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‘No Such Thing as Unending Sunshine’: The Deflation of Postfeminism in Emma Cline’s ‘Los Angeles’

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ABSTRACT

In neoliberal societies, our personal lives are increasingly subject to market logics. Feminism has become less a social force for critiquing sexism and violence against women and girls; rather, a consumer force in which feminist vocabulary is commodified, and the ability to extract profit from one’s own bodily femininity is situated as a signifier of empowerment. In this context, women’s feelings are also being commodified. Women are exhorted to perform upbeat feelings, such as confidence and resilience to help them survive in an increasingly precarious and unequal society. The transformation of negative feelings into positive ones has become a crucial way in which women can accrue social and affective value. In this article, I explore the economics of confidence in the short story ‘Los Angeles’ by Emma Cline, by interrogating the relationship between the protagonist’s feeling performances and her fluctuating value. I trace transactions of confidence throughout the story, paying attention to how confidence changes hands, how it confers value and what happens when performances of confidence are not converted into the rewards promised by neoliberal postfeminist value systems. Confidence becomes a sticking point for other feelings, such as disappointment and shame, which highlights the fact that certain neoliberal and postfeminist promises of the ‘good life’ are being slowly drained of their affective potential in contemporary American culture.

KEYWORDS

Postfeminism; affect; short story; neoliberalism; feminism

At the age of twenty-one, Emily Ratajkowski became famous because of her body. After appearing almost completely naked in the music video for ‘Blurred Lines’ (dir. Martell and Director 2013), her body became central to public discussions about whether the video and song objectified women and trivialised sexual violence. However, when asked for her opinion, Ratajkowski insisted that she felt the video was empowering, and that other women should find her performance empowering too. Ratajkowski’s position speaks to a neoliberal postfeminist perspective, with its emphasis on individual choice as the primary route to women’s empowerment. If dancing naked on camera makes her feel good, who is anyone to tell her she shouldn’t feel that way? But it is not only freedom and feeling good that Ratajkowski relies on to justify her career choices: central to her conception of her own independence is her desire and ability to make money.

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Ratajkowski describes herself as a 'hustler', a word that in contemporary parlance typically refers to a hard-working, business-minded person. However, the word has connotations of aggression and even violence – for example, 'a thief, a criminal; one who makes his living dishonestly or by begging' and 'a pimp' (*OED Online* 2022) – all of which sit uncomfortably alongside the idea of a woman making the choice to profit from her sexualised body. In her essay collection *My Body*, Ratajkowski writes: 'I understood that I had a commodifiable asset, something the world valued ... All women are objectified and sexualized to some degree ... I might as well do it on my own terms' (2021, 5). We can see how, for Ratajkowski, feminist and antifeminist ideas become entangled through an individualistic focus on work and profit as markers of success and personal value. This viewpoint raises some complex questions: is it possible for a woman to 'choose' to commodify herself in a world in which all women are objectified? Does the objectification of an individual women become acceptable if she sets her 'own terms' and if she profits from it?

The importance Ratajkowski places on making money and 'hustling' also speaks to a desire to achieve certain markers of adulthood. The criteria for adulthood are unstable and ambiguous (much like the criteria for 'successful' femininity) and reflect cultural ideals rather than essential categories (Edelstein 2019, 3). Achieving financial independence is a traditional marker of adulthood, yet Blatterer (2010, 2010) argues that attaining conventional adult ideals has become more difficult for those born after about 1970. Under the influence of neoliberalism, a rationality which 'disseminates the *model of the marke* to all domains and activities' (Brown 2015, 31), certain youthful traits such as beauty, flexibility and mobility (in comparison to the stability and 'settling down' traditionally associated with adulthood) have become recast as necessary in order to succeed under market conditions. However, these traits do not replace traditional markers of adulthood but coexist with them: though the ability to achieve these ideals and markers of maturity has become more difficult, its ideals persist. Ratajkowski is a useful figure through which to observe the conflicting impulses of contemporary adulthood: to prove oneself as independent, self-reliant and free to choose; yet also fun, open-minded and willing to take on risk – especially in order to make a profit. There is a striking resemblance between the requirements of contemporary adulthood and the postfeminist ideal, which suggests that contradictory traits are being demanded of neoliberal subjects. I draw together the imperatives of contemporary adulthood together with the demands of neoliberal femininity to argue that these demands converge around a single affective hinge point – confidence.

Confidence has significant purchase in our contemporary moment, which we can see through the increased interest in positive psychology, self-help literature and confidence training. However, as Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill point out, confidence is increasingly demanded in a context of deepening inequality. This suggests that the cultivation of confidence works to *cover up* certain things. Confidence is not something felt 'on the inside', but something that circulates among bodies. As Wetherell (2012) points out, dictionary definitions of 'affect' include notions of performance or pretence (as in 'affecting a persona' or 'affecting an accent') alongside the idea of affect as something that influences, a kind of social feeling (4). Confidence, I suggest, works as a sticking point for a complex assemblage of feelings: the optimism of self-belief, the validation from being perceived as confident and the elusive 'good feeling' that confidence

promises, alongside anxieties and disappointments about not being confident enough, or the frustration when performances of confidence do not achieve the desired effect. While Ratajkowski initially suggested that she only had good feelings about the making of the 'Blurred Lines' video, more recently she has written about how those feelings became tangled up with other, less positive feelings: 'Those men were the ones in control, not the women the world fawned over . . . Facing the reality of the dynamics at play would have meant admitting how limited my power really was – how limited any woman's power is when she survives and even succeeds in the world as a thing to be looked at' (2021, 47). Confidence here is no longer a symbol of empowerment but a hollow performance to convince others (including Ratajkowski herself) of a *feeling* of agency that does not correspond to real agency – and thus becomes stuck together with other feelings, such as shame, fatigue and disappointment.

In this article, I trace different kinds of confidence transaction that take place in the short story 'Los Angeles' by Emma Cline, published in her collection *Daddy* (2020), in order to illuminate how confidence works in relation to the fluctuation of young women's value in postfeminist cultures. By confidence transaction, I mean the ways in which confidence is exchanged between people. What are the processes by which confidence changes hands? Why does it stick to some people and not others? How does it confer value, and what happens when performances of confidence do not convert into the rewards promised by neoliberal value systems? Alice – the young woman protagonist of 'Los Angeles' – is the site on which these debates about age, gender, agency and feeling play out. Alice has recently moved to the eponymous city to pursue an acting career. Yet while she has struck out on her own to pursue an independent life, Alice is stuck in a 'disgusting' shared apartment, takes acting classes (paid for by her mother), and works as a sales assistant in a clothing store. Frustrated with her situation, Alice begins to sell her underwear to strangers. I draw from an existing relationship between affect and value, which has been outlined in a number of theories of affect, including 'emotional capitalism' (Illouz 2007), 'affective economies' (Ahmed 2004) and in particular, Sianne Ngai's book *Ugly Feelings* (2005), in which Ngai asserts that 'confidence might be described as the "tone" of capitalism itself' (62). In these texts, emotions are not internal psychological dispositions, but occur through interactions with people in the world. As Sara Ahmed writes, 'emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation' (2004, 120). 'Los Angeles' explores this relationship by considering the ways in which Alice seeks to accrue value by performing certain ideals of worthwhile personhood. I proceed as follows. First, I ask how women accrue value in neoliberal societies. I then consider the ways in which conflicting images and ideas are used in 'Los Angeles' to convey Alice's disorientation as the paths she follows to achieve certain kinds of personhood begin to fracture and unravel. Finally, I trace the transactions of confidence that take place throughout the story, identifying the processes through which confidence spreads and how it converts into value.

Because You're Worth It: Beauty, Work and Affective Performance

To understand the fluctuation of women's value in 'Los Angeles', I read the story within a postfeminist context. While the term 'postfeminism' has been plagued by criticism,

contradiction, and ambiguity to the point that some scholars have abandoned the term altogether (for example Douglas 2010), the durability and cultural resonance of postfeminism are hard to ignore. I use the term in a fluid way, focusing on what links more recent analyses of postfeminism together, which I suggest is an attempt to unpick the entanglement of contradictory and seemingly paradoxical ideas about women's empowerment and equality that circulate in mainstream political, cultural and media contexts (McRobbie 2009; Gill 2007, 2017). I follow Stéphanie Genz (2017, 2021) in paying close attention to the ways in which postfeminism has shifted from a more celebratory 'boom model' that emphasises 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 and uncertainty in place of unbridled optimism. Following Gill, I also understand postfeminism as a 'distinctive sensibility' (2007), which has become increasingly reliant on the cultivation of certain kinds of feeling. Whereas in the 1990s and early 2000s postfeminism tended to be characterised by optimistic and celebratory 'can-do' feelings (Harris 2004), more recent work has focused on 'affective dissonances' (Dobson and Kanai 2018) and the cultivation of corrective feelings, such as confidence and resilience, which provide women with the tools to cope emotionally with the precarity of recessionary life (McRobbie 2020; Orgad and Gill 2002). Expressions of vulnerability and negative feeling are sometimes permitted – even encouraged – yet only within certain parameters, such as to strategically highlight one's overall strength or to affirm one's authenticity (Berryman and Kavka 2017). In cultures marked by a postfeminist sensibility, women must work on themselves emotionally and transform negative experiences into something positive. While this enables women to maintain an appearance of independence and self-sufficiency, focusing inward disconnects them from the social forces that shape their lives.

Though scholars of postfeminism have highlighted the ways in which it often privileges youthful subjects, postfeminist subjects are also required to possess certain characteristics associated with maturity, such as self-knowledge and responsibility. Thus, we can see how Alice's attempts to reconcile the contradictions of neoliberal femininity are entangled with a desire to achieve the ideal blend of youthful and adult characteristics. This is evident in two sources from which Alice derives value: her physical desirability, in which youth is an asset, and which includes beauty, her body and sex; and work, associated with maturity, which encompasses both Alice's wage-earning capacity and her ambition for a more lucrative career, in which she invests for the promise of future success. We can see how these sources of value – work, beauty and youth – converge in the cultural figure of the 'girl boss'. The term is often used in a celebratory way to refer to an aspirational career woman, who is typically both youthful and glamorous, but also highly successful. The 'girl boss' does not only refer to a woman who is successful in the world of business – such as former Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, who published the now infamous *Lean In* (2013) and Ivanka Trump, whose book *Women Who Work* (2017) espoused a similar kind of corporate faux feminism – but also high-achieving celebrity musicians, actors, entrepreneurs and models, such as Beyoncé and Taylor Swift. What binds these figures together is not just their lucrative and successful careers but also their polished, glamorous and often youthful appearances, which suggests that beauty, youth and work success go hand in hand. Winch (2015) argues that in the 'hypervisible

landscape of popular culture' the body is seen as a woman's 'asset, her product, her brand and her gateway to freedom and empowerment in a neoliberal market economy' (233). A woman's physical appearance then, is not only something she can make money from, but also something potentially liberating.

The relationship between feminism and the politics of beauty is fraught. While some feminists, such as Wolf (1991) have argued that any power or pleasure a woman might derive from her beauty is a patriarchal distraction from the ways in which she is subordinated, in postfeminist cultures beauty and grooming practices are framed as something that women choose to do for themselves in order to feel good, rather than a form of labour required to conform to imposed societal norms. In their analysis of 'aesthetic entrepreneurship',Elias, Gill, and Scharff (2017) draw attention to the ways in which women's psychic and affective lives are increasingly involved in the cultivation of beauty. It is no longer enough for a woman to simply look good – she must also *feel good* and enjoy the processes by which she comes to look good. In 'Los Angeles', Alice's beauty is situated as a source of privilege, in that she is given attention and opportunities because of the way she looks. Alice understands that the option to pursue a career in acting is only available to her because of the way she looks: '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' (Cline 37). Prettiness is something both valuable and uncomplicatedly desirable – and it is associated with youth, as Alice becomes the pretty *girl* despite her independence. It is something Alice is fortunate to possess, something that makes her special. Yet prettiness is also described in economic terms, as something at which Alice must work. Alice's responsibility to her own appearance is not only one of aesthetics, but also related to money. That she sees beauty as a 'natural resource' suggests she knows her looks have the potential to earn money, but only if she learns how to successfully extract profit from them. Berryman and Kavka (2017) argue that beauty is translated into profit in the 'attention' and 'like' economies of social media platforms. Followers' attention is exchanged for 'metrics of value' (likes, views, comments and followers) which turns into financial gain for both the social media platform and for the individual posters themselves. In this way, looking good and being worthy of attention become the 'affective currency' of the contemporary moment (Berryman and Kavka 86). This not only highlights how, under capitalism, the lines between work and beauty become increasingly blurred, but also how maintaining one's appearance (especially for women) becomes an increasingly important source of value. However, though 'Los Angeles' frames Alice's physical desirability as one of her primary sources of value, it drains beauty as a site of potential pleasure by associating it with money and the drudgery of work, rather than the uncomplicated 'good' feelings promised by postfeminism. We see how endless self-improvement and the pressure to be 'perfect' (McRobbie 2015) become draining when Alice reflects on her position among the other would-be actresses of Los Angeles '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' (Cline 36). The project of beauty maintenance is here framed as a pointless pursuit rather than something pleasurable, which stands in contrast to the upbeat rhetoric of postfeminism.

Alice's beauty not only puts her at an advantage in her pursuit of success as an actress, but it is also one of the reasons she is offered her job as a sales assistant. While this is a precarious, low-status job (and certainly not the glamorous career idealised in post-feminist discourses), as a stable source of income it enables Alice to live independently and pursue her career dreams. The job also associates Alice with the glamour of the clothing brand: she wears and sells the clothes, stands beneath the photographs of the models and acts 'as shorthand to the entire brand' (Cline 33). When Alice interviewed for the job, no one looked at her resumé but rather sent photographs of her to 'corporate' for approval, which shows how integral Alice's looks were in securing the role. The invocation of a faceless corporation behind the scenes points to the fact that, in this particular role, profit is being extracted from Alice's appearance alongside her manual labour. Alice also reads as white, which confers further privileges. Jha (2016) argues that 'physical attractiveness, whiteness and youthfulness have accrued capital just as darker skin color, hair texture, disability and aging have devalued feminine currency' (3). We can assume that Alice's whiteness, beauty and youth were positive indictors when her image was reviewed by 'corporate' before offering her job – something that is not available to all women. Although Alice is frustrated with the precariousness of her situation – the low pay, and the fact that her acting career has not yet taken off – her position stands in stark contrast to that of the briefly mentioned cleaners, who must scrub beach tar off the floor at the end of the night for presumably even less pay than Alice, and who are most likely to be non-white women. Thus, we can see that value is ascribed to women on an uneven basis.

Although Alice is beautiful and is willing to work hard, her currency is devalued by her low-income family background. Alice doesn't earn much money as a sales assistant – a low-status job, acceptable as a steppingstone on a path to something else – and the lack of financial safety net means that her job matters more to Alice than it does too other characters in the story. Alice is unable to embrace the kinds of risk and experimentation that employers and corporations value in neoliberal economies – and this decreases her overall profitability. Drawing on the work of Lendol Calder, Ngai (2005) describes an 'intimate link between "credit" and "character" in the antebellum economy, in which "character" (in the sense of temperament) was . . . functionalized as "a means of economic gain"' (59). Certain signifiers of temperament can translate into financial advantage. A person might, for example, be able to draw on signifiers of their trustworthy character to convince someone to invest in them or lend them money or persuade them that their product is worth something. However, if we think about the low-income status of Alice's family of origin as part of her 'character', we can see how it hinders her ability to access certain forms of value. As Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood point out, in the US the working class is often accused of being lazy and irresponsible, with the 'supposed lack of volition to work on one's self . . . politically rhetoricized as a lack of aspiration and ambition in which the person is shown to lack the capacity to accumulate value' (2012, 51). The precarity of working-class life makes the attainment of conventional markers of adulthood difficult. Indeed, the characteristics that Skeggs and Wood suggest are associated with the working class in the US – lazy and irresponsible – are also often attributed to adolescents, which suggests that the respectable status of 'adult' with its connotations of maturity and full personhood is denied to those who do not, for example, benefit from stable employment or own their own home. Although all subjects are compelled to

endless self-improvement under the conditions of neoliberalism, we can see why work and financial independence are so significant to Alice as forms of personal value. Similarly, and perhaps more importantly, we can see that, for Alice, work and earning money is a necessity, not merely a way to accrue status or respectability. The way postfeminism frames work as a site of empowerment, value and visibility for women often excludes the experience of women for whom work is essential for survival. Writing about the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s and 70s, bell hooks points out that the insistence on work as a source of liberation for women ignores the experiences of working-class women for whom 'working for pay neither liberated them from sexist oppression nor allowed them to gain any measure of economic independence' (2015, 145). 'Los Angeles' asks us to consider whether it is in fact possible for Alice to be liberated by work within the confines of a capitalist and postfeminist society.

Alice is depicted as a cautious character, and her wariness is contrasted with the wilder, more carefree behaviour of her younger colleague and friend, Oona. Though both work at the clothing store together, the stakes are very different for each of them. Oona is seventeen and presumably still lives with her parents, while Alice is older, supports herself financially and doesn't have familial wealth to fall back on. Oona's confidence and ability to make bold choices seems tied up with her wealthy background, shown by her 'lawyer parents' and 'private school' (Cline 35) – yet the story also holds open the possibility that it is also the difference in age that creates the confidence gap between the two friends. Alice is aware that she is 'a little old' to enjoy Oona's company so much, and while the friends enjoy an 'easy, mild rapport' and a 'sense of resigned camaraderie', Alice feels that the pleasure she takes in the friendship deflects away from 'larger concerns' about her life choices – concerns that do not bother Oona yet (Cline 40). Here we can see how age works as a set of disciplinary ideals. While Oona represents the freedom and possibility of youth, the fact that Alice has not made adequate progress towards certain markers of adulthood has begun to feel threatening. Holding out for her 'big break' has begun to seem foolish. As Blatterer points out, those who are seen to prolong 'a stage of irresponsibility' and so delay their adulthood are often harshly judged (2010a, 64). Oona is able to enjoy her youth, free of the expectations of adulthood (for now) and this freedom contributes to her ability to take more risks than Alice. Oona is described as 'easy and confident, already well versed in her own beauty' (Cline 35). In contrast, Alice seems somewhat detached from her own appearance and is only vaguely aware of its potency. She is hesitant and does not know how to capitalise on her desirability the way that Oona does. Oona is not afraid of the 'pervs' who are 'lured' (Cline 36) into the store by the young women who work on the shop floor – she takes advantage of their attention to make money. In contrast, Alice is slowed by concern. She fears that these men might represent a threat, so she tries to remove Oona from any situation in which she is alone with them. This associates Alice with some of the qualities of adulthood that have become less desirable in the neoliberal marketplace, such as rigidity and wariness. Alice's lack of confidence holds her back. She is unable to take a risk and see the profit to be made, whereas Oona laughs the threat off, and encourages the men to purchase clothes, from which she earns commission. The confidence gap between Oona and Alice is highlighted when Oona first tells Alice she sold her underwear to a customer: 'Alice's stomach dropped with an odd mix of worry and jealousy, an uncertainty about who exactly had been tricked' (Cline 41). Alice is caught between conflicting imperatives that she struggles

to reconcile. On the one hand, she understands that customers' sexual interest in Oona might be dangerous, and Alice feels a responsibility to protect Oona, perhaps because she is older and believes that Oona is oblivious to the danger. She asks Oona: 'Aren't you worried he might do something weird? Follow you home or something' (Cline 41). Yet on the other, Alice begins to realise that there is value to be mined from Oona's youthful, sexy performed confidence – from taking risks – in this case, financial as well as social.

We might view Oona's confidence as something similar to what Amy Shields Dobson (2014) calls 'performative shamelessness'. Dobson (2014) draws on McRobbie's (2009) implied connection between 'young women's "shameless self-exposure" and the normalisation of gender melancholia' to suggest that the 'sexy, wild, laddish and generally "out there" performances' of feminine subjects on social media sites function as demonstrations of confidence, allowing young women to dismiss 'potential criticisms or judgements of viewers on the basis of autonomy and self-acceptance' (98). Yet what Dobson doesn't take into account is the fact that 'shame' and 'shamelessness' are not opposites: shame is inextricable from shamelessness. Performed shamelessness means that a person behaves in a way that others will – or at least, might – find shameful, but they do not exhibit outward signs of shame. But this does not mean that the person performing shamelessness does not *feel* shame. The anticipated shame does not disappear; rather, it spreads between people. We can see how this dynamic works in 'Los Angeles' during the conversation in which Oona reveals that she has sold her underwear. Alice assumes that Oona is embarrassed or upset by the customer's proposition to purchase her underwear. When Oona does not show signs that she feels ashamed or upset, Alice becomes uncomfortable. We see an affective dissonance emerge between the friends. The shame is turned back onto Alice, whose feelings of concern make her seem safe and boring in comparison to Oona's fun and adventure. In turn, Alice's discomfort makes Oona feel 'disappointed'. While Oona had expected to share a sense of fun, hilarity and risk with Alice – which represents a rejection of the assumed shame – this expectation is not delivered upon. Similarly, Alice expected the two friends to bond over feelings of concern and unease about the situation. Shame alienates the friends from the sense of affective belonging they had each hoped for.

Performative shamelessness functions in the same way as confidence. It is a façade, a way of pushing the negative feelings that underpin the performance aside temporarily – but those negative feelings do not disappear. Though Dobson takes an optimistic view of performances of shamelessness as 'signs of life' (2014, 111) – that is, an attempt on the part of young women to self-define within the context of postfeminist regulation – the narrative of 'Los Angeles' suggests that performances of feelings such as confidence and shamelessness are more to do with concealing other, negative feelings. Later in the story, Oona invites Alice to a beach party, where Alice's prudishness in comparison to Oona's shameless confidence is shown once again, when Alice is embarrassed by Oona's friend exposing her breast for a photograph. Oona tells the girl: 'You're embarrassing Alice . . . Stop being such a slut' (Cline 45). Oona's other friend performs shamelessness, but Oona observes outward signs of shame in Alice. Shame moves between all three of them. Nevertheless, Alice insists that she's fine, and later on, makes the decision to sunbathe topless, as though she is trying to replicate or recapture the confidence she witnessed earlier on. The narrator asks: 'She was having fun, wasn't she?' (Cline 46). The question here highlights Alice's own uncertainty, as she tries to conform to postfeminist ideals

despite her own discomfort, which is further illuminated as Alice puts the top into her bag 'as calmly as she could' (Cline 46). When Alice wakes up with her breasts exposed at the beach party, Oona's boyfriend is watching, 'grinning at her' (Cline 46). This punctures the idea that Alice's performance of confidence could serve to make herself feel good. We see signifiers of shame return as Alice crosses her arms over her chest 'in the least obvious way she could manage' (Cline 47), evidently uncomfortable with the way Oona's boyfriend is looking at her. It was Alice's own choice to take her top off – a risk – but it didn't pay off, at least, not affectively. Rather than feeling empowered, she becomes complicit in her own objectification and feels disappointed and deflated – her 'shamelessness' doesn't increase her value or decrease her feelings of shame. Those feelings linger.

Ultimately however, whatever value is conferred on a woman by her adherence to postfeminist standards of appearance, behaviour and feeling does not compete with the value a woman accrues by simply being wealthy. This is shown in 'Los Angeles' through the figure of a celebrity customer – a jewellery designer who is also married to a successful actor. The woman represents normative adulthood in myriad ways: she is stable, both financially and romantically, through her marriage to the actor, and crucially, the woman appears (to Alice) to epitomise freedom and independence. Alice imagines the jewellery designer 'driving in the afternoon sunshine, deciding to come to the store, the day just another asset available to her' (Cline 39) – which draws attention to not only her wealth, but the freedom that wealth bestows – while Alice, in contrast, is stuck inside the shop, working for low pay. Alice gravitates towards the woman, wanting to be in proximity to the fantasy she represents, yet the woman ignores Alice's offer of assistance: 'The woman looked up, her plain face searching Alice's. She seemed to understand that Alice recognized her, and that Alice's offer of help, already false, was doubly false' (Cline 39). The woman sees through Alice's performed feelings, which makes Alice feel ashamed. Alice makes a 'swift and unkind catalog of every unattractive thing about the woman – the dry skin around her nostrils, her weak chin, her sturdy legs in their expensive jeans' (Cline 39). The woman does not adhere to the immaculate standards of postfeminist beauty in that particular moment, but she does not need to prove her worth to Alice – she has freedom that Alice can only dream of.

Smoke and Mirrors: Navigating 'Doubleness'

'Los Angeles' is preoccupied with the ways in which opposing ideas and images are held together, and the unstable boundaries between irony and deception. As Yvonne Tasker points out, irony is to do with 'doubleness' and layers of meaning, and this '[d]ouble discourse' is central to postfeminism (2011, 73). The name of 'Los Angeles's protagonist – Alice – connotes another literary Alice, the protagonist of Lewis Carroll's popular and famous children's stories, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (2003). The *Alice* stories are about the transition from girlhood to womanhood, and the child's struggle to make sense of the confusing world of adults. Alice is repeatedly asked to identify herself in Wonderland, but she cannot, which makes her feel confused and disoriented. But it is not just Alice's own identity that is unstable in Wonderland – everything and everyone shifts and changes in ways that don't make sense to Alice. The Alice of 'Los Angeles' finds herself in a similarly strange and illogical world, in which

things are much more unstable than they are in her hometown and, much like the other Alice's experience in Wonderland, at first these surreal details seem amusing and harmless. In the heat of Los Angeles, Christmas decorations are on display in shop windows: 'cutouts of Santa wearing sunglasses, windows poxed with fake snow, as if cold was just another joke', which suggests an instability between the way things are presented and the way things actually are – nothing can be taken at face value – whereas in contrast, Alice's hometown is 'grim and snowy, the sun setting behind her mother's house by five P.M'. (Cline 31). While this seems a depressing image, it also contains some comfort because it is at least intelligible. Weather operates as an extended metaphor – a kind of ironic pathetic fallacy – throughout 'Los Angeles', the pervasive sunshine of the eponymous city representing hope, wonder and opportunity for Alice, the days passing 'frictionless and lovely' (Cline 31). Conversely, the cold weather of Alice's hometown represents a lack of opportunity, as well as a lack of money, Alice's adolescence marked by 'her mother's running commentary on the price of everything' (Cline 34). While Alice has escaped her home life and her family and has begun making a new life for herself in the city, the deflation of Alice's faith in the promises of postfeminism and the American dream is foreshadowed early on as we are told that there is 'no such thing as unending sunshine' (Cline 31). The fact the suggestion of disaster is set up so early on contributes to the creation of a particular kind of affective tone. It punctures the optimism promised by the weather and by the setting of the story in Los Angeles, a place of glamour and opportunity, and instead creates a sense of low-level dread and futility.

There is an interplay between humour and irony that also plays an important role in 'Los Angeles'. Alice is still learning to read certain social situations and separate what is said from what is meant and, as Tasker points out, '[a]s with comedy more broadly, recourse to irony can often indicate points of acute cultural uncertainty or difficulty' (2011, 73). Humour and irony are technologies which work to soften or blur the sharp points of difficulty in postfeminist culture, such as the coexistence of opposing ideas, reshaping the uncomfortable edges into something that can be more smoothly absorbed into the narrative of the postfeminist fantasy. Indeed, Alice's uncertainty, her lack of 'knowingness' and inability to perform the 'right' feelings in certain situations creates uncomfortable feelings of dissonance and anxiety which she attempts to smooth over. Kanai (2019) argues that in the context of postfeminist affective regulation 'one must have the right feelings for the right context, and if these feelings diverge from the appropriate ones, they must be worked on to make them "fit"' (61). We can see how Alice reshapes her feelings throughout 'Los Angeles', investing affective labour into producing a version of herself that is pleasing to others and converting her experiences of navigating the affective confines of postfeminism into humour. Most notably, when Alice is engaged with a difficult customer at the end of the story, she imagines herself narrating the experience to Oona. They usually tell each other stories about their lives in a specific way: 'so that everything in their life took on an ironic, comical tone, their lives a series of encounters that happened to them but never really affected them, at least in the retelling' (Cline 50). In this sense, shameful or difficult encounters can be recast differently depending on the way Alice 'spins' the story to her friend. There is still value to be mined from experiences, no matter how difficult, as long as Alice casts herself as shameless, confident and 'unflappable' in the minds of others (Cline 50). When Alice reflects on having sex with John, her manager at the clothing store, the realises that the

experience had been 'bearable because it would become a story, something condensed and communicable. Even funny' (Cline 50). We see Alice's negative feelings emerge, before being immediately transformed into a funny story for an audience. Alice believes she is able to reclaim a degree of agency by performing nonchalance – humour is the tool by which shame and disappointment is translated into an upbeat performance of confidence – yet at the end of the story, when Alice is caught between the confidence imperative and the terrifying possibility of her own lack of agency, Alice is literally and affectively trapped, unable to move forward. The invocation of seemingly opposing ideas throughout the story – heat and cold, discomfort and humour, confidence and shame – suggests a degree of instability, uncertainty and a gap between how things appear and how they actually are. This illuminates the difficulty Alice experiences when trying to reconcile the demands of both neoliberal femininity and contemporary adulthood – the paths to which are more fragmented and complicated than they appear.

Confidence Transactions

While confidence as I use it in this article is not something felt internally – rather, a social performance that influences and affects others – confidence is often depicted as something an individual person can possess, which Ngai calls 'psychic property' (61). Ngai describes how this works in Herman Melville's novel *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), by showing how steamboat passengers are persuaded that their negative feelings are 'not genuine dispositions in their own right' but an effect of the deprivation of confidence – which the confidence-man alone can provide (Ngai 61). This process involves convincing the passengers that feelings of confidence are possessable and can be transferred to them as part of a transaction. In this section, I think about how confidence is depicted as a commodity in 'Los Angeles', how it is exchanged or transferred between people and how performances of confidence convert into value. For Orgad and Gill, the confidence culture acknowledges that confidence 'felt on the inside' is hard to achieve, so women are encouraged to 'fake it': 'The idea is that repeated performance of external confidence markers . . . will, eventually, generate the longed-for internal shift' (22). In other words, confidence as psychic property is promised in return for the performance of confidence in the world.

We can read Alice's acting classes as not only teaching her how to 'act' in a dramatic sense, but also how to perform in an affective sense – to exhibit appropriate feelings and make herself profitable. Alice's acting classes are a way in which she buys confidence for herself. Alice's acting teacher, Tony, is described as a former actor, who requires a 'brand of personal devotion Alice found aggressive' (Cline 37). Tony's personal devotion is reminiscent of positive psychology, which is not only central to confidence culture but central to the pursuit of adulthood, marked by 'complete' personal psychological development. Tony encourages the cultivation of positive feelings such as confidence in his students by sending out daily emails containing inspirational and motivational quotes, such as 'REACH FOR THE MOON. IF YOU FALL SHORT, YOU MAY LAND ON A STAR!' (Cline 38). The oppressive nature of positive psychology can be read through the lens of Sara Ahmed's 'happiness duty' (2010, 7), which suggests that, for certain subjects, happiness is employed as a cultural duty, which works to conceal and deny negative feelings and stall any potential political action. Read as a confidence transaction,

we can see that Tony's emails are designed to increase Alice's self-confidence and therefore, to propel her towards career and financial success. They also make Alice's destiny her own responsibility, and thus aim to turn her away from the social and political forces that shape her life and onto her own mindset. However, in this transaction, confidence is not converted into the promised value. Alice tries to get off Tony's email list multiple times, which suggests that she finds his quotes not inspiring or motivational at all, but rather irritating and perhaps even oppressive. Alice's response highlights the relentless nature of the confidence imperative and empties Tony's messages of any positive affective potential.

Alice requires her mother's help to pay for the acting classes, and so, despite her attempts to achieve independence, the progress Alice is able to make towards her goal of becoming an actor is dependent on her mother's belief in her ability to achieve the goal. We can see why Alice panics when her mother suggests that Alice take a break from her acting classes: '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). This suggests that Alice is clinging to the potential that being in a state of 'becoming' gives her. Whilst she is in training, she has a certain status as one who is working towards the goals of maturity, towards an outcome in which she will be stable and financially independent. However, when she is no longer training, she is forced to look at her life, not through the rosy tint of possibility, but at the reality – the job, the apartment – all the things she puts up with in order to achieve the lifestyle she believes is promised to her, by conforming to certain standards. Alice wonders if it is 'important to her mother to feel Alice was achieving something, moving forward, and completing classes had the sheen of building blocks, tokens being collected' (Cline 37). The cultural preoccupation with relentless forward progress is closely linked to a neoliberal market logic, in which individual value is accrued through levels of productivity. This is evident in the valorisation of the 'girl boss', as the desire to achieve is a crucial way in which women, in particular, accrue value. In that sense, then, by pursuing a career ambition – and having a tangible marker of that pursuit, such as being in training – Alice gains value. By handing the money over to Tony, her acting teacher, and attending classes, Alice's mother's confidence in her increases. Alice is bestowed with a kind of promissory value, of 'becoming' whilst she is still in training to be an actor. The significance Alice places on 'becoming something' resonates with Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism': in Alice we see optimism in the future, attachment to a fantasy of the 'good life' and 'a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of the fantasy that enables [her] to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help [her] or a world to become different in just the right way' (2011, 2). Yet Alice's creeping awareness that what is promised may never materialise is suggested through the affective tone of the story. When she tells her mother that she is getting better at acting, she asks herself: 'Was she? She didn't know' (Cline 42). Despite the fact that Alice is trying to sell herself to her mother as someone who is progressing, in order to secure her mother's financial investment in her career and affective investment in Alice's value in the world, Alice's performance of confidence betrays the feelings of doubt and shame that underpin it, and so the performance of confidence does not convert to value in the way that Alice hopes. After Alice's mother suggests that Alice should consider taking a break from acting, Alice goes into her kitchen 'to quickly occupy her brain with something else' and eats from a bag of frozen

berries 'until her fingers were numb, until a chill had penetrated deeply into her stomach' (Cline 43). We can see here how failed performances of confidence – those that fail to fulfil their value promises – return Alice to feelings of shame and failure, feelings which are so painful she goes to extreme lengths to distract herself from them.

Alice's role as a sales assistant at the clothing store is another sale of confidence. Shoppers are lured by not only the clothes themselves and the advertisements, but by the attractive sales staff, who are all dressed in the brand's clothing. In neoliberal postfeminist cultures, women are incited to purchase their way to empowerment, by constructing more confident selves with products. However, Alice gets a glimpse behind the scenes: 'seeing all the clothes there, all stuffed and flattened together in a cube without tags or prices, made their real worth suddenly clear – this was junk, all of it' (Cline 33). The potential of the products to bestow confidence on Alice, by associating her with the glamour and luxury of the brand is flattened. Similarly, though Alice arrives at 10 AM, 'already the lights and music conjured a perpetual afternoon' (Cline 32). This highlights the artifice that goes into the selling of the clothes – a falseness that Alice is nevertheless made complicit in by her role in both selling and advertising for the brand.

Yet Alice's riskiest confidence transaction takes place when she decides to sell her underwear to strangers. This is also a monetary transaction – Alice is paid for her underwear – and as such, this has the potential to be viewed as an emancipatory act for Alice. In a world in which men have historically made money from women's bodies (and indeed, even within the context of the story, it is primarily men who both benefit and profit from Alice's body), Alice's ability to make the choice to profit from her own body, on her own terms, for her own personal gain, might seem a better option. However, this represents a limited and defeatist view, a resignation to a world in which women are, as Ratajkowski suggests, bound to be objectified in one way or another. This begs the question: is it only within the existing structures of patriarchal domination that women can exercise choice? While Alice may believe that she has agency because she is free to use the fact that men are sexually attracted to her to earn money, this act does not release her from the oppressive structures of patriarchy. Thus, any feelings of confidence produced through this transaction is stuck together with other, negative feelings. Alice is simply performing what she believes is an empowered persona, but this works to conceal the ongoing inequality and objectification that Alice experiences by painting it in a positive light.

The feelings created in 'Los Angeles' suggest that the promise of confidence is rarely delivered upon. Alice's interactions with those who purchase her underwear are initially described as not being 'so bad' because it was 'that time of life when any time something bad or strange or sordid happened, she could soothe herself with that thing people always said: it's just that time of life' (Cline 44). The 'time of life' Alice is referring to is the period before becoming an adult, when every experience is merely a rehearsal for when 'real life' begins with adulthood. This shows that though certain traits of youthfulness are prized, there is still a hierarchy among age groups with adulthood situated as 'life's centre stage' (Blatterer and Burnett 2010, 12). It also shows Alice's conflicting feelings: at once the interactions are 'not so bad' and also 'bad, strange and sordid'. Alice tries to reconcile her negative feelings with the overarching life narratives she has been sold. By disclosing Alice's methods of reassuring herself, the story suggests that Alice is performing affective labour in the process of denying negative feelings to engineer a presentation of

confidence and unflappability. However, towards the end of the story, when we come to '[t]he last time she ever did it', flat, melancholic feelings emerge: 'It was a peculiar time of day, that sad hour when the dark seemed to rise up from the ground but the sky was still bright and blue' (Cline 48). This is a visual representation of how it feels to be trapped in unhappy circumstances while looking ahead to a more hopeful future, yet the distance between Alice and the blue sky overhead suggests the creeping realisation that the promises she has been sold will not be delivered upon. On her way to the final meeting, Alice passes 'cheapo apartment buildings' and 'nicer homes' with 'lush backyards' and 'koi ponds swishy with fish' (Cline 48). This depiction of the wealth gap punctures the glamour and wonder of Los Angeles as we realise that it is not a place of opportunity for all, only a select few. For Alice, viewing these houses is 'like a primer on being human, on what choices you might make. As if life might follow the course of your wishes' (Cline 48). This invokes the cruelly optimistic logic of the American dream, and the belief that hard work and 'choice' can be the difference between one person and another, regardless of circumstances. It shows Alice's desire for normative markers of adulthood – a house, a garden – yet it also shows a growing awareness that the process of attaining these markers has become more complicated and difficult. Alice has become disillusioned with the promises of postfeminism and adulthood and no longer believes she can wish (or work) her ideal life into existence.

When Alice's final customer arrives, the car looks 'immaculate until she caught sight of the clothes in the backseat . . . ' (Cline 49). The fact that Alice's customer might live in his car captures some of the dissonance between appearance and reality that 'Los Angeles' is preoccupied. It also suggests that Alice's customers, far from being powerful men that she might strive to be on equal footing with, do not have much power themselves. As Hooks (2016) argues, a simplified view of feminism, which ignores other hierarchies such as those of class, sex and race (and to which we might add age) that complicate the simple categorisation of women and men, suggests that women gaining freedom to be 'like men' can be seen as emancipatory; however, this is a 'false construction' of power, because it ignores the fact that so many men do not possess power. This deflates the logic that Alice's own 'empowerment' in this transaction had been built upon – that if she took advantage of men, almost in retaliation for the way they take advantage of her, she would gain the upper hand, or at least an equal hand. That the customer struggles to look at her suggests both that he is a threat, but also that he is ashamed. The scene holds open the possibility of the man's vulnerability at the same time as his potential violence. When the man takes Alice's underwear, he looks 'at the bag from the corner of his eye, a look that was maybe purposefully restrained, like he was proving he didn't care too much about its contents' (Cline 50). The man is himself performing a kind of confidence, constructing a version of himself who doesn't care, is not ashamed of living in his car, of the fact that he is purchasing a young woman's underwear in broad daylight. His restraint and his performed nonchalance seem to suggest that he does feel shame about his own behaviour, yet this is turned back onto Alice as she senses his disgust 'not for himself but for her. She no longer served a purpose, and every moment she stayed in the car was just another moment that reminded him of his own weakness' (Cline 50–51). Alice's performance not only puts her in danger, but it also shames her. This undercuts the encounter's potential for Alice to feel good about herself – that she had in fact 'used' the customer as he had attempted to 'use' her. The customer draws out the process of payment and Alice

feels hatred towards him, believing that he wants her to 'witness this … that he was shaming or punishing her by prolonging the encounter, making sure she fully experienced the transaction, bill by bill' (Cline 51). The very fact that she is making money from her bodily femininity has become a source of shame, rather than the feelings of confidence Alice had hoped for. Thus, the scene ruptures the idea that women can achieve autonomy by earning money from their bodies in a patriarchal context. No matter how much money Alice gains, no matter what good feelings, her value is ultimately decreased by the fact that she has colluded in her own reduction to an object, which means that the customer feels some sort of ownership over Alice.

Throughout the story, Alice engages in risky transactions of confidence in which the prospect of danger is present, but functions somewhat like a joke, as something that won't 'really' happen. Even the selling of the underwear is minimised as something that 'seemed insane at first' but 'like other jokes, it became curiously tolerable … the uncomfortable edges softening into something innocuous' (Cline 43). However, at the end of the story, we realise that her performed confidence cannot protect her from violence. The car door is locked as Alice feels 'certain, suddenly, that she was trapped, that great violence was coming to her' yet '[w]ho would feel bad for her? She had done this to herself' (Cline 52). The rhetoric of personal responsibility and individual choice, which is such a central part of neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies, is here recast as something that has allowed a woman to participate in and take responsibility for potential violence against her. I started with a question about where the line is. When does the commodification of women tip from problematic to empowering? If a woman chooses how she is portrayed, if she is well-compensated and if she feels good about it, do these conditions make it acceptable? But what 'Los Angeles' opens up for us is a different kind of question, a question that is more difficult to answer. Does Alice have another choice? The narrative offers her no other way to exercise agency or to break out of the confines of her life. She is caught within a system in which succeeding outside of it is impossible. By tracing the purchase of a particular kind of neoliberal postfeminist logic about women's feelings of empowerment throughout 'Los Angeles', I have illuminated the ways in which these ideas maintain their grip as a kind of taken-for-granted common sense, but I have also argued that the story shows us that this logic keeps women trapped. It is not the case, as the end of the story suggests, that Alice 'had done this to herself'; rather that the value systems under which Alice lives leave her little choice. Though Alice has made the choice to leave her hometown and go to Los Angeles, when she reflects on the people she went to high school with and what she knows of them now – the photos of their babies and engagements posted on social media – we are faced with the realisation that whatever choices Alice made, she would always have been compelled to perform certain kinds of feeling for attention.

The Latin word *fidere* means 'trust' and is the root of many English words, including confidence and also, 'fiduciary' – a person or organisation who is responsible for managing property and/or money on behalf of another person or organisation. 'Los Angeles' highlights the fact that in a patriarchal context women's performances of confidence are always economic. Alice is incited to perform a pleasing confidence in order to earn money and to increase her own social currency, which may in turn increase her profitability. The realisation that the cultivation of confidence is not about personal wellbeing, but a cog in the machine of heteropatriarchal capitalism is deflating and disorienting. 'Los Angeles'

draws attention the gap between *feelings* of empowerment and the ability to control one's own life, free from patriarchal influence. Fostering belief in one's own abilities and freedoms may feel good temporarily, but it doesn't last long, and it won't until women's objectification is not a given, something women must work with and condition themselves to feel better about. Far from an indictment of those who, like Alice, make use of their bodies for personal gain in such a culture, 'Los Angeles' asks us to question the empty rhetoric of confidence by asking who it benefits and what it hides.

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