

## **The One with the Feminist Critique: Revisiting Millennial Postfeminism with *Friends***

In the years that followed the completion of its initial broadcast run, which came to an end on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2004 with the airing of the tenth season finale “The Last One” (S10 E17 and 18), iconic millennial US sitcom *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004) generated only a moderate amount of scholarly writing. Most of it tended to deal with the series principally in terms of its institutional context, and to discuss it as an example of “must-see TV” -- appointment viewing of the kind that was prevalent in 1990s television culture. This, of course, was prior to the widespread normalization of time-shifted viewing practices to which the online era has since given rise (Lotz 2007, 261-274; Curtin and Shattuc 2009, 49; Gillan 2011, 181).

*Friends* was also the subject of a small number of pieces of scholarship that interrogated the show’s negotiation of the cultural politics of gender. Some noteworthy entries that emerged in the mid-2000s included, for example, Naomi Rockler’s discussion of its liberal feminist individualism, and what she argued to be the postfeminist depoliticization of the hollow feminist rhetoric that intermittently rose to prominence in the show’s hierarchy of discourses of gender, and in its treatment of women’s issues (2006). The same year also saw the publication of work by Kelly Kessler that interrogated issues and problems arising from some of the limitations inherent to the show’s depiction and treatment of queer femininities (2006). The same year also saw acknowledgement in a piece by feminist television scholars Janet McCabe and Kim Akass of the significance of *Friends* as a key text of postfeminist television culture (2006). In their contextual overview of feminist television criticism that spans the period from second wave feminism to their mid-2000s time of writing, McCabe and

Akass rightly situate *Friends* alongside, and in relation to, a number of contemporaneously running series that have been much more widely discussed and critiqued by feminist scholars, critics and commentators as touchstone texts for US television culture's various takes on gender roles and gender performance in the period of millennial postfeminism (2006, 115). These texts have long served as textual reference points for and symptomatic examples of television's negotiation of the postfeminist cultural zeitgeist of the late 1990s and early to mid-2000s. Specifically, they characterize *Friends* directly as a "post-feminist series" (115), placing it explicitly alongside some of its most iconically postfeminist contemporaries in the US television landscape of the time, including *Ally McBeal* (Fox 1997-2002), *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998-2004) and *Desperate Housewives* (ABC 2004-12).

The three latter series were highly culturally impactful during (and in some cases also after) the period of their respective runs, and all three have generated key entries in what has since become the canon of feminist television studies scholarship to have emerged from the first wave of feminist criticism of postfeminist television culture (e.g. Lotz 2001; Moseley and Read 2001; Dow 2002; Ouellette 2002; Akass and McCabe 2003; Arthurs 2003; Negra 2004; McCabe and Akass 2006; Jermyn 2009). Their cultural currency also gave rise to some of the most noteworthy flashpoints of millennial postfeminist media culture. For example, the publication of the famous June 29, 1998 edition of *Time* magazine, which featured the title character of *Ally McBeal* on its cover as the poster girl for present day postfeminism, above a strapline that posed the question 'Is Feminism Dead?' Akass and McCabe's inclusion of *Friends* amongst this group of popular cultural powerhouses and in the context of its place in the history of feminist television criticism, is certainly indicative of its credentials as a postfeminist text, and therefore its pertinence to the concerns of scholars and critics of postfeminist

culture. But the fact that it receives only a brief namecheck and that no scholarship on the series is cited in contrast to the relative abundance of scholarship cited about its aforementioned contemporaries, is symptomatic of a tendency by feminist scholars to overlook the extent and the specifics of the cultural significance of *Friends*, and its relationship to contemporary gender discourse, especially postfeminism.

Thus, notwithstanding the contributions made by these scholars and others (e.g. Hersey Nickel (2012) on the show's cultural politics of motherhood) to the extant body of work on the series, *Friends* as a site of analysis remains a curious, almost structuring absence from the central canon of the first wave of postfeminist media criticism. This absence is curious considering the place of *Friends* at the forefront of millennial popular culture in the Anglophone world and beyond, but also in light of its long-term syndication both within the US and in countries across the world since that time (Kessler 2013, 936; Lotz 2014, 134; Vogel 2014, 256-257). And it is structuring in the sense that *Friends* was the stage on which many of the familiar tropes of postfeminism that are interrogated across this body of work, appear, in retrospect, to have been tried and tested.

Such tropes, which became normalized in the postfeminist culture of the early twenty-first century, span the spectrum of femininities and masculinities that populate the representational landscape of the series, ranging from the runaway bride discourse that underpins the characterization of Rachel Green (Jennifer Aniston) in the inaugural episode (S1 E1 "The One Where It All Began"); to the homosocial dynamic between Chandler Bing (Matthew Perry) and Joey Tribbiani (Matt Le Blanc) and the masculine gender discourse of 'bromance' that presciently circulates around the series' articulation of their friendship; and the matter-of-fact depiction of Ross Geller's (David Schwimmer) hands-on parenting of his son Ben (and later daughter Emma), among

others. In many ways this corresponds to a configuration of ideal masculinity that I have elsewhere theorized as “postfeminist fatherhood” and which I argue to have been the hegemonically ideal formation of manhood for millennial postfeminism (Hamad 2014). This article thus aims to contribute toward redressing, in part, the absence of *Friends* from feminist media studies scholarship on postfeminist culture at the turn of the millennium through interrogation and contextualization of the series’ negotiation of these tropes of postfeminist gender discourse. In so doing, I therefore argue for the status of *Friends* as an unacknowledged and structuring ur-text of millennial postfeminist media culture.

### **Postfeminist Neo-Traditionalism in *Friends***

Establishing the de facto postfeminist credentials of the series and its central sextet of twenty-something friends, Hersey Nickel observes that, “the characters display no interest in political action and seem unaware that they are benefitting from that of the feminists who came before them.” (2012, 26) With particular reference to the female characters Rachel, Monica Geller (Courteney Cox) and Phoebe Buffay (Lisa Kudrow), she goes on to note that while they “may not be feminists themselves... they have [nonetheless] benefited from the achievements of the second wave.” (Hersey Nickel 2012, 30; see also Projansky 2001, 68-70; McRobbie 2004; Tasker and Negra 2007). Elsewhere, in locating the series within postfeminist culture, the one observation that Akass and McCabe do make about it situates *Friends* as one of a range of contemporaneous media fictions of postfeminism that “perpetuate a narrative of supposedly liberated women desiring romance – longing for a man to *complete* her,” thus correspondent with the arch narrative of innumerable media fictions of millennial postfeminist femininity. (See for example Genz 2009, 2010; Taylor 2011, 89-90)

In feminist media studies our go-to reference points for this figure have tended to be found in the aforementioned central characters of Ally McBeal (Calista Flockhart) and Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) from millennial US television series *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, as well of course as the titular Bridget Jones (Renee Zellweger) of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, both the novel (Fielding 1996) and the film adaptation of the same name (Sharon Maguire, 2001). But there is an equally vividly and arguably even more extremely drawn iteration of this cultural figure in *Friends* in the character of Monica. Most notably in the early seasons, Monica epitomizes this figure of the “postfeminist singleton” (Genz 2009, 135) and she embodies and articulates a discourse of neo-traditionalism that is centered on (white) heteronormative romantic love, and the fetishization of the domestic sphere, encompassing both domestic labor and the inhabitation of domestic space. This mode of neo-traditionalism has featured as a defining component of discourses of postfeminist femininity since the 1980s, going as far back as Susan Faludi's now iconic polemic *Backlash* (1992). Faludi sheds light on the phenomenon of what she describes as the “New Traditionalist” woman who withdraws from the public sphere and “gladly retreats to her domestic shell.” (77) Faludi terms this phenomenon “cocooning” (1992, 77), but in later feminist media studies, it would be more fully theorized and conceptualized by Diane Negra, who terms it “postfeminist retreatism.” (2009, 16)

As Rockler points out, the characterization of Monica is centered upon her “obsessive desire for domestic bliss” and her “fantasies... about domestic tranquility.” (2006, 252) This can be seen not only in her intense desire to couple, which is evident from the early seasons, long prior to the formation and continuation of the long term heteronormative relationship that she goes on to experience with neighbor and friend Chandler. It can also be seen in her fetishistic and obsessive relationship to domestic labor, and her

equally intense desire to perform it, on which a great deal of the show's humor as it relates to Monica's character is contrived and focused. Monica's two great desires as a postfeminist neo-traditionalist peak and dovetail most pointedly and visibly in the 1998 episode "The One With All the Wedding Dresses." (S4 E20) An instance of mistaken identity (typical to the set-up of innumerable sitcom scenarios in this series and beyond) when Monica picks up her soon-to-be sister-in-law Emily's (Helen Baxendale) wedding dress gives her the opportunity to model it in the store – an opportunity that she readily takes. She is so seduced by the image that she is left with of herself as a bride that upon returning home with the dress, she is tempted to once again put it on, and this time to play out a conflated fantasy of both matrimonial and domestic bliss, as she gleefully washes dishes while dressed up like a bride on her wedding day. The bridal image likewise proves so seductive to the show's other female characters that by the end of the episode, both Phoebe and Rachel have joined Monica for her wedding day themed costume party. The episode culminates in a scene that finds the three of them sitting together on the living room sofa, drinking beer and eating popcorn, all dressed in bridal gowns. Moreover, invoking Negra's notion of postfeminist "time crisis" (2009, 57), which she elucidates as the means by which postfeminism defines and provides parameters for the mapping out of a succession of normative life stages for women – specifically in this case the iteration that puts time pressure on women to marry while relatively young that she terms "matrimonial panic" (85) – one of the episode's most noteworthy jokes in this regard comes with Phoebe's deadpan remark to the effect that she rented her bridal dress from a store called "It's Not Too Late."

We are of course supposed to see Monica as excessive and ridiculous in her near obsessive compulsive performance of domestically located neo-traditionalism. There is certainly an argument to be made that the use of humour here has great potential to

complicate and challenge the hegemonic struggle to negotiate postfeminist ideology through her characterization in this way. However, given her long-term narrative arc that adheres both to the inherent conservativeness of the sitcom genre and the dictates of the postfeminist life script for women in having her couple, marry, have children and relocate from the city to the suburbs, the potential for this humour to operate to subversive or counter-hegemonic ends is contained.

### ***Friends* and the Postfeminist “Runaway Bride”**

Staying with bridal themed tropes of postfeminist culture, another symptomatic trait of this kind to be found in *Friends* is the fact that the premise of the series is underpinned by a typically contrived “runaway bride” narrative. Specifically, at the outset of the inaugural episode (S1 E1 “The One Where It All Began”) the formation of the central sextet of titular friends is completed at the outset when, having fled from the altar on her wedding day, away from the suburbs and toward the city, toward her new urban family, and toward what will go on to become her her on-again off-again romantic relationship with Ross, Rachel bursts into Central Perk – the coffee house in which much of the show’s action takes place – looking for her high-school best friend Monica, and quickly finds her.

The cultural figure of the runaway bride of course has a long history far beyond the timeframe of millennial postfeminism. It has in fact long served as an iconic semiotic signifier of and visual and discursive shorthand for newly liberated and/or empowered femininity (Negra 2005), signifying (albeit often ambivalently or ideologically disingenuously) a symbolic rejection of repressive patriarchal social structures and institutions, and the subjugated place of women within them. As a number of scholars have noted elsewhere, the runaway bride is in fact a historically entrenched cultural

archetype that has been used to negotiate and articulate fluctuations and shifts in gender norms and social roles at different historical points over time, and to likewise signify and culturally negotiate the destabilization of patriarchal institutions (Kendall 1990; Rickman 2001; Gehring 2008; Negra 2009; Mizejewski 2010; Hamad 2010). A noteworthy early flashpoint example of this figure in popular US film culture is the character of spoiled heiress Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) in the highly culturally impactful and much discussed classical Hollywood screwball comedy *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934), who flees from her own wedding in the film's narrative denouement. Further well-known flashpoint examples of runaway brides in popular films of subsequent decades have included Elaine Robinson (Katharine Ross) in *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1968) and Judy Benjamin in *Private Benjamin* (Howard Zieff, 1980). This figure has thus persisted over time, and intermittently found renewed purchase as her signification has adapted to shifting cultural, social and political terrain, including of course the onset of millennial postfeminism. The "hypermatrimoniality" (Negra 2009, 81) of millennial postfeminism, in conjunction with its circulation and negotiation of politically disingenuous discourses of liberation and empowerment, re-cemented the representational efficacy and cultural viability of runaway bride narratives and the runaway bride trope.

The figure of the runaway bride and the discourses of gender that circulate around her thus found renewed currency in postfeminist culture, and images and discursive formations of this figure proliferated and intensified in millennial media fictions. These include the Hollywood film and Julia Roberts star vehicle *Runaway Bride* (Garry Marshall, 1999), the 2006 Christmas special of rebooted telefantasy series *Doctor Who* (BBC 2006-) "The Runaway Bride," and as Negra explores at length in her interrogation of postfeminist family values and social fantasies, in the mediation of the bizarre US



news story of runaway bride Jennifer Wilbanks who secretly absconded from her home, her family and her life a few days prior to her planned wedding to her then fiancé (2009, 36-45). The millennial runaway bride was thus, as Negra writes “very much in keeping with a postfeminist media culture that tends to recycle classical representational codes but strip them of their progressive and/or ambivalent features.” (2009, 42)

Notwithstanding the initial challenge posed by these figures to the patriarchal status quo of these narratives, the endgame is nonetheless still to achieve the romantically driven formation of the (white) heteronormative couple. Unsurprisingly, this remains the case in *Friends*. Rachel’s initial status as a runaway bride may have given rise to her inhabitation of a formation of femininity that was characteristically postfeminist, in terms of her being an aspirationally upwardly mobile singleton who transitions from low grade service work to a professional career in the fashion industry, and who seems (in the early seasons) to give equal weight to her friendships (especially with other women) and her (hetero) sexual encounters. And it may have been a jumping off point for a narrative journey that navigated her through a series of archetypally postfeminist pitfalls, pleasures and dilemmas. These include sexual liberation (via her sexual encounters and/or romantic relationships with various male partners over the years), striking a balance between the fulfilment of professional ambition and the attainment of personal satisfaction in the domestic sphere (although when Rachel becomes a mother, the realities of time management inherent to her situation as a working woman and a single mother are glossed over, to say the least), and the felt need to adhere to the gendered demands of the heteronormative life script for a (white, privileged) woman, i.e. get married, have children, retreat to the suburbs, and downshift her career, to name only some. But ultimately *Friends*, like most sitcoms, conceded to the inherent conservatism of the sitcom genre in working towards her eventual (re)coupledness.

Rachel sacrifices the chance to take up a major job opportunity in Paris in order to remain in New York and couple with Ross. (S10 E18 “The Last One”)

### ***Friends* and Postfeminist Masculinities**

Notwithstanding the fact that the corpus of scholarship on postfeminism and postfeminist media culture continues to grow and expand, it remains the case that masculinities in postfeminism remain under explored and relatively lightly theorized. There are key contributions towards redressing this imbalance (made by, for example, Modleski 1988; Byers 1996; Projansky 2001, 84-86; Dow 2006; Thompson 2012; Gill 2014; Abele and Gronbeck-Tedesco 2015; O’Neill 2015; Clark 2016), but postfeminist masculinities remain less well served by scholars than postfeminist femininities on which there now exists a sizeable, robust and variegated body of work. In the main, this is also true where scholarship on *Friends* is concerned. Although the work of Lauren Jade Thompson is highly noteworthy in this regard for its discussion of the show’s male characters in terms of postfeminist masculinity, in her doctoral study of masculine formations in millennial cultures of postfeminist film and television (2012).

As I, and others, have argued elsewhere, “a hallmark of postfeminism is its dualistic approach to configuring ideal masculinities that conflate [otherwise] competing modes of masculinity.” (Hamad 2014, 40). Specifically, through a mutually constitutive binary of strong and sensitive masculinity that renegotiates heretofore outmoded norms by accommodating qualities of masculinity that are reconfigured as desirable following the challenge posed to the hegemony of these norms by second wave feminist re-evaluations of their efficacy, worth and morality. *Friends* was typically attuned to the millennial postfeminist cultural purchase of this formation of masculinity, and this is crystallized in the 1997 episode “The One With Ross’s Thing” (S3 E23) in which Phoebe

is shown to be struggling with the dilemma of which of the two men she is currently dating she should choose to be her boyfriend: hard-bodied alpha male firefighter Vince, or sensitive intellectual kindergarten teacher Jason. Channelling both the cultural logic of postfeminist masculinity and the narrative premise of the high-grossing Hollywood film *Kindergarten Cop* (Ivan Reitman, 1990) in which hard-bodied alpha male police officer John Kimble (Arnold Schwarzenegger) goes undercover as a kindergarten teacher, the solution provided to Phoebe's dilemma is found in the contrivance of a comedic scenario designed to expose her dilemma as having been premised on a false binary of masculinity of Phoebe's own assumptive making.

In the first instance, the two men appear to offer embodiments of different, opposing and seemingly competing modes of masculinity, each of which is presented as desirable and appealing to (hetero) women for different reasons, and in ways that differently correspond to the gender mores of millennial postfeminism such as, for example, the sexual objectification of the male body for the pleasure of a (hetero) female gaze and the problematic suggestion that this constitutes some kind of gesture toward gender equality. As Phoebe explains, "Vince is great... cos' he's a *guy* guy. He's just so burly. *So very burly*;" but, she continues "Jason's really sensitive." And therein lies her dilemma. As the episode continues, a scenario is contrived to showcase the extent to which it is actually a composite of these two masculine modes that provides the formation of masculinity which constitutes the ideal both for the mores of the current cultural moment, and for Phoebe. After considering her options, she chooses Jason and must break the news that she no longer wishes to see Vince, whereupon, to Phoebe's dismayed surprise, he immediately reveals himself to be as "sensitive" and emotionally literate as Jason, breaking down in tears, and retreating to "go write in [his] journal." Thereafter, she pays a visit to Jason, but is equally taken aback by the sight of a toned

and muscular Jason performing alpha masculinity at his apartment when, to her obvious delight, she finds him shirtless and undertaking home improvements with a power tool. She, however, is left with neither Vince nor Jason as a potential romantic partner, when the two men happen upon one another, discover that they have been two-timed and both end their relationships with her. The episode thus ends with a kind of retributive comeuppance for Phoebe, as a result of her ostensibly reductive treatment of their respective masculinities in viewing them as mutually exclusive and dichotomous, and for having reversed the terms of an inherently problematic dynamic in heteronormative gender relations in her determination to adopt behavioural practices associated with hegemonic masculinity and “play the field.”

### **Metrosexuality in *Friends***

The ‘metrosexual’, a term first coined by British journalist Mark Simpson in his now iconic polemic on 1990s masculinity for UK newspaper *The Independent* (1994), and published in the same year that *Friends* began its initial broadcast run, is a much discussed, debated and critiqued formation of postfeminist masculinity (Hyman 2004; Miller 2005; Cohan 2007; Coad 2008; Ervin 2011; Simpson 2013; Hall 2015).

Furthermore it is a configuration of maleness that depends on the masculine adoption of the supposedly feminine traits of consumerism and narcissism, and that has been widely interrogated in feminist media studies writings on masculinities in postfeminism (e.g. Chapman and Rutherford 1988; Nixon 1996, 1997). The defining characteristics of the metrosexual male in millennial postfeminism have correspondingly been identified and discussed by various writers as his urbanity, style consciousness, a proclivity for personal grooming, concern over his appearance, and the consumption of purchasable

lifestyle commodities and experiences. His lifestyle is thus necessarily a consumerist one, which can only be maintained through shopping and spending.

As Steven Cohan rightly and corroboratively notes, “the metrosexual reimagines masculinity from a postfeminist perspective,” which is “feminized as narcissistic” in that “the metrosexual willingly displays... [and] perform[s] his masculinity through his ability to consume.” (2007, 182) Nowhere has postfeminist culture articulated a discourse of metrosexual masculinity more visibly and persistently than through the mediated celebrity persona of British former football star and pop culture icon David Beckham. One of the first big media flashpoints for the metrosexuality of his celebrity masculinity came in June 1998 with the tabloid print media publication of what would go on to become an extremely widely mediated image of the then footballer dressed in a sarong while out for the evening with his then fiancée Victoria Adams during the 1998 World Cup in France. The saleability to men of items like these, that might previously have been restricted to female market demographics, is thus central to the notion of metrosexuality, and the comparable marketability of an accessory that became labelled with the epithet of the “man bag” (ostensibly a satchel intended to serve the same function for men as a handbag or purse does for women users of such items) has been highly instructive in this regard. Unsurprisingly, Beckham again was at the media forefront of the cultural negotiation of this item as a sartorial marker of this formation of postfeminist masculinity in the mid-2000s. This process of negotiation arguably peaked across the spring and summer of 2006 when a number of male celebrities (including Jude Law, Brad Pitt, and of course David Beckham), all differently associated with various formations and iterations of postfeminist masculinity, were photographed and written about in the mainstream media for their respective use that season of a range of designer so-called “man bags.” (Bilmes 2006)

As is so often the case, *Friends* was ahead of the cultural curve in responding to this consumer phenomenon of millennial cultures of masculinity. Specifically in the 1999 episode “The One With Joey’s Bag,” (S5 E13) in which a comedic scenario is contrived around Joey’s purchase of a man bag, an item that thereafter came to serve as an instant visual and sartorial shorthand for the signification of the cultural figure of the metrosexual man. Visiting Rachel at Bloomingdale’s where she works as a buyer and personal shopper, Joey, an actor, is taking her advice on dressing for an audition. To Joey’s evident bewilderment, Rachel adds a finishing touch to her friend’s outfit when she grabs what appears to be a handbag intended for (normatively feminine) women from the shoulder of a feminine contoured mannequin and proudly presents him with it. Joey leaves no doubt about the extent to which he views this item as gendered, and in which direction, with his incredulous response “Really?! A purse?!” Rachel’s immediate disavowal of this reading with her insistence that the accessory is a unisex “shoulder bag” rings hollow with Joey, even after her attempt to negotiate the bag’s currency, and its potential to enhance his cultural capital, when she situates it as emblematic of an emergent trend in fashion cultures of masculinity of the moment: “All the men are carrying them in the spring catalogue. See? Men. Carrying the bag.” Thereafter, most of the humor in the episode, as it relates to Joey, derives from the episode’s use of his man bag to destabilize normative gender binaries, via a combination of comedic appeal to the recognizability of the postfeminist figure of the metrosexual, and humorous disavowal of its potential challenge to hegemony by falling back on homophobic and transphobic jokes that serve to resituate Joey within the semiotic landscape of hegemonic masculinity. This takes place through a combination of ironic dismissal (e.g. Chandler’s sarcastic exclamation of “Wow, you look just like your son, Mrs Tribbiani!”), and the fact that ordinarily, as Shelley Cobb and I write elsewhere, of the three central

male characters “it is Joey who is depicted as securest in his heterosexuality and with the normativity of his masculinity.” (forthcoming 2018)

### **Homosocial Dynamics and Proto-‘Bromance’ in *Friends***

Also occupying the upper levels of postfeminist culture’s hierarchy of discourses of masculinity are the masculine relational dynamics attendant to homosocial relationships between male friends, that have since (and sometimes retrospectively) come to be vividly and recurrently articulated through the ‘bromance’ trope/epithet. In short, such dynamics and cultural iterations thereof serve to showcase the possibilities, ambivalences and limitations of ostensibly platonic but frequently homoerotically charged intimacies between men in mediated form across the representational landscape of millennial postfeminist popular culture. In the mutable and ever expanding pop culture lexicon, the negotiation of so-called ‘bromantic’ dynamics between men was normalized in the 2000s through the vernacular and rhetorical adoption of the ubiquitous phrase “I love you, man.” This permeated spheres of popular media, arguably peaking and crystallizing with the late 2000s release and reception of the Hollywood comedy and Paul Rudd/Jason Segel star vehicle *I Love You, Man* (John Hamburg, 2009).

The makers of *Friends* were thus prescient in setting a cultural tone in this regard, both at a micro textual level -- as in the 1997 episode ‘The One Where Chandler Crosses the Line’ (S4 E7) when Joey writes “I love you man” on a notice board in gratitude for Chandler’s recent purchase of new furniture for their apartment -- and also at broader narrative and discursive levels. So much so, that homosociality and bromance are the discourses of gender that have thus far generated the most interest in *Friends* from scholars. Writings thus most often focus on the relationship between roommates Chandler and Joey, and correspondingly interrogate their masculinities by

looking at them through this lens. Ron Becker, for example, discusses *Friends* as symptomatic of a millennial television culture in which homophobia is renegotiated through these discourses of bromance, homosociality and through the figure of the so called “bromosexual.” (2014) Rebecca Feasey likewise discusses dominant discourses of masculinity in *Friends* in terms of homosociality, pointing to the extent to which “the relationship between Chandler and Joey can be seen to widen the degrees of acceptable personal disclosure between men by ‘representing new ways of men dealing with each other’ with emotionality and [with] feeling as the foundation of their relationship.” (2008, 26) The series even went so far as to self-reflexively signal the show makers’ intentionality in configuring the masculinities of Chandler and Joey to this template of postfeminist homosociality in the 2000 episode “The One With Mac and C.H.E.E.S.E.” (S6 E20) In the main this episode was comprised of short vignettes of footage from previous episodes and seasons, one of which was compiled to make an overt point of showcasing and knowingly remarking upon Chandler and Joey’s propensity to hug one another.

This montage serves to humorously and vividly showcase bromance as the structuring dynamic of Chandler and Joey’s friendship through its repeated depiction of the physical intimacy that goes hand in hand with their regularly recurring hugs. However, the ironic mode through which this remediation takes place, and Chandler’s ultimate refusal of Joey’s embrace evinces ambivalent anxiety about the potential challenge to the hegemony of normative masculinity posed by their intimacy, and which is distilled into his curt refusal of it on becoming conscious of the frequency of its recurrence.

The tendency of bromance to thus invoke the possibility of a homoerotic dynamic between male friends, in order to dismiss and disavow it, is one of the many ways in which the plethora of iterations and manifestations of dualistically configured



postfeminist masculinities are enabled to have their cake and eat it too. By offering up the possibility of a challenge to normative masculinity, only ultimately to resituate that challenge within patriarchal norms, the hegemony of straight white masculinity is thus negotiated. As Becker writes, thinking about this phenomenon in the context of 1990s popular culture, “while expressions of homophobia became increasingly taboo in certain social circles during [this decade], constructions of hegemonic masculinity remained firmly tied to heterosexuality. The era’s mistaken sexual identity plots foregrounded the pitfalls of male bonding for straight men trying to navigate this shifting and contradictory terrain.” (2014, 240) He goes on to assert that the particular episodes of *Friends* under his scrutiny “relied on (and reinforced) the perceived illegibility of sexual identity and focussed on the anxiety it produced for straight male characters” arguing that “in the newly gay inclusive world of these sitcoms, homosocial relationships easily got tangled up in homosexual ones” pointing to the 1995 episode “The One With the Baby on the Bus” (S2 E6) in which Chandler and Joey are mistaken for a pair of gay fathers after having been tasked with caring for Ross’s infant son when he is forced to spend the day at the emergency room following an allergic reaction to kiwi fruit. This example is also highly symptomatic of how the series harnessed the cultural currency of paternally inflected masculinities to negotiate postfeminist discourse, as I expound upon in the next section.

### ***Friends*, Postfeminism and Parenthood**

In line with broader tendencies elsewhere in postfeminist popular culture, at times *Friends* also articulates the practice and experience of parenting roles in ways that seem to naturalize fatherhood for men and denaturalize motherhood for women. As Hersey Nickel has observed “multiple episodes reinforce the theme that nothing about

motherhood comes naturally” for the women of the series. (2012, 37) In addition to this, it is also noteworthy that from its earliest episodes the series used humour to conversely articulate a discourse that negotiated the idea that fatherhood can and does come naturally to suitably postfeminist men. For example, in the aforementioned episode “The One With the Baby on the Bus” (S2 E6), Ross’s infant son Ben is shown to cry unremittingly when placed in the arms of an aggrieved Monica, but to cease immediately in the arms of any one of the male characters that he is placed with.

As indicated earlier, a scenario is also contrived in this episode whereby Chandler and Joey are placed in charge of baby Ben for the day after Ross is taken ill with an extreme allergic reaction. Between them, they decide to attempt to harness the desirability of fatherhood and male parental caregiving as a means of attracting women. Or as Becker puts it, they attempt to use Ben as a “chick magnet.” (2014, 238) Adorned with the standard range of paraphernalia for an excursion with an infant, Chandler and Joey observe two women at a bus stop watching them and smiling. When the realization finally dawns that the baby has given rise to heterosexual flirting between them and the women, they board the bus and revel in the attention being lavished on the baby, and by association on them, resulting in them successfully securing a drinks date with their new acquaintances. This narrative scenario is also seen elsewhere in millennial popular cultural fictions of postfeminist masculinity such as Nick Hornby’s novel *About a Boy* (1998), which was adapted first into a feature film starring Hugh Grant (Chris Weitz and Paul Weitz, 2002) and then a US television series (NBC 2014).

Returning to the idea invoked earlier that *Friends* is complicit in the cultural tendency to naturalize fatherhood for men and denaturalize motherhood for women, it is instructive that in the 1996 episode “The One Where Old Yeller Dies” (S2 E20), Ross’s apparently effortless secondary caregiving to his son is placed in contrast with Rachel’s

manifest discomfort in the company of the infant, whom she holds in front of her body by his underarms stiffly and awkwardly and facing away from her. Despite Ross's attempt to school her in maternal comportment -- "Just hold him like you would hold a football." -- Rachel's response manages to at once normalize the gendered cognitive dissonance between women and the traditionally masculine sport of American football - "This *is* how I would hold a football!" - at the same time as negotiating the naturalization of Ross's paternal instincts in contradistinction to the absence of her own maternal ones.

This denaturalization of motherhood is echoed following the birth of her own baby Emma in the 2002 episode "The One Where Emma Cries" (S9 E2). Here, Rachel, Monica and Phoebe between them are unable to find a way to stop the newborn baby girl from crying. Hersey Nickel invokes an interesting and appropriate comparison when she describes this scene, referencing the much discussed Hollywood comedy of male parental incompetence and transformation *Three Men and a Baby* (Leonard Nimoy, 1987), as "three women and a baby," (2012, 25) highlighting that even when pooling their efforts, Rachel, Monica and Phoebe have "almost no instinctive knowledge about raising children," and stating that "[m]othering does not come naturally to any of them." (25) This brings into clear view the extent to which the scenario of parental incompetence that was once used so lucratively in early postfeminism to narrate transformations of fatherhood and renegotiations of masculinity, is here articulated as far more necessary for the women than for the men, for whom child-care and parenting are conversely depicted as relatively effortless, and as coming to them fairly naturally. There is thus clear political ground at stake here for feminism with respect to the politics of gender equality in parenthood, adhering as *Friends* hence does in this way to

what Sarah Projansky positions as the postfeminist trope that men are better feminists than women, and “emerge... as [feminist ] models to be emulated.” (2001, 20)

## **Conclusion**

A big part of what I thus hope to have demonstrated in this article is the efficacy of *Friends* as a teaching text for introducing students to the range of contextually specific gender discourses that manifested in popular media and culture in millennial postfeminism. As the heretofore go-to texts (such as *Ally McBeal*, which at the time of its initial broadcast was a major cultural touchstone but today is little remembered) for teaching these tools for the analysis of gender discourses become increasingly historically remote to today’s cohorts of students, and as the formerly iconic pop culture figureheads of millennial postfeminism like Bridget Jones, Ally McBeal and Carrie Bradshaw come to appear anachronistic to them as reference points for a cultural moment that predates the realm of their adult or even lived experiences, *Friends* is remarkable for the resilience and robustness of the cultural afterlife that it has and continues to experience (recently prolonged in the UK at the time of writing by an impactful landing on Netflix), and for its continued ability to strike a resonant chord with new generations of audiences.

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