“Stuckness” and the Fraying Promise of Postfeminism in Contemporary Women’s Short Stories

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Abstract

While postfeminism is typically associated with upbeat feelings, such as confidence and resilience, scholars have begun to examine the emergence of less positive feelings alongside the compulsory outward presentation of enthusiasm. This essay examines feelings of “stuckness” in two short stories—“Would Like to Meet” (2014) by May-Lan Tan and “Los Angeles” (2020) by Emma Cline—and how these feelings illuminate the affective regulation of postfeminism. It also makes the case that the short story is an adept form through which to explore the contradictions of neoliberal femininity and that women short story writers are utilizing the tendencies of the form—particularly in regard to the short story’s ending—to re-create the lingering, non-cathartic feelings produced by the deteriorating promise of postfeminist culture.

The protagonists of “*Los Angeles*” (2020) by Emma Cline and “*Would Like to Meet*” (2014) by May-Lan Tan are both stuck. Their lives are marked by instability and precarity: both work in low-paid retail jobs and both rent rooms in shared houses. Yet both characters aspire to more. Alice, the white American protagonist of “Los Angeles,” moves to that city to pursue a career as an actor. Vivien, the protagonist of “Would Like to Meet,” is a London-based art school graduate of Chinese heritage who longs to become an artist. Both characters make frustratingly slow progress toward their career goals, and both make decisions that could put them in danger. After discovering that her younger colleague sold her underwear to a customer, Alice begins to sell her own used underwear to strangers. Vivien responds to a

Contemporary Women’s Writing

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mysterious advertisement in a magazine from a couple seeking "CONSCIOUS … FEMALE FOR SOMETHING REAL," shortly after she is robbed at knifepoint while closing the shop in which she works (Tan 198).

I situate "Los Angeles" and "Would Like to Meet" within a growing body of Anglophone short fiction published from the early 2010s onward, in which women writers explore the contradictions involved in growing up and coming of age in a postfeminist culture. Writers such as Jenny Zhang, Abigail Ulman, and Lucy Caldwell have all published short story collections about girlhood since 2015. Writers who are perhaps better known for their bestselling novels about young womanhood, such as Emma Cline and Sally Rooney, have published short fiction on the same theme. Yet these stories share more than an interest in young women and girls: they also share a complex engagement with feeling and an ambivalent attitude toward femininity.

The short story has been utilized by women writers since at least the nineteenth century, when New Woman writers saw the potential that the form offered, as Clare Hanson has argued, for the "exploration of uncharted or hidden areas of women's subjective experience" (4). Within the context of postfeminism, the short form has a distinctive history: two popular novels often associated with postfeminism, Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996) and Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) both began as newspaper columns and were subsequently novelized, while perhaps the first use of the term "postfeminist fiction" occurred in Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell's short story anthology *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995). More recently, Emma Young (2015) argued that British short story writers writing at the turn of the millennium, such as Helen Simpson and Michèle Roberts, made use of the short story to create a dialogue between second- and third-wave feminist concerns and postfeminism. There is a prevailing tendency for women to use the short story form to express and examine the complexities of feminism and femininity, particularly during periods of cultural shift and change. "Would Like to Meet" and "Los Angeles" are representative of a specific moment in women's short story writing, in which women writers are exploring what happens when the promises made to women by the postfeminism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries began to lose their purchase. The two stories together illuminate the kinds of feeling that emerge when the affective promises of postfeminism—empowerment, confidence, and happiness—are not available to those who had anticipated them.

The concept of postfeminism has been muddied with ambiguity and criticism since it gained popularity in the late twentieth century. It is sometimes thought of as a kind of anti-feminism or a backlash to second- and third-wave feminism, yet postfeminism is not a straightforward rejection of feminism. Rather, as Angela McRobbie argues, postfeminist discourses take the language of feminism, using vocabulary such as "empowerment" and "choice" to create an individualistic agenda, which situates itself as a trendier, more playful replacement for feminism (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 1). I follow Stéphanie Genz in paying close attention to the ways in which postfeminism has shifted from a more celebratory "*boom*

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model" that emphasized choice, freedom, and consumerism, to a "recessionary" or "*bust*" postfeminism, which emerged in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and which (though still concerned with consumption and self-determination) is different in tone, marked by ambivalence, precarity, and uncertainty in place of unbridled optimism (205). Following Rosalind Gill, I also understand postfeminism as a "distinctive sensibility," which has become increasingly reliant upon the cultivation of certain kinds of feeling (147). Where postfeminism in the 1990s and early 2000s tended to be characterized by upbeat and optimistic feelings that celebrated women's empowerment, more recent work has begun to investigate the articulation of dissonant affective positions in postfeminist media. For example, Amy Shields Dobson and Akane Kanai point out that, while television shows such as *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) reflect a "highpoint of individualistic and neoliberal ideals," this celebratory narrative is less prominent in more recent shows, such as Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012–2017) and Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* (2016–2019), among others: the young women characters in these shows are insecure and anxious, which cracks "the shiny veneer of girl powered neoliberal mythologies" (7–8). Yet while scholars have examined the ways these dissonant feelings are articulated and explored in film and television, less scholarly attention has been paid thus far to the ways postfeminist culture is questioned and critiqued in contemporary literature.

My method in this essay is to pay close attention to "Would Like to Meet" and "Los Angeles" to show how these texts engage with the politics of feeling in contemporary postfeminist discourses. I begin by considering the postfeminist promise of success and fulfillment (to which Alice and Vivien are both attached) in relation to the metaphor of light and the imperative to "shine." The emphasis on progress and self-improvement creates stuckness, a kind of feeling that can be understood in terms of what Lauren Berlant calls the "impasse"—a space in which "one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the *same space*" (*Cruel Optimism* 199). Alice and Vivien both try to take steps toward their goals, and while these steps have "the sheen of building blocks, tokens being collected," they do not produce any real progress (Cline 37). Instead, the characters remain stuck and experience "a kind of paralysis" (Tan 197). My analysis is intersectional: I pay particular attention to the ways Vivien's fantasies of postfeminism intersect with post-racial fantasies, by looking at how the model minority myth—a pervasive stereotype that characterizes Asian Americans and British Asians monolithically as a high achieving, obedient, and assimilating group—works to enforce optimistic feeling in the face of glaring inequality.[1] I go on to show how Alice and Vivien become alienated from happiness when they use happiness as a mask; their inability to express dissatisfaction or move toward change creates feelings of stuckness. Finally, I consider the question of form, making the case that the short story is an adept literary channel for feelings of stuckness. I argue that women writers deploy the short story's ending, which as Young points out, is often approached by the reader with "high expectations," to capture the complex and frustrating feelings created

1 See, for example, Nguyen.

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by the fraying promise of postfeminism (*Contemporary Feminism and Women's Short Stories* 12).

Glow Up: Postfeminist Luminosities, Light, and the Extraordinary

The satisfying creative futures that Alice and Vivien anticipate are what Lauren Berlant calls fantasies of the "good life." Berlant argues that people form optimistic attachments to objects, habits, other people, ideologies, and fantasies themselves when believed to confer certain rewards, which might include material rewards, such as access to money, food, and shelter, or social and affective rewards, such as happiness, fulfillment, and acceptance (*Cruel Optimism* 2). These optimistic relations are not inherently cruel but become so when the object of desire "actively impedes the aim" that drew one to the fantasy in the first place (*Cruel Optimism* 1).[2] Alice and Vivien's investment in postfeminist ways of living appears to bring them closer to the rewards they desire, but in fact postfeminism's emphasis on individual agency and self-responsibility obscures the barriers that Alice and Vivien face in pursuit of their goals. Thus, the rewards they expect in exchange for certain ways of being shift even further out of reach.

2 McDermott and Marie-Alix Thouaille have explored postfeminism in relation to cruel optimism in analyses of postfeminist film and television.

There is a cruel irony at play here in the idea that by moving toward an object of desire, it could both appear to be moving closer yet, at the same time, be moving away. Indeed, irony seems to play a role in the organizing affect of both "Los Angeles" and "Would Like to Meet"—what we might think of as their literary "tone"—which Sianne Ngai describes as "unfelt but perceived feeling" (28). For Ngai, there is a "crucial similarity" between a literary text's tone, which is "reducible neither to the emotional response a text solicits from its reader nor to representations of feelings within the world of its story" and "the slippery zone between fake and real feelings" (41). This slippery zone evokes the contradictions of postfeminism, or what Yvonne Tasker refers to as its "doubleness" (73). According to Gill, irony plays a crucial role in the postfeminist sensibility and is often used to express "knowingness" and to establish "a safe distance between oneself and particular sentiments or beliefs" (159). Irony, then, works with blurred and multiple meanings, in which what is actually meant remains unclear. In both stories, we can see the gap between how Alice and Vivien frame events for others and how they experience them. For example, Vivien makes a joke to Amber and Jack about how she had "hired a kid as [her] life coach" (Tan 202)—even though, at the time, she was uncomfortable with this arrangement and "cast around for [the girl's] mother to come and shut her down" (196). The entanglement of contradictory feeling is related to the uncertainty of irony: postfeminist culture demands certain feeling performances of its subjects, which means that it is never clear what is real and what is performed. Similarly, in "Los Angeles," sunshine, good weather, and light are set up as ironic sorts of pathetic fallacies from the first paragraph when we are told

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that there is "no such thing as unending sunshine" (31). The bright weather operates as an extended metaphor for Alice's optimistic faith in the postfeminist promises of success. The golden sunshine and the bright lights and glamor of the film industry suggest opportunity and possibility, yet the world of screens and celebrities also implies a degree of performance and blurs the line between performance and reality. Throughout the story, Alice is concerned with how she appears—"happy with the picture she made"—and takes care to conceal her negative feelings (46). Yet the requirement to express positivity becomes oppressive and inescapable: at the climax of the story when Alice fears she might be kidnapped by a stranger, though she cannot believe it would happen "[i]n the midst of all this unyielding sunshine" (49). Alice believes that her performance of the supposedly right kinds of feeling should protect her, but it does not.

The postfeminist incitement to achieve spectacular success is frequently described in terms of light: women are required to "shine," "glow," or "sparkle." McRobbie borrows from Gilles Deleuze's theory of luminosity to assess the ways in which young women in the UK are subject to increased visibility (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 54–60). Deleuze wrote that visibilities are "forms of luminosity, which are created by the light itself and allow a thing or object to exist only as a flash, sparkle or shimmer" (52, qtd. in *The Aftermath of Feminism* 56). For McRobbie, postfeminism functions as a space of luminosity, a "moving spotlight," which "softens, dramatizes and disguises the regulative dynamics" of neoliberal society (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 54). Girls and young women have appeared ubiquitously in Western media since around the 1990s, yet scant attention is paid to the ways increased visibility translates into regulation, control, and pressure—particularly, as Sarah Projansky argues, for girls who fall outside the boundaries of conventional girlhood (2). Although postfeminism is framed as universally empowering, postfeminist culture is dominated by a specific type of woman: western, white, young, able-bodied, conventionally attractive, and heterosexual. As critic Rebecca Liu points out, the main characters of television shows like *Girls* and *Fleabag* may be "unlikeable," which deviates from the typically fun and positive postfeminist subject, but these women are still highly privileged. Their ability to be cruel and unlikeable is often positioned as a good thing for all women, but Liu argues against this view: "For every celebration of a rich white woman as carelessly destructive with her life as her privileged male counterparts, we should ask what it is that gives her the ability to be so brazen and who is sidelined as collateral." Under the softening light of postfeminism, the unequal dynamics that shape society are concealed, leaving many women in the shadows, striving for their place in the light. This is characteristic of neoliberalism's intensified individuation: women are seen as solely individual subjects, and success (or lack thereof) is cast as a personal failure.

The short story form itself has often been associated with light and, more specifically, with a "flash." Nadine Gordimer uses the metaphor of the "flash of fireflies" to describe the short story, suggesting that the form is characterized by transient glimpses or insights, which more accurately convey "the quality of human

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life" than the consistency of the novel (264). More recently, Sophia Kier-Byfield has developed the relationship between the short story, light, and epiphany by using the concept of the photographic flash to read epiphanic moments in modernist short stories, suggesting that these moments "actually hinder the acquisition of knowledge: both character and reader are left dazzled, rather than closer to the truth" (1). Light is used pervasively as a metaphor for positive affect: it is often associated with discovery, knowledge, and progress: note, for example, the word "enlightenment." Things that shine or sparkle—shooting stars, phosphorescence, diamonds—are often admired and pronounced special or extraordinary, yet their shine is also often transient. Light recurs throughout postfeminist and neoliberal discourse as an incitement for women to be worthy by achieving more: light represents something fleeting, yet the requirement for women to stand out—to be extraordinary—is relentless.

Light is used figuratively to draw attention to the allure of extraordinariness in "Would Like to Meet." Before she went to art school, Vivien felt like she was "carrying a kind of light inside me all the time. My first year of art school, the light went out. Almost overnight, I became deeply ordinary" (197). Light represents Vivien's anticipation of a good-life fantasy in which her individual brilliance will confer on her certain rewards. Where light is often seen as weightless and bright, conjuring feelings of happiness and general positivity, here the light has been lost; its retreat or absence acquires a melancholic tone and even gestures to something distant or ever-so-slightly out of reach. Indeed, a slight, yet pervasive sense of loss undercuts both stories, conveying the difficulty of detaching from the promises of postfeminism. One of the objects for sale in the shop where Vivien works is a Japanese doll that traditionally represents a lost baby. Vivien thinks, "I thought there could be different dolls standing in for the different things that have been lost"—suggesting that she is already caught in the difficult process of detachment (197). McRobbie touches on the idea of "feminism as loss," arguing that this is not a "nostalgia for a sanctified past, and for a golden age of second wave feminism," but rather a "feminism-that-never-was" that women have had to disavow in order to reap the benefits offered by postfeminism (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 94). In other words, though they may accept the empty rhetoric of postfeminist "feminism," the loss of feminist activism is still painful, even when women are unable to articulate this pain.

Alongside career brilliance, financial success—or spending power—is a crucial way the postfeminist woman can accrue value. We can see how this works in the television show *Sex and the City*: the self-made wealth of the four main characters not only communicates their status as independent, empowered, and successful women, it also provides them with the means to buy things. They are cheerful consumers: each purchase provides an opportunity to improve and shape their identities and a new occasion to shine. But, crucially, they choose to do this for themselves: "[T]he fearful terrain of male approval fades away, and is replaced instead with a new horizon of *self-imposed* feminine cultural norms" (McRobbie,

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The Aftermath of Feminism 63, emphasis mine). The friends' economic independence also highlights their supposed freedom from men's authority. This imagined freedom establishes them as empowered postfeminist women, who seemingly "have it all." The accrual and display of independent wealth is, as Mary Celeste Kearney explains, "a primary measure" of their worth (265). The characters of *Sex and the City* demonstrate how the figure of the self-reliant postfeminist woman depends on money. In comparison, Alice and Vivien have less money than those characters and therefore less freedom to construct their identities. Their behavior is strictly policed: they must conform to the requirements of their jobs. Alice is required to act "as shorthand for the brand" on the shop floor by wearing only the brand's clothes and by presenting herself as on display as an attractive young woman: "It was the girls that management wanted out in front" (Cline 33). Although she initially feels "stirred" by the clothes she receives for free, they were chosen by her manager and are too small; she later considers them "junk," and they "cut into her crotch," but still she must wear them—thus highlighting the physical discomfort of her lack of autonomy (32-33). She is also only permitted to work after having her photograph approved by "corporate," showing further how Alice's life is subject to patriarchal power—in jarring contrast with the rhetoric of postfeminism—as well as calling attention yet again to Alice's physical appearance as her most valuable asset (33).

Frequently in "Los Angeles," women's appearances are associated with money, as a type of commodity or a kind of labor. Alice hopes to become an actress because it "was one of the traditional possibilities for a pretty girl, everyone urging the pretty girl not to waste her prettiness, to put it to good use. As if prettiness was a natural resource, a responsibility you had to see all the way through" (36–37). The word "resource" connotes monetary value, implying that Alice's prettiness is financially valuable. The word "responsibility" suggests moral weight, a requirement to behave correctly. Alice's prettiness is both her own and not her own. She is responsible for it, for maintaining it, yet at the same time, she must keep it within specific parameters. This captures the "double entanglement" of postfeminism, a term McRobbie uses in *The Aftermath of Feminism* to describe the ways postfeminism incorporates seemingly paradoxical stances on gender politics: Alice's beauty is situated as a source of power, shifting the emphasis away from the way her appearance is policed, to what she is able to do with it (16). Alice is encouraged to seek a reassuringly feminine career, whatever will make the most of her beauty. That there might be money to be made from her looks is more important than whether Alice wants to pursue a career in acting: she pursues it primarily "because other people told her she should" (36).

Although Alice and Vivien remain attached to the possibility that they will become upwardly mobile, the themes of wealth disparity and economic precariousness are woven through both stories. Walking through the neighborhoods of Los Angeles, Alice sees "cheapo apartment buildings" alongside the "nicer homes" with "lush backyards," each one "like a primer on being human, on what choices you might

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make. As if life might follow the course of your wishes" (48). Alice is surrounded by evidence that the promised social mobility is not available to everyone, yet she engages the "vivid imaginaries" people construct about how their lives might unfold, the fantasies of the good life that they remain attached to and that seem to imbue life with hope and meaning (McDermott 46). Vivien thinks of a way to escape her job at the shop—"[T]here's nothing else for me around here, and I shouldn't have to commute for the kind of money I make" (197)—but she had essentially already tried everything else. The promises of freedom, autonomy, and independence are situated in the characters' hopes for future success and are at odds with their day-to-day lives. In the context of neoliberalism, such low-paid workers are invisible, and they do not become visible unless they transcend class and inequality to rise to extraordinary success. While their wealthier customers are free to shop and spend, the day "just another asset" to them, Alice and Vivien are required to clock in and out, their days strictly regulated (Cline 39). The fiscal connotations of the word "asset" highlight the fact that all these freedoms—financial, temporal, expressive—are bound together.

Alice and Vivien's slow-growing frustration is indicative of the impasse. Alice thinks about "[t]he sad fact of this city: the thousands of actresses with their thousands of efficiency apartments and teeth-whitening strips, the energy generated by thousands of treadmill hours and beach runs, energy dissipating into nothingness" (36). The uncomfortably cramped spaces, pointless moving about, and never reaching a destination conjure visual representations of the impasse. Vivien muses that she "could probably get a better job, in an office or something, if I took out a few of my piercings and covered my chest piece"; but that would distance, perhaps even detach her from the dream of becoming a successful artist, which she is reluctant to give up: "This is all I have left of that part of me" (197). Changing her appearance for office work would make Vivien ordinary and detach her further from association with the world of art, a space of luminosity to which she clings. Similarly, Alice remains wedded to the luminous space of becoming an actress: in other words, she remains attached to the possibility that the rewards promised by postfeminism are just around the corner. Giving up on her dream would foreclose that possibility. Berlant argues that it is "awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working" (*Cruel Optimism* 263). Letting go of a fantasy of the good life in which one has invested means admitting delusion: it is embarrassing, and it is destabilizing. This indicates why Alice and Vivien remain stuck, unable to fully relinquish the glow that working toward something gives them: remaining close to the fantasy of the good life sustains the illusion that it will—or at least might—soon be reached. When Alice's mother tells Alice that she does not want to pay for her acting classes anymore, Alice panics: "How to explain—if Alice wasn't taking a class, if she wasn't otherwise engaged, that meant her terrible job, her terrible apartment, suddenly carried more weight, maybe started to matter" (Cline 42). Alice's attachment to the postfeminist promise of personal and professional fulfillment might cause her great unhappiness, but it is better to hold onto its promises than detach—the thought of

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giving up is too much to bear. Alice's employment at the clothing store is acceptable only as a stepping stone on the path to a better future. If the destination is removed, she is relegated to the ordinary, to stagnation. Striving toward something is more reassuring than standing still and surrendering.

The "Model Minority" Myth and "Minor Feelings"

As a woman of color and a low-wage worker, Vivien is not the privileged subject of postfeminism. However, idealization of certain subjects within postfeminist culture does not exclude others from taking part: disadvantaged women are encouraged to engage as though they had the same opportunities and likelihood of success as their privileged counterparts. Jess Butler describes this as a "double-edged sword": all women are able to participate in the deployment of postfeminism and "enjoy its rewards" in exchange for silence on any inequality and discrimination they experience (50). This is another paradox of postfeminism: women who experience discrimination—women of color, women living in poverty, disabled women—are all encouraged to assist with the consolidation of the very hierarchies that continue to oppress them on the pretext that such hierarchies no longer exist. For women of color, denying that their ability to access the same rewards and opportunities as white women ignores structural racial bias, and by focusing on narratives of individual triumph over collective struggle, the would-be postfeminist is diverted from widespread racial inequality. When attention and visibility are restricted to the few purportedly "brilliant" and "hard-working" individuals who progress on the same trajectory as successful white women, to great achievement, the conditions that cause other women to become stuck are rendered invisible.

For Deleuze and Félix Guattari, feelings of stuckness, however, stimulate the creation of "minor literature," which they define as the writing "which a minority constructs within a major language" (16). In contrast to major literatures' focus on "the individual concern," Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the "cramped space" of minor literature "forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it" (17). The idea of minor literature as a "cramped space" evokes the confines of the short story, which has often been considered a minor literary form in the West and the global North, particularly in comparison to the considerably longer form of the novel. Meanwhile, the idea that one story might "vibrat[e]" inside another suggests the doubleness, which is characteristic of postfeminism (discussed above). In addition, "vibrating"—an often pointless or wasteful moving back and forth—recalls Berlant's concept of impasse. The word "impasse" is also used by Deleuze and Guattari in the sense of a deadlock or a place in which no progress is possible—yet nonetheless creates the conditions necessary for minor literature or "the impossibility of not writing" (16). The type of feelings Ngai explores in her book *Ugly Feelings*—"minor and generally

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unprestigious feelings"—are feelings that we would also expect to find in minor literature (6).

Ngai argues that ugly feelings diagnose situations of obstructed agency, such as the "cramped space" or impasse described by Deleuze and Guattari. Identifying these ugly feelings in a literary text can enable us to tease out how a character's agency is blocked in the narrative. Building on Ngai's work, Cathy Park Hong argues that the widespread denial and minimization of racial discrimination results in what she too calls "minor feelings": feelings that are "negative, dysphoric, and therefore untelegenic, built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed" (55). Like ugly feelings, Hong's minor feelings are produced by deep inequality and do not lend themselves easily to political change, nor to celebratory narratives of triumph. Minor feelings "are not generated from major change but from lack of change, in particular, structural racial and economic change" (Hong 56). Minor feelings, then, are feelings of stuckness: they emerge through being stuck in a set of unchanging social circumstances—crucially, circumstances that are denied by the dominant white society.

The gulf between Vivien and her white contemporaries is thrown into sharp focus during her date with Jack and Amber. Both characters read as white and are described as looking like works of art created by European men (Amber like a Modigliani painting; Jack like an Egon Schiele), which associates them with the whiteness of the European art industry and thus suggests they are readily assimilable by that industry in a way Vivien could never achieve. Jack and Amber also both have better jobs than Vivien within the art world she strives to be part of. Amber works as a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum and Jack works as a font designer. The juxtapositions of the glamor and success of Jack and Amber's professional lives with Vivien's—working in a gift shop and selling "a few drawings on Etsy"—make the latter's life seem lackluster and relatively disappointing, by contrast (Tan 196). The story does not say explicitly that Vivien's race or gender has anything to do with her comparatively lesser success. Indeed, there is only a passing reference to Vivien's Chinese heritage to suggest a point of blocked agency, an occasion for minor feelings. As Hong points out, minor feelings are untelegenic; they are not easily communicable or intelligible. The flat, lingering feelings of stuckness work as a kind of affective pressure point, and they invite us to recognize the ways in which Vivien's experiences fail to match up to the promises she has made.

Asian people living in the West and global North (particularly in the US) are often stereotyped as the "model minority," as Sapna Cheryan and Galen Bodenhausen explain, meaning that Asian people are depicted as a uniformly hard-working and nondisruptive group and are accepted into the middle and upper classes because of these presumed traits (199–203). This situates them as different from other immigrants, particularly those in Black and Latin communities, who are stereotyped instead as lazy and disruptive and who must work still harder to be accepted. This set of myths produces a double-edged sword: Asian people are supposedly accepted,

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yet at the same time their ability to speak or be heard is obstructed. As Vietnamese novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen puts it, "How could we have anything valid to feel or say about race when we, as a model minority, were supposedly accepted by American society?" This is a cruelly optimistic relation: by behaving in ways that enable them to reap the rewards of (supposed) social acceptance, Asian people are prevented from taking action toward social change. Both "model" Asians and young women are viewed as privileged subjects of social change. The inequalities of the past are no longer seen as issues but as solved, and the dominant view of Asian people and young women alike as accepted and empowered conceals the ways in which they are not. Instead, if they fail to achieve what is expected of them, they are blamed for not being resilient enough. It is their own failure of spirit or giving in to negativity that is to blame, a narrative that obscures the socioeconomic inequalities that shape people's potential. Where postfeminism encourages young women to be hyper-visible and "shine," young Asian women are subject to additional constraints. The stereotype of the "model minority" means that, while success is expected, it must be achieved quietly—lest it threaten white people and prompt racial backlash. As Chao-Ju Chen points out, "Western feminist discourses that grant visibility to Asian women constantly label them as different and categorize them according to a series of cultural stereotypes" (10). Being culturally visible as an Asian young woman in a Western postfeminist culture carries a different weight from that of a young white woman. Where postfeminism optimistically frames all women as able to reap the same rewards, Asian women are stuck between contradictions that are difficult to reconcile.

Neoliberalism's narrow focus on the individual—and particularly on narratives of transformative individual success—obscures the political conditions behind the feelings of stuckness in "Would Like to Meet." Despite being orphaned at the age of seven and growing up as a girl of minority ethnicity in a Western culture, Vivien was able to achieve success (in the form of an art degree) by working hard and downplaying her difficult life experiences. She overcame her obstacles to achieve her goals. After this success, she anticipates continual progression and other rewards—financial and career success, but also affective rewards, such as acceptance, fulfillment, and happiness. But these do not materialize. Vivien becomes disillusioned about the promise of rewards awaiting her just around the corner. Her good life fantasy is not nearer despite how hard she works; rather, she is stuck in one place with the fantasy continually moving further out of reach.

The Happiness Masquerade

In *The Promise of Happiness,* Sara Ahmed argues that the expectation and projection of happiness onto certain subjects mask other feelings. Drawing on Betty Friedan's figure of the "happy housewife," Ahmed shows how the labor of the housewife is erased "under the sign of happiness," describing the housewife's concealed negative

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feelings as an "infection underneath her beaming smile" (50). The "melancholic migrant" is bound by a similar "happiness duty" not to speak about racism or negatively about colonial histories: "The happiness duty is a positive duty to speak of what is good but can also be thought of as a negative duty not to speak of what is not good, not to speak from or out of unhappiness" (158). The expectation of happiness from certain groups of people alienates them from happiness. The requirement to remain silent about negative experiences and to present oneself as happy creates uncomfortable and dysphoric feelings. One must hold contradictory beliefs: that one is promised happiness yet knows that one cannot be happy due to political conditions, and those conditions are obscured or held at bay by the neoliberal postfeminist duty to perform happiness. Ahmed describes it as a "shock" to realize "that the world you are in is not available to you, that you do not belong in the world that you imagined would give you happiness in return for being a certain way" (152). Falling for a false promise is embarrassing and demoralizing, and it keeps a person in place. Happiness, then, deserves closer scrutiny. Rather than being something unquestionably "good," it plays a part in a highly gendered and racialized system of affective regulation involving social and moral codes regarding who can or should feel what and when.

Alice's drama teacher, Tony, sends his students a motivational quotation every morning, for example, "REACH FOR THE MOON. IF YOU FALL SHORT, YOU MAY LAND ON A STAR!" (38). Such mottos support the postfeminist project of encouraging women to work endlessly on themselves. This language revives the twentieth-century trend of positive thinking and could enable literary epiphany in a short story; perhaps Alice (or the rare Alice) could harness her mind to achieve the success she desires, which is just waiting to be revealed. However, instead of feeling inspired or reaching a higher plane of insight, the actual character's response is to try to remove herself from Tony's mailing list. She never succeeds, despite emailing the studio manager and Tony himself. This evokes the oppressiveness of the happiness duty: it is impossible to escape. Any dissatisfaction Alice feels must be smoothed over by the happiness projected onto her as a pretty, young white woman chasing her dreams; her happiness is already socially scripted. Happiness's oppression recurs throughout the story. Alice is told to smile by John, her manager, during the interview for her low-wage job. Although employees of the company are not paid much, the women are still expected to smile and perform happiness, to make their more privileged customers feel comfortable.

The imperatives of both happiness and extraordinariness are gendered. Women are held to a higher bar than men in both ways; they are regularly encouraged to think positively and outwardly perform happiness, and this is even more marked for non-Western women and women of color, as Ahmed's work shows. The performance of happiness in this context functions as an act of submission, a relinquishing of power. To be angry or dissatisfied is the first step toward enacting change or finding solidarity with others, but happiness forecloses the possibility of both. Happiness implies satisfaction and the view that nothing needs to change.

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When describing comments made in the 2006 BBC television show, *The Happiness Formula*, Ahmed suggests that happiness is imagined as "what sticks people together" in a kind of "social glue" (121). Happiness is presented in "Would Like to Meet" and "Los Angeles" as social glue, something heavy that sticks to the characters, weighing them down. In contrast to the dominant perception of happiness as something liberating, in a postfeminist context, happiness functions as a glue in the sense that it holds women in place, unable to achieve the social mobility and success they were assured would be readily available to them. The projection of happiness keeps people stuck and thus performs an important political function as well: women are required to disavow political (particularly feminist) activism as something negative and take up a new, supposedly apolitical kind of femininity—a smiling and shiny one, in which change is not needed because it has always already occurred.

When she is threatened in the shop, Vivien feels an impulse to project happiness but resists: "I knew what was required, an ultimate act of salesmanship, but I couldn't think of a single good thing I'd done or might do" (Tan 195). Vivien feels she must "sell" herself—and her life—as something positive and therefore valuable, to prevent her attacker from disposing of it. She thinks about inventing "a fiancé and a baby," to evoke her worth in relation to others through their presumably common bond in family life and her implied capacity for spousal and maternal care (Tan 195). As both McRobbie (*Feminism and the Politics of Resilience*) and Catherine Rottenberg have pointed out, the weight given to career success as a source of women's value is not intended to come at the expense of family. Rather, women are encouraged to "balance a spectacularly successful career with a satisfying home life" (Rottenberg 428). McRobbie even goes so far as to suggest that "cultural intelligibility as a young woman is now tilted towards the achievement of 'affluent, middle-class maternity'" (*Feminism and the Politics of Resilience* 32). We can see how Vivien leaps from one fantasy of femininity to the other: if she cannot prove her happiness (and therefore her value) through career success, perhaps she can do so through invocation of the domestic. Ultimately, she gives up on trying to prove her worth and tells the attacker that she is "a failure" and "necessary to no one" (Tan 195). As this disclosure also suggests, however, Vivien is trying painfully also to negotiate a way out of her impasse, and she is detaching from fantasies of the good life. For Ahmed, happiness can "involve a project of social description: to see happily is not to see violence, asymmetry, or force" (132). In the face of looming death, Vivien sees all too clearly. Contrary to our expectations, it is not her lies about family that save her but, rather, her admission of feelings of worthlessness.

In the aftermath of the attack, Vivien thinks that "if my life was a movie, this was when I'd decide to be artificially inseminated, open a cake-making business, or cycle across South America" (197). Women are not expected to dwell on their hardships but instead "bounce back." Theorized by Gill and Orgad as "the amazing bounceback-able woman," she defies adversity and precarity by springing back enthusiastically from any crisis or challenge she confronts. For Gill and Orgad, resilience is a characteristic demanded in contexts of inequality and austerity, as

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"ways to navigate and survive pain, risk, difficulties and unhappiness" (490). The articulation of negative feelings would exhibit and perpetuate a person's individual failings and would add to those failures an inability to "bounce back": resilience itself requires that "negative experiences can—and must—be reframed in upbeat terms" (Gill and Orgad 477). Both Vivien and Alice use bounceback-ability as a tool to hide their anxieties and present themselves as fun, carefree, and in control. But their negative feelings do not disappear. While those feelings may be temporarily papered over with happiness performances, it is precisely that obfuscation that contributes to stuckness. Both characters articulate unhappy or uncomfortable experiences as reassuring, lighthearted stories for other people. As well as joking about hiring a child as her life coach, Vivien tells Jack and Amber that her parents' death when she was seven was "not as bad as it sounds" (202). Discomfort is softened into something more palatable—a warm, indifferent nonchalance. Similarly, when Alice fears she may be kidnapped, she imagines recounting the experience to her friend: "She and Oona were used to telling each other stories like this, to dramatizing incidents so that everything took on an ironic, comical tone, their lives a series of encounters that happened to them, but never really affected them" (50). Humor and irony allow both characters to speak about negative experiences by emptying them of negative affect. When Alice had sex with her manager, the experience "had been bearable because it would become a story, something condensed and communicable. Even funny" (50). These anecdotes imply that certain feelings or experiences are not expressible unless and until they are translated into something light, something at least adjacent to happiness, and emptied of political potential.

Stuck with "Stuckness"

In their hopes of realizing certain good life fantasies, both Alice and Vivien make choices that expose them to a greater risk of violence. Vivien goes on a date with a couple she picked out of a magazine, and Alice meets with strangers to sell them her underwear. Both actions represent attempts to break out of their impasses and reach the promised postfeminist fulfillment. After the knifepoint attack, Vivien seems to abruptly detach from her artistic fantasies and instead seek validation in the form of romantic relationships and in a fantasy of belonging. In the lead-up to the date, Vivien's feelings are hardly described at all, and when Amber tells her they do not want to see her again, she simply wonders, "if I just hadn't been a good fit" (Tan 206). Nevertheless, her disappointment is conveyed by the hopefulness she had begun to cultivate about the prospect of a future with her new partners: "I began to picture museum afternoons and picnics in the park" (Tan 205). Conjuring up images of sunshine and light, as Vivien walks home while it is also still light outside, this passage evokes the space of luminous possibility that the relationships had represented. Despite Vivien's downplaying her difficult life experiences and playing up her fun, upbeat side, this last-ditch attempt to embody the postfeminist ideal fails.

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When Alice's faith in the potential of her acting career dwindles, she seeks validation by selling her underwear, thus equating her sexual desirability literally with money. Although her motivation to sell her underwear is, at least in part, related to her financial circumstances, Alice also seems to be seeking power or control. When Alice's friend Oona first tells Alice that she has sold her underwear, "Alice's stomach dropped with an odd mix of worry and jealousy, an uncertainty about who exactly had been tricked" (41). This line captures the doubleness of postfeminism. Alice knows, on the one hand, that selling her underwear is potentially dangerous because she knows that men's sexual violence remains a threat to women (despite the postfeminist insistence that it has been mostly resolved). On the other hand, she is jealous of the way Oona plays with her sexual power, presenting herself as a paragon of idealized femininity by playing the role Gill has characterized as the "sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman" who is "forever 'up for it'" (151). Throughout "Los Angeles," Alice is oppressed and objectified by men; selling her underwear seems a chance to tip the balance of power back in her favor and use men as they use her. At the end of the story, Alice finds herself stuck in a car with a dodgy customer and wonders, "[w]ho would feel bad for her? She had done this to herself" (52). Self-responsibility is linked to the postfeminist emphasis on choice. But, in this instance, a reader is compelled to ask: is this Alice's fault? Or to put it another way, does Alice have another choice? The narrative offers Alice no other way to exercise power, no other way to break out of the repetitive stasis of her life.

For Valerie Shaw, there should always be a "definite moment" at which the meaning of a short story is made clear, a moment of "radiant insight," often termed an "epiphany" (193–94). However, the supposed insights brought by the epiphanic moment are called into question in these postfeminist stories. As Kier-Byfield suggests, this bright moment can instead leave character and reader "dazzled" rather than enlightened (1). By playing into archetypal narrative tropes in which subjects triumph against the odds, both "Los Angeles" and "Would Like to Meet" lead us to expect a transformative light-bulb moment in which the protagonists take control of their lives and enact change. Indeed, this expectation rises as we see both characters take active steps toward change. However, ultimately, they remain stuck in the same space, and our expectations of progress, change, and self-invention are frustrated.

Both stories work structurally as well as at the level of imagery and affect, to suggest stuckness. "Los Angeles" closes with Alice literally trapped inside a vehicle, and the circular structure of "Would Like to Meet" ends with Vivien in the bath, reading a magazine—that is, in the same place as when she initially decided to respond to Jack and Amber's advertisement. The little hope for change that each character had begun to manifest is crushed, and this deflates our hopes for a happy ending; both Alice and Vivien appear trapped in unending cycles. Both narratives culminate not in the moment of change or revelation with which short stories often entice us and which postfeminist discourses promise women as a tool of progress, but end instead in a lack of illumination. This produces a frustrating, disorienting sense of contradiction since we have been dazzled by what seemed promised

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only to end with Alice and Vivien still stuck, going nowhere. Their impasse, whose negotiation had been promised and future progress envisaged, stops short.

Despite their bold actions, both Alice and Vivien remain trapped inside the affective confines of postfeminism. Neither character exhibits the heightened feelings we might expect from them when they are in situations with high emotional stakes. When Vivien is told that Jack and Amber do not want to see her again, she does not react; similarly, Alice shows little fear of the customers to whom she sells her underwear—until the end of the story when she falls into obvious danger. Although at times, Alice shows signs of anxiety, events are quickly reframed in a way that makes her seem unaffected. Her feelings are flat and level, with little fluctuation. For Berlant, flat affect or "underperformed emotion" is produced when "events that would have been expected to be captured by expressive suffering … appear with an asterisk of uncertainty" ("Structures" 193). Flat affect creates uncomfortable feelings of isolation for the reader: the scene is not immediately emotionally intelligible, and we are shut out from a collective sense of affective belonging. Yet Berlant further suggests that underperformed emotion can occur in "a scene of appeal for help in shifting the way things are" ("Structures" 195). Functioning in a similar way to Ngai's "ugly feelings," these flat feelings are not overtly directed towards action, but they disclose situations marked by stuckness.

The use of flat affect in these two stories nonetheless creates a space of stillness for the reader amid the perpetual motion of impasse and encourages us to attend to the implications of the affective deadlock. How and why do postfeminist subjects reach this place? Why are their feelings flat when the world around them seems full of optimism and light? Despite registering a "recession from melodramatic norms," flat affect functions in a similar way to melodrama, as a bid for attention (Berlant, "Structures" 193). In a world in which overperformed and exaggerated emotions are the norm, melodrama would not gain special attention; thus, the turn to underperformed emotion can stand out. When Vivien is robbed at knifepoint, for example, we expect action that demonstrates her intense emotions. We might expect Vivien to cry or call the police, which would show us her fear and panic. Instead, she takes money from her savings account to replace the stolen money and focuses on her desire for a "fish finger sandwich with ketchup" (195). We do not obtain the catharsis we expect, and so the scene raises questions. It asks us to think about how the affective regulation of postfeminism obstructs the flow of feeling. Flat feelings are slow feelings: dawning realizations as opposed to instantaneous flashes of insight. They leak into the cracks between celebration and despair.

In addition to contextualizing some of the ways in which fraying attachments to postfeminist ways of living are being conveyed in contemporary women's short stories, this essay has investigated how the blurred and contradictory meanings of postfeminism—its doubleness—work in "Would Like to Meet" and "Los Angeles" at the level of feeling. Certain expectations that the short story form sets up—particularly those of insight and climactic revelation—are frustrated and, instead, the story captures the feeling of being stuck. An epiphany is an individual experience

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that necessarily lends itself toward change—even if only in the form of insight—which means that it is ideally suited to perpetuate the project of neoliberalism. The ambiguous endings of "Would Like to Meet" and "Los Angeles" resist revelation and the suggestion of change we hope for. The constant, fretful motion of the impasse, with its performances of productivity and positivity, masks the creeping sense of futility that characterizes the affective experience of neoliberal femininity. The short story, which entices us towards illumination, then, is an apposite form through which also to channel flat feelings. The unfulfilled expectation of insight works structurally to suggest the unfulfilled promise of postfeminism. As readers, we are denied the catharsis, the moment of narrative triumph that we expect. We are made to feel the dissonance that characterizes Alice and Vivien's experiences, reeling between one false promise and the next. We might ask ourselves, how do we continue to bear these slow, frustrating feelings? Yet we already know the answer: we go forward, we keep moving.

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