say, a leave of absence – that's one possible option" ("Who Do You Think You Are?"). The language Eric uses here is crucial, for it is an almost word-for-word articulation of the popular postfeminist phrase: "opting out." This phrase became popular around 2003, when the *New York Times Magazine* ran an article entitled "The Opt Out Revolution," describing the large amount of professional women choosing to leave careers for motherhood and domesticity (Akass 53). Of course, the notion of women "opting out" was nothing more than a variation on the postfeminist notion of "choice." As Joan C. Williams puts it: "It is clear that any decision to 'opt out' is made within the constraints of a system that 'pulls fathers into the ideal worker role and mothers into lives framed around caregiving'" (quoted in Akass 53). As such, Eric's claim that Tami has the choice to opt out is just a subtle dodge of the fact that this is an option *only Tami* might consider.

But, true to form, Tami calls him out: "Uh-huh. A leave of absence from my job which I love." When Eric tells her he's not going to fight about it, she responds: "Well you don't have to fight with me, do you? 'Cause you can just sit there in judgment and know that you will never be threatened to leave your job which you love and worked so hard for!" ("Who Do You Think You Are?"). Here, Tami cuts to the heart of postfeminist discourse by revealing the patriarchal privilege such a logic enables.

What is most important about this confrontation, however, is its ultimate resolution: in the end, Eric gets it. It is at this point that Eric comes full-circle and fully embraces the notion of co-parenting. As such, he takes it upon himself to convince Tami to go back to work. "Let me tell y'all something," he says towards the end of the episode:

> One of the reasons that you and I gave up that job down at TMU is that so you didn't have to give up your job. … And I was just

> inside on the computer, and you know what I found out? I found out that separation anxiety is completely normal. We get over it ("Who Do You Think You Are?").

It is instructive to note the pronouns used by Eric during this: "*you and I* gave up that job" … "*We* get over it." It is at this juncture that we see Eric leave his outmoded notions of gendered parenting behind to embrace a vision of shared responsibility that he articulates in his own, colloquial way: "We stick together, it all works out." The episode ends with an image that underlines this new commitment in poignant fashion: Tami and Eric bringing Gracie Bell to her first day of childcare together.[7]

[7] Of course, at this juncture it is necessary to point out that, like most mainstream television narratives, the Taylor's mutual decision to send Gracie Bell to daycare is an individualized solution to a structural problem of inequality. For, while the Taylors do not appear to be wealthy, it is clear that they can *afford* daycare; an option from which too many working families are priced out. As many feminist commentators have argued, true gender equality can only be achieved alongside substantive policy changes, such as universal healthcare and paid family leave, that would support parents attempting to balance career and children in an equitable fashion (Traister). However, such structural changes are unlikely to be made within a postfeminist media context that continues to stoke the flames of maternal guilt for working-moms, while their male counterparts are let off the hook. Indeed, Douglas and Michaels make this argument when considering the historic lack of public support for publically-funded daycare within the U.S. One of the reasons the idea has never truly taken off, they argue, has been decades of media stories detailing the "negative effects" of daycare on children (and marriages), which have worked to attach the worst kind of connotations to the very concept: "If you sent your kid to day care you were warehousing her, depositing her someplace with the same care and attention you would devote to dropping off your drycleaning. Even stories emphasizing the desperate need for more or better day care often contained this little burrowing worm of accusation" (241). In this way, the Taylor's decision to send Gracie Bell to daycare – and especially Eric's research explaining the sheer *normalcy* of "separation anxiety" – seems to be an overt attempt to counteract such connotations. Thus, while *Friday Night*

Thus, while Tami spends much of the first two seasons demanding her right to make choices, she *also* demands that Eric take responsibility for helping create a familial structure within which those choices are made possible. For Tami, "having it all" does not mean having to *do it all alone*. If the Taylors are going to have an equitable, committed relationship, then Tami's ambitions and desires must become Eric's responsibility, too. Indeed, it is through narratives like this that *FNL* not only challenges the postfeminist rhetoric of choice by laying bare the gendered double-standard upon which it rests; it also replaces this concept with a different one – the much more equitable notion of shared *responsibility*. This is crucial because, where the concept of choice is inherently individualist, responsibility is social. We make choices for ourselves, but we are responsible for – and to – others. As such, the notion of responsibility pulls *men* back into the equation, in a way that makes them accountable.

Conclusion: "What am I going to tell my daughter?" FNL's Feminist Legacy

By the time Season Four arrived, the Taylors had already worked through a series' worth of marital turmoil and tension, and the show seemed content to allow their relationship to recede into the background a bit, as it focused more intently on its younger characters. Indeed, one of the most refreshing aspects of the last two seasons is the way in which *FNL* depicted Tami and Eric's collegial relationship (both at home and at work), in a manner that reframed such a partnership as normal – even mundane. Thus, not only did the show invite viewers to work through a

Lights certainly does not offer a full-throated critique of the structural inequalities that undergird gender discrimination within the U.S., it does, at the very least, offer a pointed counter-narrative to the kinds of postfeminist tropes that can distort and discourage critical thinking on these issues.

critical reassessment of postfeminist values, but it also made the bold statement that heterosexual marriages could exist – and, indeed, flourish – beyond traditionalist notions of gender identity

However, given the show's commitment to wrestling with issues of gender, marriage, choice and responsibility, it was perhaps inevitable – and entirely appropriate – that it returned to these themes in the show's final episodes. It does so through the storyline discussed earlier, in which Tami fields the surprise offer from Braemore College, located in Philadelphia, to become their new Dean of Admissions ("The March"). The ensuing struggle over whether or not to accept the offer, ending with Eric's ultimate decision to follow Tami as she takes her dream job, serves as a fitting coda to the progressive depiction of gender relations cultivated by the show.

What is perhaps most important about this final narrative arc, however, is the *way* in which Eric finally comes around. When Tami makes her final argument for taking the job, she invokes not only herself, but their daughter:

> "It's my turn, babe. I have loved you, and you have loved me, and we have compromised. Both of us. For *your* job. And now its time to talk about doing that for *my* job. Because otherwise, what am I going to tell our daughter?" ("Always").

Here, by invoking *Julie*, Tami completely reframes the Taylor marriage in terms of its generational consequences. She reminds Eric that the stakes involved in their relationship are not simply personal, but political (to use an old phrase). Specifically: their personal decisions will help to create the social reality within which their own daughters will have to live.

This point is driven home a scene later when Jess Meriweather, a High School student who has been acting as Eric's student-assistant, tells him that she will not be back the following year because her family is moving away. As a young girl who dreams of becoming a head football coach,

Jess's story has its own feminist arc – and one that has been engineered, in part, by Eric, who agrees to let her assist him throughout the season. In a touching moment, Eric tells her that she will be missed and offers to call the coach of her new High School to recommend that she be taken on as his assistant. In many ways, Jess acts as a kind of surrogate daughter for Eric (just as his players often act as surrogate sons). As such, this moment seems to remind of him of the question posed by Tami: *"What am I going to tell my daughter?"* In his very next scene, Eric is shown rushing from school to find Tami at the local Mall, to tell her that he has decided to leave Dillon, the Panthers, and his own patriarchal privilege behind for good. "I turned the contract down," he tells her. "It's your turn. I want to go to Philadelphia" ("Always").

This decision – to reframe Eric and Tami's marriage in terms of its consequences for their daughters (both real and symbolic) – is crucial because, as many scholars have argued, postfeminist logic is defined by a profound amnesia regarding the *connection* between past, present and future generations. In today's postfeminist culture, the gains of the feminist movement are not so much rejected, as relegated to an antiquated past; postfeminism assumes that the feminist movement has already succeeded and, hence, can be forgotten (Levine; McRobbie; Tasker & Negra). Eric seems to espouse a similar view in the final season of *FNL* when he tells Tami that the issues they have worked through are settled and long behind them. But Tami (and Julie, and Jess) remind him that the politics of their personal lives are never settled; and matter not just to them, but to their children. In this way, *Friday Night Lights* ends not on a note of feminist "triumph," but on the much more provisional note of steady, ongoing commitment. True equality is an ideal to be cultivated and maintained, not won and then forgotten.

Thus, by challenging and overturning a number of traditionalist narrative tropes that have become ubiquitous within today's postfeminist media culture, *Friday Night Lights* offers a unique depiction of

heterosexual marriage based upon progressive principals of gender equality; principals not usually emphasized within the mainstream media. In so doing, it helps to expand the range of possibilities for reimagining dual-career marriages outside the gendered norms of patriarchal relations.

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