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A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by

JENNIFER H. GUNTER

April 2011

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role images of southern women play in understanding the feminist movement from 1980 to 2000. By closely analyzing several media forms, from television to self-help books, it becomes apparent that the function of the southern woman is often to either soften the blow of feminism or push the agenda of patriarchy. I look thoroughly at movies and television of the 1980s as well as books and societal groups of the 1990s. The time period involved in this study encompasses the backlash to the second wave of feminism through the emergence of the third wave. The data I use was culled from personal as well as literary and film analysis. I utilized historical works and studied the media forms intimately. This paper argues that although the south may be dissolving into the rest of the country, the image of the southern woman remains distinct. Through marketing, branding and consuming, the figure of the southern woman is as prominent as ever.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt gratitude is extended to my advisor, Dr. Nancy Bercaw. She was tireless in her assistance and was never more than a phone call away. Dr. Katie McKee and Dr. Zandria Robinson were also unfailingly helpful to me during this process. The support of my fellow graduate students, especially Xaris Martinez, made it almost enjoyable. My parents, Janice Jordan and Bill Holman, are possibly the most supportive and loving a person could hope for. And, thanks to my husband, Brad, who never lets me take myself too seriously.

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INTRODUCTION

In academic circles there has been talk of a disappearing South. That it, as a separate entity, may no longer exist.¹ But neither popular culture nor its consumers are convinced this is true. One needs only to stop in a book store, turn on a television, go to the movies or surf the internet to see that there is still a strong contingent of people who continue to believe in a place that is the South. Or, if not that, they believe in people who are southern, especially women. In other words, there is a belief in southern people if not a southern place.

There are currently dozens of books written by southern white women about southern white women and what it might mean to be one or want to be one. Florence King started the most recent movement with her book *Southern Ladies and Gentlemen*, published in 1975.² In the decades since there have been movies, television shows, magazines and books that exalt the image of southern women. Contemporary scholarship steers toward the negation of southern exceptionalism yet the opposite seems to be true in the marketing of southern women, or at least her image: simultaneously that of a coquette and a matriarch, who is steely and graceful as well as frail and demure. Suzanne Ferris says, “With remaining claims to regional distinctiveness

¹ See C. Vann Woodward, “The Search for Southern Identity” from *The Burden of Southern History*, by C. Vann Woodward. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960.

² Florence King. *Southern Ladies and Gentlemen*. New York: Stein and Day, 1975.

tenuous at best, southerners [and nonsoutherners] wistful for lost race and class privilege look to the gender rituals around which such privileges were constructed in the first place.”³

Consumers both within the region and abroad are buying into the idea that southern women are extraordinary examples of their gender. With that distinction comes some sort of inherent belief that women outside the region feel that they are lacking. The public feels they have something to learn from the “southern lady.” This can be seen with the popularity of Ronda Rich’s best-selling book, *What Southern Women Know (That Every Woman Should)*. She tells us that southern women are “specifically trained from the cradle to be feminine. We spend years learning to wink, smile, flutter, flatter, and bedazzle.”⁴ This claim to a unique training is what Rich, and writers like her, utilizes as a marketing ploy. Suzanne Ferris says, “Scholars generally agree that in the absence of true regional distinctiveness, both southerners and nonsoutherners continue to contribute to this effort of maintaining a knowable South by trafficking in southern difference.”⁵ Indeed, W. Fitzhugh Brundage says, “[s]outhern identity, in short, will endure as long as people imagine themselves within a southern historical narrative.”⁶

That is not to say that the fascination with the south and its women did not exist before 1975. In fact, the appeal of southern women has a history almost as long as that of the United States. Throughout American history, the southern half of the country has held a sway over popular imagination. There is a long-held belief that southerners are a part of something

³ Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young. “Ya Yas, Grits and Sweet Potato Queens: Contemporary Southern Belles and the Prescriptions that Guide Them.” *Chick Lit: the New Woman's Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2006, 162.

⁴ Ronda Rich. *What Southern Women Know (that Every Woman Should): Timeless Secrets to Get What You Want in Love, Life, and Work*. New York: Putnam, 1999, 15.

⁵ Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young. “Ya Yas, Grits and Sweet Potato Queens. Contemporary Southern Belles and the Prescriptions That Guide Them.” *Chick Lit: the New Woman's Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2006, 162.

⁶ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed. *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, 15.

unique.⁷ The simple act of being born there has granted them admittance to a special club, at least in popular imagination. Southerners eat unusual foods, create strange music and hearken back to an exceptional (white) past. They use unfamiliar words and speak them slowly. They occupy a place that is both exotic and accessible. It is because of this belief that southerners are different that an obsession with the region has continued, morphed and changed over time, but never actually died. Perhaps it is this sense of belonging that has allowed the obsession to bloom rather than fade away. In 1975 Jack Kirby, author of *Media Made Dixie*, foresaw the ending of the mass southern appeal and has since been proven wrong.⁸ Instead the appeal has grown and images of southerners, especially women, have traveled worldwide.⁹

But forces that reside outside the region have created most of these images. Iconic images of southerners and southern landscapes have been used to, as Karen Cox says, “sell an idea of leisure to middle-class consumers outside the South.”¹⁰ Just such an image is that of the perfect woman, the Southern Belle or Lady, who is worshipped by all who see her.

Both the south and the women who hail from there have changed drastically over time. Consumerism and capitalism have gradually created a monotone landscape with one region looking spookily similar to any other. Chain stores and restaurants have made it possible for every person in America dress and eat identically. Yet something remains that continues to make

⁷ W. J. Cash. *The Mind of the South*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1941, vii.

⁸ See the conclusion, which he later recanted in the second edition, in the first edition of Jack Temple Kirby. *Media Made Dixie: the South in the American Imagination*. Athens.: Univ. of Georgia, 1975.

⁹ This can be seen in Gavin James Campbell’s discussion of Britney Spears’ fame. In it he says that appreciating her “hold on American pop culture” requires understanding her skill at “playing upon a national fascination with southern white femininity.” “‘I’m Just a Louisiana Girl’: The Southern World of Britney Spears.” *Southern Cultures* 7, no. 4 (2001): 81-97. doi:10.1353/scu.2001.0047, 82-83.

¹⁰ See discussion of the image of Aunt Jemima in Karen Cox. “The South and Mass Culture.” *The Journal of Southern History* LXXV, no. 3 (August 2009): 682-683.

us believe that the south, or at least southerners, is unique.¹¹ Now, as much as anytime in the past, there is a fascination with the South, and especially its imagined women, from both inside and outside the region.

In the past few decades women in the U.S. south, of all classes and races, began calling themselves belles and hence the image has changed somewhat. But it evidently did not change so much that its mass appeal dimmed or faded. In fact, it seems that in recent years the appeal has only grown. This may be because of the reality that there is more access to such images through the Internet and other global systems of information exchange. Or it may be attributed to something else entirely. But the truth is that now, more than ever, the southern belle has a global face.

In the early 1970s Kirby's *Media-Made Dixie* took a close look at images of the south in the media and popular culture. He documented a fascination with all things southern in the 1970s that included the television show *The Waltons*, increase in country music stations, and the boom of Kentucky Fried Chicken. This inclination continued through the rest of the century and could be attributed to the image the south inhabits. Kirby said, "White Americans increasingly identified the South with rustic simplicity."¹² Perhaps it is the desire to live in a simpler time that has so many eyes focused on the south. But the image of the southern woman that continues to hold sway over consumers is anything but simple. In fact, she has become ever more complicated over the past few decades. Her image has grown to encompass several new

¹¹W. J. Cash. *The Mind of the South*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1941, vii.

¹² Jack Temple Kirby. *Media Made Dixie: the South in the American Imagination*. Athens u.a.: Univ. of Georgia, 1975, 136.

characteristics. The following chapters will prove that there are new dimensions to the Scarlett/Melanie dichotomy.¹³

Most of the scholarly works that examine southern women end their studies in the 1970s, with the Civil Rights Movement, but the story does not stop there. Southern women have continued to evolve and hold fascination for people everywhere. New books are emerging in libraries and bookstores that tell stories of southern women and offer up tips and recipes that they claim are distinctly southern. These books bear names as humorous as the topics they cover, and many have emerged since the market began showing new demand for books with a southern flair.

Anne Goodwyn Jones argues, “[a]s an *image*, southern womanhood has been the crown of Dixie at least since the early nineteenth century; it originated earlier, with the development of the planter class in the South in the seventeenth century.”¹⁴ When planters began to inhabit their versions of elite society in the U.S. south they also began to idealize the image of the perfect woman. These girls, or belles, and their mothers, or ladies, were bound to more than just the land. They were expected to be the image of the South itself. Suzanne Ferris says, “[t]he original southern lady, after all, was the imaginative creation of white, slaveholding southern men, who looked to her to rationalize a race-gender system that placed the patriarchal father at

¹³ Scarlett and Melanie are two of the main characters in Margaret Mitchell’s classic, *Gone With the Wind*. Scarlett is obstinate and vain while Melanie is docile and plain.

¹⁴ Anne Goodwyn Jones. *Tomorrow Is Another Day: the Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1981, 8. My emphasis; no italics in the original.

the head of households of women, children, and slaves.”¹⁵ Thavolia Glymph says that, “The plantation household was the principal site for the construction of southern white womanhood.”¹⁶

Gender played as important a role in the social stratum as did race in the U.S. South. Ferris goes on to say, “[t]hus southern womanhood was linked directly to fundamental southern questions of race, class, and sex”.¹⁷ The planter-elites used their families as a capstone on the pyramid of their society. These men were not only master in the field, but in the home as well. Women were relegated to subordinate roles and there they stayed, until it was necessary for them to be otherwise.

“Southern men have toasted and celebrated southern womanhood since the South began to think of itself as a region, probably before the American Revolution,” says Ferris.¹⁸ This prescription was pressed upon the women of the planter class who had very little choice but to mold themselves into this image just as they molded their bodies daily with corsets. She continues by saying, “[t]his marvelous *creation* was described as a submissive wife whose reason for being was to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household. Physically weak, and ‘formed for the less laborious occupations,’ she depended upon male protection she was endowed with the capacity to ‘create a

¹⁵ Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young. “Ya Yas, Grits and Sweet Potato Queens. Contemporary Southern Belles and the Prescriptions that Guide Them.” *Chick Lit: the New Woman's Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2006, 166. See also Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1988, especially pages 192-241.

¹⁶Thavolia Glymph. *Out of the House of Bondage: the Transformation of the Plantation Household*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008.

¹⁷ Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young. “Ya Yas, Grits and Sweet Potato Queens. Contemporary Southern Belles and the Prescriptions that Guide Them.” *Chick Lit: the New Woman's Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2006, Pg 8.

¹⁸ Ibid. Pg 3

magic spell' over any man in her vicinity. She was timid and modest, beautiful and graceful' the most fascinating being in creation . . . the delight and charm of every circle she moves in".¹⁹

Traditionally women of the U.S. South had been born into a certain role depending on their race and financial status. Those in the white elite class were raised to uphold a certain ideal that was created for them by the men in their lives. This ideal was not in place for African American women or white women of the lower classes. Nor was it one that was upheld by all women of the upper classes. This was an image, a symbol that was envisioned by the planter-elite and one that very few women would, or could, embody. Anne Firor Scott argues, "it is possible to speculate that, as with so much else in the antebellum South, slavery had a good deal to do with the *ideal* of the southern lady".²⁰ This ideal, as the ultimate image of the South, was lily-white and pure. Her lineage was never in question; she came from unpolluted Anglo stock. As important, she reproduced pure unpolluted children certain, if the myth remained secure, sired by her husband. By placing this icon on her pedestal, southern white men asserted control over their families and the safe inheritance of political and economic power. Their wives and daughters were untainted, as was their standing as patriarch. This was an extension of the land/slave owning mindset. Scott continues, "[w]omen, along with children and slaves, were expected to recognize their proper and subordinate place and to be obedient to the head of the family."²¹

Elite southern women had long been considered queens. But the title came with some consequences. In return for being queens at home they were not allowed anywhere else, except

¹⁹ Ibid, 8. Again, the italics are mine to emphasize that this was a mythic creature.

²⁰ Anne Firor Scott. *The Southern Lady: from Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970, 16.

²¹ Anne Firor Scott. *The Southern Lady: from Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970, 17.

perhaps church. They ruled the home sphere and were responsible for everything in their realm. The honor of the region was directly connected to their own honor. If they were thought to have compromised themselves it would reflect on the power of their men. Their virtue, their sexuality (or lack there of), was the center of the racial dynamics in the south and was what their husbands and fathers thought was the most important attribute to protect. In her memoir *Womenfolk*, Shirley Abbot remembers, “[t]he lady’s work was cut out for her, not in her own house or even in the quarters, but in the realm of collective self-delusion.”²² The placement on a pedestal removed them from the sullying hands of all who were thought to be impure, basically anyone not white. In consequence they were firmly placed upon a dais and left there until the end of the twentieth century, when they finally took it upon themselves to step down. Abbot continues, “[o]bedient, faithful, submissive women strengthened the image of men who thought themselves vigorous, intelligent, commanding leaders”.²³ This emphasis in elite women’s purity secured their husbands’ interests as well as their own, they profited from the seclusion.

But once the Civil War began and the head of the household left for the front lines women’s roles changed. This is where we see the insertion of steel into the image of the fragile magnolia. Because it was necessary for men to leave their women at home alone so that they may join the fight, it was essential to modify the image of southern women, who were in many cases now responsible for everything regarding house and home. Mistress became Master and had to begin to learn how to maneuver in the outside world. For the first time it was acceptable for southern women to leave the home in search of resources. During the Civil War when most of the men were away fighting women were made to, or allowed to, take responsibility for the plantations and everyone residing there. This image was made popular with the release of *Gone*

²² Shirley Abbott. *Womenfolks: Growing up down South*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1983.

²³ *Ibid*, 18.

With the Wind, in 1939, which showed a resilient Scarlett not only feeding her family with scarce resources but also murdering a Northern soldier to protect them.

Once the war was over, women returned home, glad their services were no longer necessary. The Emancipation Proclamation granted slaves freedom but the roles of southern white women of a certain class remained the same, the icon did not change position, she happily returned to her pedestal. In fact, after the Civil War it was as important as ever for southern women to be seen as chaste for it was then that a freedman could overtake them and denigrate their honor. By defiling the representation of the south this gave the impression of defiling the region with blackness. This image was put on the silver screen to incite terror into white men region-wide in *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915. It would be the middle of the next century before these women saw any sort of permanent change in their status. Throughout history, women rose to the occasion when their services were needed. Howard Zinn argues that, “[i]t seems that women have best been able to make their first escape from the prison of wifeliness, motherhood, femininity, housework, beautification, isolation, when their services have been desperately needed—whether in industry, or in war, or in social movements.”²⁴ It was within these movements that women began to fully understand their power. But, he continues, “[e]ach time practicality pulled women out of her prison—in a kind of work-parole program—the attempt was made to push her back once the need was over, and this led to women’s struggle for change.”²⁵ Yet, many women reveled in their dependence and longed to remain subdued.

During the 1950s African Americans began to firmly assert their freedoms through legal means and non-violent demonstrations. Women were the backbone of what became the Civil

²⁴ Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States: 1492-present*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999, 494

²⁵ Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States: 1492-present*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999, 494.

Rights Movement.²⁶ They often were used as a catalyst for changes such as with Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Rosa Parks and her push for equal treatment on public transportation, and Fannie Lou Hamer and her involvement the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Yet, they mostly remained behind the scenes and relegated to menial tasks like office work. Many white women worked alongside African Americans in their struggle for equal treatment under the law. While working for equal rights for all races, women in the organizations often succumbed to sexual harassment and relegation to menial tasks from the men they worked among. It was in this work that they began to see how important it was to change their own legal status. With the creation of the National Organization of Women (NOW) in 1966 women, mainly white and middle class, set in motion a series of protests that they believed would make life better for all U.S. women.²⁷

Although Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination according to sex it was never enforced. In early 1972 the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), first introduced in 1923, was passed by Congress and sent to the states for ratification. This amendment would guarantee equal rights under any federal, state or local law and citizen entitlements could not be denied on account of sex. Of the fifteen states that have yet to ratify this amendment, nine of them are in the south. Introduced in Congress every year since 1923 it finally failed to gain ratification by its 1982 deadline.²⁸ This is due, in part, to the influence and lobbying of a small

²⁶ Sara M. Evans. *Personal Politics: the Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*. New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1979, 83-101.

²⁷ Collins, Gail. *When Everything Changed: the Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*. New York: Little, Brown and, 2009, 130-148.

²⁸ For a more detailed history of the Equal Rights Amendment and its failure to pass see Jane Mansbridge. *Why We Lost the ERA*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, especially pages 8-19.

group of women who believed that, as Donald Mathews says, the “ERA would destroy gender identity (womanhood) in America.”²⁹

According to Martha McKay, member of the North Carolina Women’s Political Caucus, “I think it would have gone on through if groups of preachers and women who were making a lot of noise in opposition hadn’t gone down and started lobbying against it.”³⁰ The Mississippi State Legislature was the only state to refuse to even vote on the amendment. In fact Mississippi did not ratify the 19th amendment, granting women the right to vote, until 1984. “On March 22, 1984, the Mississippi Legislature—on a day when few legislators were even listening and with no opposition----finally ratified the Nineteenth Amendment.”³¹

In Mississippi the death rattle for the ERA encouraged a group of women to play with the bounds of femininity with the first appearance of the now notorious Sweet Potato Queens. That year Jill Connor Browne and a group of her friends donned second-hand green dresses, red wigs and tiaras and proclaimed themselves Queens. She would later pen eight books detailing these exploits and persuading other women to do the same.

A few years later *Designing Women* premiered on CBS and Sony Pictures’ *Steel Magnolias* hit the silver screen. Also during the 1980s audiences were enthralled with the female

²⁹ Donald G. Mathews. "“Spiritual Warfare”: Cultural Fundamentalism and the Equal Rights Amendment." *Religion and American Culture* 3, no. 2 (1993): 141.

³⁰ "Oral History Interview with Martha C. McKay, March 29, 1974. Interview A-0324. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007)." Interview. Documenting the American South Homepage. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/index.html>. See also Marjorie Julian Spruill. “The Mississippi Takeover: Feminists, Antifeminists, and the International Women’s Year Conference of 1977.” Swain, Martha H., Elizabeth Anne Payne, and Marjorie Julian Spruill, eds. *Mississippi Women: Their Histories, Their Lives. Volume 2*. Athens: University of Georgia, 2010.

³¹ Marjorie Julian Spruill. "The Equal Rights Amendment And Mississippi." *Mississippi History Now*. Accessed April 05, 2011. <http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/226/the-equal-rights-amendment-and-mississippi>.

characters in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, set in Alabama. They were also treated to movies such as *Miss Firecracker* and *Blaze*, each telling the story of southern women.

The 1990s saw the beginning of what would become an abundance of what is now termed Southern Chick Lit. With *A Southern Belle Primer: Or Why Princess Margaret Will Never Be a Kappa Kappa Gamma* in 1991, Marilyn Schwartz wittily introduced a new generation of women to the intricacies of southern womanhood. This generation was born to mothers who had lived through the Equal Rights Movement. They were being influenced by another wave of feminism and were looking for meaning in their gender and looking to escape some of the stricter prescriptions. By detailing the mores and protocols of southern womanhood Schwartz's book, and the others that followed, poked fun at the restrictions that continued to bind women in society.

This is just a sampling of the dozens of books that have been published, movies and television shows that exist in which the South, and its women, is prominent. Alongside this there exists a web presence that includes numerous sites concerning southern belles, The Civil War, and sites offering general introductions to southernness, creating a Virtual South. What is it about southernness, and in particular, southern women that holds such fascination for consumers nationwide? There are several possible answers for this.

In today's world people are disconnected from each other to such a degree, they have turned towards a place and a time to find some connection. The reality of the place and its inhabitants matter little. The fictions created by writers, filmmakers and website creators offer comfort and nostalgia for simpler times. Cultural anthropologist, Lourdes Arizpe, argues, "[i]n a world in which humans have become mobile geographically as never before, they may carry their cultures with them, like internalized software, but they must also find new ties to bind them

to communities across countries and continents. The Internet may be the site for these new virtual identities.”³²

Since the late 1970s, American women have been inundated with images of “perfection” in women’s magazines, television and movies. Naomi Wolf contends that with the benefits afforded women since the Equal Rights movement, ever more emphasis is placed on beauty. This creates mindsets of competition among women and a disconnect in the female society. It also creates a dwindling in the self-esteem of women nationwide, a way in which the power in society remains male.³³ As the embodiment of the ideal woman, are southern women being created in popular culture and looked to in order to “learn” to be beautiful?

In the 1980s there emerged in popular culture the vision of a new southern woman. In books, movies and television shows she showed a new face. Gone were the days of Melanie Wilkes and her timid sisters. Although not completely a new version of the southern woman (i.e. *Jezebel* and Scarlett O’Hara), this designing woman was no longer meek, married and subservient, she may not even like men or be white. She owned her own businesses, she had sex and she had opinions of her own, which she wasn’t afraid of sharing. But why did these new images of southern women emerge? What were they in response to?

Can the recent fascination with southern women be connected with the advent of the technological age? I argue that the loss of tradition and community that has come with cell phones and the internet have created a desire to return to a simpler time, if only in our imaginations. It is also possible these groupings of southern women in the subjects that will be covered represent idealized female relationships that are, if not completely fictional, at least very

³² Wendy Harcourt. *Women@Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace*. London: Zed Books, 1999, xiv.

³³ Naomi Wolf. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*. New York: W. Morrow, 1991.

rare. I would also propose that this fascination is a form of backlash against both the second and third waves of feminism.

In the United States there have been three “waves” of feminist movement. The first occurred from 1848 to the early 1900s as white women, known as suffragists, gathered together held marches and conventions in order to force their way to enfranchisement. The second wave began in the late 1960s in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. Members of this group were concerned with achieving equal rights under the law for women. They did this by pushing for the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment, which had been proposed in 1923 that would ensure that people were treated equally by law, regardless of gender.³⁴ The Amendment never passed, largely due to the influence of certain women who felt it was an attack on their womanhood. And, seeing as how the image of the white southern lady is the epitome of womanhood, it was also an attack on their race and privileges.³⁵ The third wave, stretching from the early to mid 1990s to the present was born more to popular culture. During its reign women were influenced to create their own media, for example “zines,” which were photocopied pages hand-stapled together. Many aggressive all-girl bands sprung up and declared themselves “Riot Grrrls.”³⁶ Their ideology differs from the earlier waves in that it was a self-propelled movement, “indie” in spirit. The followers were more interested in doing it themselves, or DIY, and produced their own propaganda.

³⁴ There is an excellent discussion of these two movements in Gail Collins. *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*. New York: Little and Brown. 2009.

³⁵ See page 99 for discussion of “’protection’ of Southern womanhood” during the Equal Rights Movement 1982: in the South in Stephanie Gilmore. "The Dynamics of Second-Wave Feminist Activism in Memphis, 1971-Rethinking the Liberal/Radical Divide." *NWSA Journal* 15, no. 1 (2003)

³⁶ Elizabeth Keenan. "If Liz Phair's "Exile in Guyville" Made You a Feminist, What Kind of Feminist Are You? Heterosexuality, Race and Class in the Third Wave." *Women & Music* 14 (2010): 45-71.

Following each of these movements there have been popular culture backlashes that focused on southern women, as the ideal woman. After the suffragist movement, movies such as *Jezebel* and *Gone With the Wind* were very popular. After the second-wave, sitcoms featuring southern women like *Designing Women* and *Golden Girls* became hits on television. Then, in the wake of the third-wave came the influx of the Southern Chick Lit books. Time and again popular culture has turned to southern women to present a turning away from, or reframing, feminist agendas. While, as Karen Cox claims, “it is clear that representations of the South in national mass culture more generally have been created by nonsoutherners,” the question remains is why?³⁷

Howard Zinn contends that the 1980s were “a very different social, cultural, and political terrain in which feminism was once again consigned to the dustbin of history, women reembraced high-heeled shoes and dress-up clothing, and fear of spinsterhood reemerged as a popular pathology.”³⁸ The term “feminism” may have died but women across the country were joining the job force like never before. This movement was seen all over the country, including the south where the image of womanhood had always had a firm footing. How were these women going to retain their lady-like aspects when they were forced, or allowed, to leave the home? And why did the country turn to her to be their role model in the media?

How have the portrayals of southern womanhood changed since she was first imagined? At that point she was a belle, a lady, poor white trash, mammy or jezebel. There was a rigid form they were forced to adhere to. In present times they can be all of these at the same time or

³⁷ Karen Cox. "The South and Mass Culture." *The Journal of Southern History* LXXV, no. 3 (August 2009): 689.

³⁸ Gail Collins. *America's Women: Four Hundred Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines*. New York: William Morrow, 2003, 447.

none at all. But, according to depictions in popular culture there are still some expectations and stereotypes that apply to southern women, many self-applied.

At some point in the last several decades the image of the fallen belle (impure), or the fallen lady, was embraced and turned from a negative into a positive. Betina Entzminger links the fallen belle to the ancient image of the femme fatale—“sexually knowing, physically powerful because of her allure, and morally dangerous. She becomes, therefore, the opposite of the ideal southern lady, the mature woman the belle was intended to become.”³⁹ Some women in the south embraced this image, including Jill Conner Browne.

Around the same time it became acceptable for a belle or lady, fallen or otherwise, to be of any race and economic background. All it took was a proclamation, a statement, and one could become a belle. It seems that the underlying intention here would act as a move for empowerment. The fact that Florence King published her books, including *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*, in the 1970s and coincided with the second wave of the feminist movement is telling. Not only accepting the label of fallen but announcing it went a great distance in proclaiming southern (and maybe all white) women’s independence. By embracing the fallen belle women were also embracing their inherent power. Entzminger asserts that, “her womanly beauty is the source of her power.”⁴⁰

In 1975 King was just reaffirming what W.J. Cash asserted in 1941, “There exists among us by ordinary—both North and South—a profound conviction that the South is another land, sharply differentiated from the rest of the American nation, and exhibiting within itself a

³⁹Betina Entzminger. *The Belle Gone Bad: White Southern Women Writers and the Dark Seductress*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002, 2.

⁴⁰Betina Entzminger. *The Belle Gone Bad: White Southern Women Writers and the Dark Seductress*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002.

remarkable homogeneity.”⁴¹ She is saying, see we are all crazy but in our craziness we are all alike and different from you.⁴² We are the other.

Although recent scholarship is steered toward the negation of southern exceptionalism the opposite seems true, especially in the marketing of southern women. Consumers both within the region and abroad are literally buying into the idea that southern women are special and that they very well might have something to teach.

In the essay “Would Youall Be Good Enough to Excuse Me While I Have an Identity Crisis?” King examines what she deems to be the problems of southern women, what she calls in the subtitle “The Cult of Southern Womanhood.” The subtitle is a nod to the Cult of True Womanhood, which was, as Barbara Welter says, “presented by the women’s magazines, gift annuals and religious literature of the nineteenth century.”⁴³ The Cult of True Womanhood, or The Cult of Domesticity, described the ideal woman of the Victorian era. Her qualities could be divided into “four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.”⁴⁴ These four attributes were also used to describe the southern woman.

But in addition to these, King says, “The cult of Southern womanhood endowed her with at least five totally different images and asked her to be good enough to adopt all of them. She is required to be frigid, passionate, sweet, bitchy and scatterbrained—all at the same time.”⁴⁵ In

⁴¹ W. J. Cash. *The Mind of the South*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1941, vii.

⁴² Florence King. *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*. New York: St. Martin's Press/Marek, 1975.

⁴³ Barbara Welter. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860." *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Athens: Ohio University Press. 1976.

⁴⁴ Florence King. *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*. New York: St. Martin's Press/Marek, 1975, 152

⁴⁵ Florence King. *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*. New York: St. Martin's Press/Marek, 1975, 37.

her frigidity she was able to “keep her footing on the pedestal men had erected for her.”⁴⁶ She admits that these attributes had “always been required of women in societies based upon vast, entailed estates.”⁴⁷ But in the South it was doubly necessary for women to remain aloof because this “enabled the white woman to maintain her sanity when she saw light-skinned slave children, who were the very spit of Old Massa” and by “being sufficiently frosty and above it all, she was able to ignore and endure the evidence of intercaste sexuality that surrounded her.”⁴⁸ This is a rather astute observation for a book that is classified as humor. Here we see King claiming that southern women have always used the role that was pressed upon them to their own profit. How else could a woman, wife and mother, ignore the sexual violence of her husband?

King delves further into the contrasting attributes by looking at historical stereotypes of southern women. Of her frigidity King says, “Anything can happen in a land where men drink toasts to frigidity,” so the “Southern woman often decided to enjoy sex as much as possible while remaining a virgin—a compromise that won her a reputation as a sadistic flirt.”⁴⁹

King argues, “today’s belles are brides and debutantes,” because the “de facto belle is going the way of the dodo.”⁵⁰ This is because true belles stopped existing with the fall of the southern states and their admission back into the Union. But, she said, “[t]here are many de jure belles left in today’s South because bellehood is largely a state of mind.”⁵¹ But on their wedding day or at their coming-out anyone has the ability to be a belle. I plan to show that this remains

⁴⁶ Ibid, 37.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 37.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 37. Also see: Martha Elizabeth Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South*. New Have, Connecticut. Yale University Press, 1997.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 38.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 109.

⁵¹ Ibid, 107.

true to this day with the small change that women are being told that they can be a belle/queen/lady everyday, regardless of region, income and in some cases race.

Evidence of this is that a few months after the Supreme Court dismissed the ERA, Jill Conner Browne and five of her friends dressed themselves in thrift store formal gowns and climbed into the back of a pick-up truck to participate in the first Mal's St. Paddy's Day Parade in downtown Jackson, Mississippi. This was how they decided to declare their freedom. Their government had failed them but cheap wigs and stained opera gloves would not.

In the 1980s there emerged in popular culture the vision of a new southern woman. In books, movies and television shows she showed a new face. Gone were the days of Melanie Wilkes and her timid sisters. But why did these new images of southern women emerge? What were they in response to?

This study will focus on three separate areas of interest. The first chapter will be a discussion of the Southern Chick Lit genre, looking specifically at three different books and how they form images of southern women. The second chapter will be a conversation of film and television, two movies and a situation comedy in particular, and what the characters say about southern women. The third and final chapter will focus on a yearly celebration in a southern city that brings women from all over the world to rejoice in their womanhood and may be a backlash to the backlash against feminism. The reason I chose these three mediums is that they are the most accessible to the general public. They also are those that are most inundated with the southern belle image.

My intention is to answer the questions posed in this introduction as fully as possible. I hope to explain the reason that southern women continue to be used as representations for all American women. In other words, why in the fight between feminism and femininity does region

matter? Admittedly southerners created many of the images of southern women that will be discussed; Sweet Potato Queens and *Steel Magnolias* are both southern inventions. *An author from Alabama penned The Southern Belle Primer*. But are these representations any more true than those created by outsiders? Are any of these figures honest? Do they represent the modern day southern woman? Has she stepped off of the pedestal and into the bed of a Dodge Ram? What does she have to teach us about ourselves?

CHAPTER 1

SOUTHERN WOMEN IN PRINT

In the wake of the Equal Rights Movement a new print genre emerged. In bookstores around the country the shelves began to fill with books, termed Chick Lit, which featured young women who embodied the characteristics of the Everywoman born in the era of independence and feminism. She worked, was typically single and trying desperately to be otherwise.

During the same time span dozens of books have been published that have the word “South” or “Southern” in the title and are labeled Southern Chick Lit. Although none of them holds much weight as literature or serious works the sheer volume of them seems to demand some sort of attention. What is it about Southernness, and in particular, Southern Women that holds such fascination for the American public? Is there some secret they hold that would greatly improve someone’s life? Or is it just that they were an offshoot of an up and coming popular genre?

As a genre, Chick Lit began in the early 1990s and spun into worldwide popularity with the release of *Bridget Jones’ Diary*. Suzanne describes the genre by saying these “books are entertaining, interesting, and many women can identify with them. The plots usually involve a

woman in her 20s or 30s, going through everyday problems and challenges with her boyfriend, job, living situation, marriage, dating life, etc.”⁵² Unlike most Chick Lit, the southern extension is usually non-fiction. The rest of popular women’s books are all fiction – telling the stories of youngish women in their quest for stylish clothes, the next new cocktail and a one-night stand that could lead to true love.⁵³ These stories are in direct response to the Equal Rights Movement and the necessity of two income families. Within these narratives the reason why the women work is never raised. It is portrayed as an unquestionable fact of life.

Yet the books I am presenting are memoir-type/self-help works. The dust jacket of *GRITS Friends Are Forevah* says these are “lifestyle” books.⁵⁴ They are primarily composed of anecdotes, tips, quips and quotes. These gift books are often meant to be seen and not read. Yet, they perform the same work as fiction in that they provide an escape from otherwise ordinary lives. Janice Radway says, “the simple event of picking up a book enabl[es] them to deal with the particular pressures and tensions encountered in their daily round of activities.”⁵⁵

This new genre comes in at least two sets. One set contains rules and tips on how to be a Southern Belle/Lady, such as *Southern Belle Primer* (1991) and *The Grits Guide to Life* (2003). The second asserts the advantages and disadvantages of being a “Fallen/Tarnished/Failed” Southern Belle/Lady, such as *The Sweet Potato Queens’ Book of Love* (1999) and the decades earlier, *Southern Ladies and Gentlemen* (1975). White southern women wrote all of these books,

⁵² Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young. “Ya Yas, Grits and Sweet Potato Queens: Contemporary Southern Belles and the Prescriptions That Guide Them.” *Chick Lit: the New Woman's Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2006, 24.

⁵³ The introduction explains the genre. Ibid, 8-10.

⁵⁴ Deborah Ford. *Grits Friends Are Forevah: a Southern-style Celebration of Women*. New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Dutton, 2006.

⁵⁵ Janice A. Radway. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

assumedly for white southern women. Yet many of these volumes have become national bestsellers, and even international phenomenon.⁵⁶ This cannot happen if they are bought and read only regionally. Ferris says, “sales across the genre are just as high in Washington, D.C. as in Atlanta—and both are eclipsed by those in New York.”⁵⁷ Women all over the country, and indeed the world, must be picking them up and connecting to the words and ideas on the pages, in one way or another.

Studying works of this sort, as pieces of cultural significance, offers a deeper understanding of how (southern) women view themselves and how they wish for themselves and their longings to be portrayed to the bigger world. Close readings will offer clues to white, middle class, and women in general in the post-feminist world. Although these works are cloaked as humorous essays or how-to books, they can also be read as new assertions of what it means to be a southern woman. The new fascination with southern womanhood is also connected to a disconnection with traditional values and community. Or, the fascination stems from the fear of lost femininity in the wake of feminism. White Southern women have long been the bastions for femininity and perhaps readers turn to these types of books when their own femininity is in question. As *the* symbol of feminine womanhood and family the Southern Belle/Lady stands firm upon her pedestal. Although now it seems that by purchasing a book and taking its provisos to heart and hearth it is possible for anyone to make herself over into a belle, regardless of race or region.

In this section I present the authors and works to be analyzed. Each has a different background and viewpoint of what it means to be a southern woman. Two of them (Marilyn

⁵⁶ All eight of the Sweet Potato Queen books and all four of the GRITS books were on the New York Times Bestsellers list. The Sweet Potato Queens website lists close to seven thousand “Wannabee” chapters from almost every country in the world.

⁵⁷ Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young. “Ya Yas, Grits and Sweet Potato Queens: Contemporary Southern Belles and the Prescriptions That Guide Them.” *Chick Lit: the New Woman's Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2006, 160.

Schwartz and Deborah Ford) have similar agendas while one (Jill Conner Browne) takes a strikingly different approach. Yet, all three seem to understand that the product they are selling relies on them asserting their difference from other women.

In the early 1990s a writer was grappling with what it meant to be a southern woman. A journalist in Dallas, Texas, Maryln Schwartz was a feature writer and columnist for the Dallas Morning News. She published her first book, *A Southern Belle Primer, or why Princess Margaret Will Never be a Kappa Kappa Gamma* in 1991. It tells the tale of modern southern women in twelve small chapters. These chapters cover such topics as silver patterns, beauty pageants, what to serve at a funeral and “learning to sparkle.”⁵⁸ In this small volume Schwartz delivers several lists and witticisms by which her readers can help themselves obtain southern belledom. Two years after that book she published *New Times in the Old South or why Scarlett’s in Therapy and Tara’s Going Condo* (1993). Her tone is whimsical and she takes a tongue in cheek approach to spelling out the ins and outs of southern womanhood. Yet, at the same time, it is evident that she knows these prescriptions so well because she has learned them from the inside. By alternately poking fun at and detailing the rules and regulations of southern womanhood, Schwartz claims ownership of her elite status as a southern woman.

Deborah Ford did not start out wanting to be a writer, unlike Browne and Schwartz, and she had help writing her first book. Her first volume lists Edie Hand as co-author. She began her career as a high school volleyball coach. In the mid 1990s her idea for GRITS began while working with her team in a small town in Alabama. She began printing shirts as a confidence booster for her players and the rest stems from there. Her bio on Amazon.com reads: “Deborah Ford is the founder of Grits, Inc., a multimillion-dollar merchandising company specializing in

⁵⁸ Maryln Schwartz. *A Southern Belle Primer, Or, Why Princess Margaret Will Never Be a Kappa Kappa Gamma*. New York: Doubleday, 1991, 28.

women's apparel. Her first book, *The GRITS Guide to Life*, was a *New York Times* bestseller and SEBA Award winner, and spurred the series of lifestyle books that includes *GRITS Friends Are Forevah* and *Puttin' on the GRITS*.”⁵⁹ To date she has written and published four books: *The Grits (Girls Raised in the South) Guide to Life* (2004), *Puttin' on the Grits: A Guide to Southern Entertaining* (2005), *Grits Friends Are Forevah: A Southern-Style Celebration of Women* (2005), and *Bless His Heart: the GRITS Guide to Loving (or Just Living With) Southern Men* (2007). Her tone is somewhat serious in regards to what constitutes a southern woman and the actions deemed proper. Yet she includes anecdotes and stories that are intended to be humorous. Ford is not of the same elite status as Schwartz and Browne. She has a grittier approach to southern womanhood, a more tenuous grasp, hence her tone is more serious.

Jill Conner Browne turned what began as a whim by her group of friends in 1982, into a real empire. Since then, she has put out eight best selling books that offer rules to live by for the new southern (or in fact, any) woman. In *The Sweet Potato Queens' Book of Love* she lays down some new rules for southern women to live by, ways to use their belle charm to further their own ends. Yet, Browne is not pushing for women to release their inner belle. Instead she encourages her readers to dress funny, be loud and enjoy sex, a clear divergence from the other two authors, as well as most impressions of southern ladies.

In the past fifteen years she has published eight books in all, as well as co-written the pilot for a sitcom based on her works. Her books include: *The Sweet Potato Queens' Book of Love* (1999), *God Save the Sweet Potato Queens* (2001), *The Sweet Potato Queens' Big Ass Cookbook (And Financial Planner)*(2003), *The Sweet Potato Queens' Field Guide to Men:*

⁵⁹ "Amazon.com: Grits (Girls Raised in the South) Guide to Life: Deborah Ford: Books." Amazon.com: Online Shopping for Electronics, Apparel, Computers, Books, DVDs & More. Accessed April 07, 2011. http://www.amazon.com/Grits-Girls-Raised-South-Guide/dp/B003IWYKSA/ref=sr_1_fkmr0_1?ie=UTF8.

Every Man I Love is Either Married, Gay or Dead (2004), *The Sweet Potato Queens' Marriage Planner/Divorce Guide* (2007), *The Sweet Potato Queens' 1st Big Ass Novel* (2007), *The Sweet Potato Queens' Guide to Raising Children for Fun and Profit* (2008), and *American Thighs: The Sweet Potato Queens' Guide to Preserving Your Assets* (2009).

The books by all three authors are classified as humor and self-help, and found as such in bookstores. Interestingly, they can also be found in the history stacks in libraries, in place of academic history tomes.⁶⁰ What is evident in the pages of these works is an author trying to come to terms with changing times. Ford lists recipes and gardening tips, concrete evidence of her southern womanhood. Both Browne and Schwartz are so secure of their standings and consequently this confidence allows them the freedom to use freedom so freely.

The theme of change is prominent in Maryln Schwartz's work. Often Schwartz refers to the Old South as if it were truly just yesterday, 1960 instead of 1860. " 'You want to know the difference between the Old South and the New South,' a belle from Atlanta explains. 'I'll tell you the difference. This is the New South—Junior League just isn't what it used to be. They are taking in everyone now, I mean *everybody*.'"⁶¹ Here, I assume she means that the new Junior League will admit people of other races, classes and backgrounds, truly a big change from the class and race exclusions from years past.

There are other ways in which the south has changed for women according to Schwartz. Many of these ways are material in nature and have to do with how women dress. " 'My Mississippi grandmother always said only whores and children wear red shoes,' says an Alabama

⁶⁰ The impetus for this project was finding the Schwartz book in the University of Mississippi Library while researching for a piece on Southern women. It was nestled next to books on Civil Rights as if it were next in the chronology of historic works. It was also the only offering regarding white women in the south since the 1960s.

⁶¹ Maryln Schwartz. *A Southern Belle Primer, Or, Why Princess Margaret Will Never Be a Kappa Kappa Gamma*. New York: Doubleday, 1991, 80.

belle. ‘Of course I don’t abide by that in 1990.’”⁶² Three of the “Southern Belle’s Ten Golden Rules” refer to clothing and two are about silver patterns. From this list it is easy to assume that all southern belles are simply materialistic. Nothing in the list mentions any sort of virtues unless not smoking on the street is a virtue.

In the 1970s, when memoir writer Florence King was publishing her books, she asserted that southern women were to be judged more on the way they carried and conducted themselves and less on the way they appeared. Appearances were important but it was the composure and manners that truly mattered. In the two decades separating King’s work and that of the three authors studied here, southern womanhood had changed from an internal aspect to an external one. It was more important to look like a lady than it was to actually be one.

According to Schwartz’s book, something else that still held importance at this time for southern women was family. Not spending time with family or family values, but who your family was, what your lineage was. This was what assured your place in society. Your home was also still important, not the city, town or region but the actual home, the house. Schwartz emphasizes that Southern belles will stop at nothing to save the family home. She’ll dress in period garb and allow tourists to traipse through her home during the annual Spring Pilgrimage. She’ll turn her mansion into a bed and breakfast and give tours to visitors.

Who your family was determined which sorority you pledged. “In true Southern tradition, mothers and grandmothers pass down their sorority affiliation with the same reverence they pass down the family jewels,” or silver pattern.⁶³ Your family also ensured your debutante status and whether you would be a member of the court or even be crowned the queen or empress at an ultra exclusive Mardi Gras ball or St. Cecilia Society ball.

⁶² Ibid, 19.

⁶³ Ibid, 50.

One of the chapters is dedicated to debutante balls and another to beauty pageants as further examples of belledom as something to be performed. Anyone could compete in a pageant but only members of certain families could be presented to society. Schwartz says that in other parts of the country “when a young woman is presented to society, she wears a long white dress, is presented at a ball, and has lovely parties. But in the South, debutantes aren’t just debutantes—they become queens, princesses, duchesses, or even in a few instances marchesas or maharinis.”⁶⁴ These balls are extremely exclusive; reinforcing correct bloodlines, the proper ancestry in Southern society. “Old native families control this part of Southern society” and it has nothing to do with money, although the prices of the gowns that the girls wear can be in the tens of thousands. “This is more than *mere money*. The girl has royal blood,” said a member of the Fiesta Court in San Antonio of the girl who had been chosen over a wealthy man’s daughter.⁶⁵

Schwartz claims that sometimes birth is not a defining factor for belledom. Here is evidence that the idea of belledom is fluid, one that can be purchased and put on as if it were an article of clothing. This is in direct opposition to her assertion that debutants in the South must come from a proper family. “Most Southern belles are, of course, born in the South. But sometimes the stork gets off course and deposits Southern belles in Detroit, Hollywood, Washington, Las Vegas, and even London and Paris.”⁶⁶ Apparently a woman doesn’t even have to be an American to be a belle, or according to the list on the next page, white or even a woman. On the next page Schwartz lists ten people who she names as “Honorary Southern Belles.” The list is: Elizabeth Taylor, Diana Ross, The Queen Mum of England, The McGuire Sisters, Barbara

⁶⁴Ibid, 59.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 60.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 89.

Walters, Eva Gabor, Marie Antoinette, Martha Stewart, George Hamilton (who is elsewhere in the book called a traitor for selling a historic home in Natchez to Hare Krishnas), Willard Scott.

What do the people in this list have in common? They are all famous. Some are overly tan. They are all consciously performative. Elizabeth Taylor famously portrayed a broken Southern belle in the film adaptation of Tennessee Williams' *Cat On a Hot Tin Roof*. Diana Ross is an amazing singer and member of the popular 1960s girl group, The Supremes. The Queen Mum may tap into the Southern obsession that dates back to colonization, with all things royal. The McGuire Sisters were another popular girl group from mid-century. Barbara Walters is known for being a tough journalist. Eva Gabor was a Hungarian born actress who was well known for her portrayal of an out of place socialite stuck in a small town on the 1960s television show, *Green Acres*. Marie Antoinette was the wife of King Louis XVI of France and is known for her sense of fashion as well as her public trial and subsequent submission to the guillotine. Martha Stewart is the ultimate homemaker. George Hamilton is an actor and mainly known for being suave and excessively tan. Willard Scott personally announces the birthdays of centenarians on morning television.

On closer examination the members of this group all possess characteristics of what Schwartz deems belleworthy. The women are (or portray mannerisms of women who are) fashionable, materialistic and beautiful. The men are charismatic and personable, yet neither of them could be described as feminine. In fact, it is their extreme masculinity, putting them in opposition to the belle, which allows them entrance to this list. Perhaps Schwartz should have named them honorary southern gentlemen. Her tone in this list is lighthearted and cheeky and maybe she only means to garner a grin from her readers. But the taint of racism is evident here.

Other than Diana Ross, George Hamilton is the darkest person on the list. Even with the playful tenor that the author employs, the exclusivity seeps through.

A lot of space in this book is dedicated to silver. Chapter Four is called “Silver Patterns” and leads off with a quote attributed to a “South Carolina Grandmother talking to her Granddaughter.” “My dear, this is something you must always remember: Your bosom can be fake. Your smile can be fake and your hair color can be fake. But your pearls and your silver must always be real.”⁶⁷ The chapter is dedicated to how to choose it, how to save it and what each pattern means. Schwartz says that which pattern you choose sets a belle on her life’s path. “When a girl picks Grand Baroque at age eleven, she hasn’t just decided how to set her table, she’s charted her course in life.”⁶⁸ This is because a belle must marry a man whose mother’s silver is complementary to her own and is as useful in picking a man as the symbols of the zodiac. The book then uses four pages to describe the twelve most sought after patterns. The author goes on to explain that the popularity of the patterns varies with the area. A family in Mobile may like the sleek lines while a family in Charlotte may prefer something a little more ornate.

Page sixteen is dedicated to the word “tacky.” It “is a word you hear so often from Southern belles, it is almost their national anthem. *Tacky* is used to comment on why some women don’t make certain social circles, why some marriages are doomed to failure, why some new stores just aren’t going to be patronized.”⁶⁹ Other words for tacky are “common” and “trashy.” Trashy refers to white trash, in many circles the lowest form of Caucasian. The word tacky originally referred to “a small or inferior horse” in 1800 later came to mean “in poor taste”

⁶⁷ Ibid, 38.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 39.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 16.

in 1862 and was also meant to mean a “hillbilly or cracker.”⁷⁰ If something is referred to using one of these words it is an allusion to class status. The women that Schwartz is describing were continuing to create an illusion of bygone times when their bloodlines were important.

So, over all, the image of southern belles that Schwarz portrays is an extremely vain, self-centered, elitist woman who is obsessed with material possessions and how she is presented to the world. She is the one who holds her family together. The past and future of her lineage lie with her. She holds and secures the class position and social connections for her kin. Through her jokes her seriousness shines through. These are her people, her kind. She is comfortable in her bloodlines. Her heritage makes her special.

The virtues that King claimed defined a southern belle in the late 1970s are decidedly missing in this book. There is no mention of church or sex (or lack of sex) anywhere here. Apparently piety and purity were not as important to southern women at the beginning of the 1990s as they were ten years earlier. Times were changing and according to Schwartz the belle, ever the survivor, was changing with them.

“What do Sweet Potato Queens, Steel Magnolias, Ya-Ya Sisters, and Southern Belles have in common? They’re Grits-Girls Raised In The South!” So announces the front flap of *The Grits (Girls Raised in the South) Guide to Life*. Deborah Ford, and co-author Edie Hand, introduced the *GRITS* series in 2003 with the publication of this book. In this first book the reader is urged to become a belle and the authors insist that where you were born does not restrict you from enjoying your full belle potential. The acronym spells out a word that is more commonly used to refer to porridge-like substance that is made of ground corn or hominy—something similar to polenta. It has long been a staple of southern breakfast tables. The authors

⁷⁰ "Tacky | Define Tacky at Dictionary.com." Dictionary.com | Free Online Dictionary for English Definitions. Accessed April 08, 2011. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/tacky>.

of this book utilize the instant southern connotation that the word plants in the heads of consumers.

The front flap promises that through the purchase of this tome readers “can benefit from the unspoken rules, rich traditions, and distinctive style of the southern woman.” It further asserts “this handbook is a bible of Southern style for the Grits girl in all of us.” Ford is pushing for a belledom that allows members from all classes. Hers is a grittier group, not so interested in heirloom silver because they have none.

Again we see that Belledom is a state of mind, expanding beyond the Mason-Dixon line to embrace any woman who cares to adopt the principles that Ford and Hand outline. This book outlines the necessary components of belledom that accentuate the ideas that Schwartz delineated in her works. Being a southern woman is an outward expression, a mask of sorts that can be put on at will.

The book is separated into five parts comprised of eighteen chapters, yet there is little to no actual writing offered. The majority is made up of recipes, quotes, “pearls of wisdom,” “grits glossary,” and how-tos. The overall effect is diaphanous and flimsy, but this is a New York Times Bestseller, a SEBA (Southeastern Bookseller Award) winner. Is this further evidence of the skin-deep philosophy, that belledom, and hence femininity, is simply an act, a performance, a purchase?

Ford makes no attempt to tell any sort of story. Each page is broken into mainly things written or said by people other than the author. There are diagrams and illustrations. It is plainly not meant to be read from cover to cover but instead flipped through at random, a bathroom reader for the more delicate types.

In Part one, *The Basic Ingredients*, the reader is instructed that GRITS are three things:

1. Magnolias, “Our Strength of Character.” 2. Iron Skillets, “The Flavoring of the South.” 3. Pearls, “Southern Beauty, Natural and Cultured.” Ridiculous, maybe, but women are buying, and presumably reading, this. It seems to be an example of just telling the consumer what they would like to hear about themselves. Ford is telling them, “You are strong, flavorful and beautiful, and here’s why.” This reads as simple pandering and indulgence but perhaps there is something underneath.

Modern women are searching for meaning in their gender. In the decades since the Equal Rights Movement women have been trying to understand just how to be equal with men, what equality means. The popularity of works like the ones written by Ford play into this overall push and pull of (white) women trying to understand how to be women, in every aspect of their lives. Ford, and the other authors’, tips and recipes are helping them to realize what they believe to be missing from their lives.

The final author in this study, Jill Connor Browne, writes books that are a good bit raunchier than the other two but it is important to compare and contrast this new version of southern women that has been created for public consumption. Browne began the Sweet Potato Queens with a group of friends in the first St. Paddy’s Day parade in Jackson, Mississippi in 1982. According to her everyone deserves a crown. What began as a goof has now spawned eight books, the latest published in December of 2008. The Queens have appeared on the *Today Show*, have worked with Delta Burke on a sitcom based on them and now there is a musical in the works. It is nothing short of a phenomenon.

This new version of the southern woman may make all of the Old South belles roll over in their graves. The women portrayed here laugh in the face of piety and are far from frigid. Where King shows that southern women were compared to a block of ice and Schwartz and Ford

make no mention sex, Browne dedicates an entire chapter to blowjobs. Admittedly, these favors are never granted but the mere mention of them would be an anathema to the Belles of Schwarz and Ford. She is much more in keeping with the spirit of Florence King.

When discussing how the Queens came to be, Browne remembers a phone call where she “spoke the words that would forever change our worlds.”⁷¹ She told a friend that she wanted to be in a parade that was being put on in downtown Jackson. Her friend asked her what she was going to do in the parade and Browne responded, “I am the Sweet Potato Queen,” and her friend said, “Well, so am I.”⁷² And there it began. This was new. These women were not waiting for society to crown them or define them. “We all knew we had what we needed to declare ourselves Queens of whatever we chose.”⁷³ These women had stepped down from the pedestal, put a crown they had bought on their head and draped themselves in boas. They would not answer to anyone for their actions; they were tacky and proud of it.

Two of the new self-named Queens were in fact former presidents of the Junior League and as such, firmly implanted in the elite society of Jackson. They were firmly planted in the higher stratum of class standing and this gave them the freedom to flaunt their femininity in ways it was unacceptable for others. Within their group of friends, everyone was welcome. “Basically, anybody who had balls enough to put on a green ball gown from Goodwill and a tiara and perch on the back of a pickup truck, wave, and throw sweet potatoes was welcome to join the ranks of the Sweet Potato Queens.”⁷⁴ Eventually this club became exclusive but Browne tells her readers that they are welcome to pronounce themselves queens of whatever they choose.

⁷¹ Jill Conner Browne. *The Sweet Potato Queens' Book of Love*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999, 3.

⁷² Ibid, 3.

⁷³ Ibid, 6-7.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 9.

These women also have jobs. They are designers, business owners and former district attorneys. Many of them are divorcees, and not embarrassed by this. They have children, stretch marks and brains. This is a deviation from the other popular image of southern women who have traditionally been depicted as either stay-at-home matrons or social mavens. Browne's friends were women who had reaped the rewards of the Equal Rights Movement and were now looking for something more from their lives.

Eventually the Queens began wearing a specific costume that makes all of them look the same. Browne claims that the inspiration was the Golden Girls of Alcorn State University, a dance troupe at the historically black college. "We bought a basic swimsuit pattern in about a size 24, sort of a one-size-fits-all, you know? [...] stuffed the top and the butt with enough batting to make fifteen good-sized teddy bears, and then took up the waistline to fit each Queen."⁷⁵ They combined this with flowing red wigs, pink lipstick, green majorette boots and elbow length gloves. These uniforms were a huge hit with everyone, both black and white. "For white males, it is impossible to have tits that are too big, and for black males, you cannot get the butt big enough."⁷⁶ By literally embodying the black woman's body these women appropriated the sexuality normally associated with blackness for their own use. But, by doing it in a campy style, in a parade during daylight hours they avoided the violence and criticisms that would be leveled on women attempting this in other circumstances.

This is another change from the traditional, frail image of the southern woman. Admittedly, Browne says that she is a fallen belle, which is the belle sexualized. A fallen woman is one who enjoys sex, sometimes to the degree of prostitution. Stemming from the

⁷⁵ Ibid, 10.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 10-11.

biblical account of Eve's fall from grace, the fallen woman seeks knowledge. What marks the fallen belle as different is that she was often forced, or at least coerced, into the act.⁷⁷

There was a time when such an admission would cast a southern woman into social oblivion. This book is proof that being "fallen" can be something to be proud of, to aspire to. No longer content with allowing society, and especially men, to describe them or relegate them to the interior of a house these women may have fallen but they also picked themselves right back up, by the straps of their majorette boots. This is where Browne diverges from the other writers in this genre. Whereas other authors are projecting a kind of perfection, this is not something Browne feels her readers need to worry with; this is where her popularity stems from, where it begins. There is certain strength in dressing up, costuming yourself.

Whereas previous generations of southern women went to great lengths to ensure their pale, magnolia complexions, this book dedicates several pages to how to obtain the perfect tan. Browne discusses working out, even lifting weights. This is no frail flower. This is a woman who is proud of her body. This is a woman who even enjoys her body. She proudly talks of her stash of expensive lingerie and the trips she and her friends take to Los Angeles to buy more.

Historically, southern women have been known for their feminine wiles. Each of the authors in this study offer tips on how best to use this gift to impress men. This is evidence that how men regard belles is an important factor in their fulfillment as a woman. In previous generations men often desired classic examples of the Madonna/whore (or Scarlett/Melanie) dichotomy. They separated their time between one woman, a (white) saint who stays at home, and another woman, a (black) whore who lives elsewhere.

⁷⁷ See the discussion of fallen belles on pages 164-166 in Kathryn Lee Seidel. *The Southern Belle in the American Novel*. Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1985.

But Browne asserts that today's southern man has no such hang-ups. She claims that men now desire a woman who can be both. As sexual as they are, and as independent as they claim to be, these women still want to be cared for and pampered and have someone do their bidding. But, in opposition to what Schwartz and Ford emphasize, Browne does not believe they must be married for this to happen. Instead you can utter the "True Magic Words. With these simple words you will have the instant ability to persuade any man on earth to willingly, happily, and swiftly do your bidding."⁷⁸ These words, or "The Promise," are the promise (and the promise only) of oral sex from all eight of the Queens. No one ever actually receives the gift. Southern women of yore would never even admit to knowing what the words meant much less perform the act. Tacky. She goes so far as to say, "Yes, indeed. Blow jobs make the world go 'round, just in case you still thought it was love."⁷⁹ They even have a saying, which is now printed on t-shirts that are for sale on their website, that says: "Never wear panties to a party."

It can be argued that these so called Queens are accepted only because they mask themselves so that they all appear the same. But I do not believe that this differs much from the original belles who needed assistance on a daily basis to lace them into corsets so tight that they deformed their ribcages. Tara McPherson argues that over time women's own faces became their masks they showed to the world.⁸⁰ These new southern women that Browne has introduced have the privilege of taking this costume off at the end of the parade and living a life that they created for themselves. How necessary is the costume to the play, how necessary the identical garb?

⁷⁸ Ibid, 44.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 53.

⁸⁰ Tara McPherson. *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 174.

Theirs is a true performance of gender in which they attempt to physically embody the male fantasy of womanhood. It is an extreme version of everything the Southern belle is proclaimed to be. Their hair is bigger, their make-up is thicker and their clothes are tighter. But, Browne asserts that she and her friends do not wait for their yearly costumed performance to behave in a manner unbecoming to their gender. She claims they regularly gather at restaurants, nightclubs and each other's homes for revelry and high jinks. It may be that the group dynamic is another form of masking, a protective measure that keeps them separate from the public sphere.

The examination of these portrayals of southern women has been somewhat of an eye-opener. I never thought I could learn so much from three books of humor, or self-help. The south, and the women who hail from there, have changed drastically over time. The women in the south today have been made to take responsibility for their own images and how they are seen by society at large. Whether they care or not what that image says is something different.

Most of the scholarly works that examine southern women end their studies in the 1970s, but the story does not stop there. Southern women have continued to evolve, and hold fascination for people everywhere. Countless new books are emerging in libraries and bookstores that tell stories of southern women and offer up tips and recipes that they claim are distinctly southern. Yet, these are no scholarly tomes. A quick glance at the spines of these books engender no feeling of erudition: *What Southern Women Know (That Every Woman Should)*; *Suck in Your Stomach and Put Some Color On: What Southern Mamas Tell Their Daughters That the Rest of Y'all Should Know Too*; *We're Like You, Only Prettier: Confessions of a Tarnished Southern Belle*.

As important as it is to know what is being said of southern women, indeed all women, by scholars it may be just as important to know what the women themselves are saying. It has often been said that many a truth is told in jest and often this is the only way people have of telling their truths. This can be seen in *Southern Ladies and Gentlemen* where King was documenting a type of southern woman that was fast fading with her tongue planted firmly in her cheek. In the 1970s, when her book was published, that image of perfection was still very much an ideal that southern women were aiming to embody.

By the time *The Southern Belle Primer* arrived it seems that the act of belledom had moved outward, to the exterior. The ideal that Schwartz described had not as much to do with inherent virtues as it did with a performance of sorts based on material goods and memberships to social groups such as the Junior League and sororities.

The GRITS Guide To Life shows this to still be the case, in many ways. Ford deems it important to marry well and firmly implant yourself in a social group. But, she also has a tinge of the message Browne is selling. She is telling her readers that they are strong, beautiful creatures that deserve the best out of life, literally and figuratively. She also makes a soft return to, if not the ideals, then at least the mannerisms that King had claimed were inherent in southern women. Manners are still important below the Mason-Dixon line. She makes a point to explain how to properly eat and drink while still retaining the dignity of a belle. So the performance here is still external but seems to have as much to do with upbringing, lineage and training as anything discussed by Schwartz.

The Sweet Potato Queens' Book of Love takes this performance to the next level. These women actually wear costumes, and call them that. But, the difference is that they only do it one time a year. The rest of their lives are dedicated to what could be called “real life” where they

hold jobs and pay bills. But even in the drudge of the day to day, these southern women are not standing in the background. They live the lives that they want to live and pursue their own dreams. The Queens travel in a pack, using this as their protection from the traditional mores of their society. While ensconced in their costumes, or their group, they are free to behave any way they are inclined.

Florence King showed her readers the games that southern women played in order to retain their role as queen of the home, wife and mother. They played at being weak, fragile and dimwitted in order to capture and keep a husband. This ploy must have worked to some extent. But, it seems only likely that over time women would tire of the game.

Schwartz documents similar mannerisms and inclinations. In her book it is important for women, especially southern women, to own the kind of silver that will not clash with that of your future mother-in-law. They must have real pearls and serve chicken salad that contains only white meat. While it was fine for southern women in the early 1980s to have a job she must still be able to host the perfect party and make sure to wear the correct color shoes in whatever season she may find herself so that she does not embarrass her husband. Husbands were important. They were necessary in order to become a true southern woman.

Ford agrees with Schwartz on several points. Actions, tradition and appearance are of the utmost importance. These three qualities seem to identify a southern woman; they are also what she uses to land a mate. The significance of a mate is to carry on these three identifiers, as well as race, to future generations.

Once again Browne turns this image on its ear. Women in her book no longer kowtow to men, in fact the reverse is true. She may still be elevated but she is no longer on a pedestal, she is on a stage. She may still need to know how to sparkle but now that sparkle is store bought, not

taught.

There is a generation of white women, born in the 1960s and 1970s, born to mothers who were influenced by the Women's Liberation movement who are coming into middle age. They never struggled for gender equality and were told the world was their oyster. It could be that these women are hungry for a kind of life that is unobtainable, that they believed belonged to their grandmothers. A life that was simple, when people were simple and every one knew their place and their role. The dream places this life in the South where the agrarian image must still reign. The fact remains that women are still struggling to understand how to live in this world. This fight has been evolving for decades. In 1952 Simone de Beauvoir was wondering, "What is a woman?"⁸¹ So dozens of years later women are still fighting to understand what is wanted of them; the times do not change so swiftly after all. White American women continue to inquire the same as de Beauvoir did many years ago and are looking for answers to come from Southern women.

Books such as these are primers on a fictional easy life. They include the recipes and advice that women may wish were passed within their own families. Whether the story of an uncomplicated life is fact or fiction need not enter into the equation; it does not quell the desire to lead one. These books, and others like them, are selling the fantasy that it is still an obtainable dream. Women can truly have it all, if they purchase the right paperback and become a Southern Belle. The secret to breaking through the glass ceiling is beating at it with the right pair of stiletto heels, a slight drawl to your speech and the perfect string of pearls. The performance bellehood causes all the restrictions fall away.

⁸¹Simone De Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. New York: Knopf, 1953, xviii.

The works seen in this chapter have focused on internal perceptions. The next chapter will move away from these images of southern women as written by southern women and towards depictions written and performed by outsiders. The emphasis will be more on showing what the world outside the region believes to be the defining characteristics of southern womanhood, and less on what those inside understand. We are moving away from the image authored and into the image portrayed.

CHAPTER II

SOUTHERN WOMEN IN FILM

“What I resent is how the TV and movies always show southerners to be so stupid. And, have you noticed the women are always these oversexed loons sitting around in satin slips and no air-conditioning?”⁸² Spoken by Mary Jo Shively at a dinner party in the third episode, this statement seems to be the defining idea behind the series *Designing Women* that ran from 1986-1993. She undoubtedly refers to characters like Maggie the Cat in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) or Clara in *The Long, Hot Summer* (1958) and is trying to distance herself, and all southern women, from that image. Mary Jo and her friends are the faces of the New South, not the one of Reconstruction, but the post-Civil Rights Movement, post-Equal Rights Movement, Sunbelt South.

As seen in the previous chapter, stories written by southern women are important in furthering our understanding of who they are, on the inside, as well as who they portray themselves to be to the outside. But stories told about southern women are also important, in that they show how others view them. Sprung from the mind of men and women from all over the

⁸² "A Big Affair." In *Designing Women*. CBS. October 20, 1986.

country, these “southern women” are created by writers and filmmakers to tell sweeping tales of family and femininity.

If, indeed they are used as depictions of the feminine then they also provide insight into the status of women everywhere. These creations provide a viewpoint from which to see the country’s impression of all (mainly white, middle class) women. Because (white) women from the south are often held to be the epitome of femininity, it stands to reason that representations of them can be used to gauge the overall status of women. In the two decades following the Equal Rights Movement (roughly 1980 – 2000) the numbers of southern women created on film and television exploded and were shown around the world. Why did they emerge at that time?

This was not the first instance of cinematic depictions of southern women. What is widely regarded as the first cinematic blockbuster and “most controversial film of all time,” *Birth of a Nation* (1915), featured a southern belle.⁸³ *Jezebel* (1938) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939) painted pictures of southern women for the entire world to see. The late 1950s saw depictions of belles in *Cat On a Hot Tin Roof* and *The Long, Hot Summer*, in addition to classics such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957). The 1970s to the present is another moment like these, yet it appears to have gone unnoticed.

The post Equal Rights Movement image of southern women builds upon these older images and expands them. Women, in the south as elsewhere, were coming to terms with the fact that if the glass ceiling was to be broken then they would have to take the task in hand. Government policies made it possible for a woman to work in any field she chose, attend any school she wanted and control her reproductive system. These things were accessible but the world that men had built would not be easy to fit into for women, and the powers that be were

⁸³ Randy Roberts. "D.W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation: A History of "The Most Controversial Movie of All Time"" *Journal of American Ethnic History* 30, no. 1 (September 1, 2010): 128-29.

conceding very little in the form of assistance. Women could have a career and children but little to no help in raising them. Maternity leave would remain a problem for many women. The workplace did not have an ebb and flow that conformed to the needs of many parenting women.

In the last part of the twentieth century interest in southern women boiled to the surface again. There was a surge of films and television shows showcasing southern women. I argue that these images responded to a country that was reeling, attempting to understand what equal rights for women might mean, and turned to southern women to do it. Characters such as Julia Sugarbaker, Annelle Desoto and Siddalee Walker put a face on feminism and perhaps made it a less bitter pill to swallow. Alternatively, these characters were shown to be lacking certain feminine aspects and at times these deficiencies caused hardships for them.

There are classic stereotypes of southern women, of course. Scarlett was spoiled and ambitious while Melanie was timid and frail, yet both were strong when necessary. Blanche DuBois “[a]lways depended on the kindness of strangers.”⁸⁴ These stereotypes still exist in modern tales of southern women, but there is usually a hint of shame surrounding them. In movies and television their friends and family roll their eyes at them now. They are no longer the main character but instead, an easy way to get laughs.

The new stereotypes are more wide-ranging, and maybe not even stereotypes but character types. They cannot be described in just one word but are more complex and intricate. Gone are the women who can be explained as either vain or timid. Yet, as varied as they are, they each still fall into a defined category.

⁸⁴ *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Directed by Elia Kazan. United States: Warner Bros., 1951. Film.

There is the older woman, the matron, usually widowed and well off (Julia, Clairee, Ouiser, Teensy, Neechie, Caro).⁸⁵ She speaks her mind and never turns down a drink. She carries herself with grace and dignity and is the redefinition of the classic southern lady. This character emerged as an example of a woman who was born prior to the Equal Rights Movement. She is a model of femininity and feminism combined. Her poise and self-esteem merge to become a beacon of refinement.

Often there can be several representations of one character type, especially these older women, creating a sort of Greek chorus of the elderly. Floating around the perimeters of the main characters' lives are the members of the oldest generation. Performing a role similar to that of the Greek chorus they keep the mood light and provide comic relief when feelings become too strong. We see this chorus in all three pieces studied here. They are usually widowed, and hence endowed with the power of freedom.

Ouiser, from *Steel Magnolias*, has especially embraced this power. She no longer succumbs to the standards of society, choosing instead to go about town in overalls and a mink coat. She is often referred to as "crazy" and many times other characters try desperately to avoid her, until she is once again tamed by the attentions of a man. Her reconnection with a girlhood flame has her in dresses and heels again by the end of the movie. Her counterpoint, Clairee, is featured more as the traditional ideal of a widow. Even though she tends to speak her mind she does so in such a manner that members of her small town hold her in enough esteem that her presence is requested at ribbon cutting ceremonies. Teensy, Neechie and Caro perform similar roles as members of the Ya-Yas. The action rarely centers on them though they are essential to the telling of the tale. One such character is Julia and Suzanne's mother's best friend, Bernice,

⁸⁵ Julia is from *Designing Women*, Clairee and Ouiser are from *Steel Magnolias* and Teensy, Neechie and Caro are from *The Divine Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood*.

who makes regular appearances as the bewildering and bewildered comic relief in *Designing Women*.

There is the beauty obsessed (Vivi, Suzanne, Truvy).⁸⁶ She keeps herself up with creams, perms and nice clothes. She is the new image of the belle; although no longer young and pure she refuses to be fallen. This character refuses to submit to male authority and the idea that her sexuality can taint her. Proud of her beauty and fully aware of its power, she is not afraid to charm her way into getting what she wants. The audience is usually given glimpses of her vulnerable side. This part of her understands that this power of attraction is a fleeting one and that she must eventually learn to rely on more than just her looks. Often derided as vain by her friends, the aging belle emerged as a cautionary tale to women who believed that image is everything.

Suzanne, from *Designing Women*, is a perfect example of this character type. She is the former Miss Georgia and relishes the memories of her time in the spotlight. She continues to try and recreate the emotions she felt when a crown was placed upon her head. She utilizes the fact that men desire her as a replacement for the glory she experienced as a beauty queen. Her numerous trips down the matrimonial aisle allow her to continue to be the prettiest one in the room. What she sees as the power of her charms is shown to the audience as a fleeting characteristic. The fact that she is often teased for her beliefs and actions is proof that it is desirable for this character to change her ways. We are shown that she is an outdated persona, one whose time has passed. And, unless she can evolve into a more complex character she may be left in the past.

⁸⁶ Vivi is one of the main characters in *The Divine Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood*. Suzanne is from *Designing Women* and Truvy is a character in *Steel Magnolias*.

There is the quiet and naive one (Annelle, Charlene).⁸⁷ Typically she is from somewhere out in the country and tends to be over religious, her inexperience is frequently fodder for jokes at her expense. She is the image of the rural, agrarian south that is firmly planted in the Bible Belt. Her character also stems from previously held notions that men desired women to be immature. Her childish ways depict a woman unaffected by feminism and act as a warning to those who wish to deny its effects.

There is a great example of this character type in *Steel Magnolias* in Annelle. She arrives from the country in the opening scene of the movie. Her naiveté is evident from the moment she steps into Truvy's Beauty Spot. Over the course of the movie the audience sees a synopsis of what is one view of the feminist movement. During the opening credits she is walking, seemingly aimless, a literal depiction of where women would be without masculine direction. Once she arrives at Truvy's, in the warm embrace of a feminine group, she begins to understand her power. She is raw and inexperienced in these opening sequences and we learn that a man has recently betrayed her, which is why she has been forced out into the world. For a brief span she relaxes her mores, dresses in skimpy clothes and wears heavy makeup. Soon she realizes her mistakes and returns to her Christian ideals. She settles down with a man and promptly becomes pregnant. Throughout all of this it is her connection to the feminine that sustains her and allows her to overcome her inexperience and naiveté.

Another character type is the mothering one (M'Lynn, Mary Jo).⁸⁸ She doles out advice and is a good listener. She knows how to stand tall in the face of adversity. As a modern day combination of Mammy and her mistress this character revels in motherhood and nurturing. She is defined by these characteristics. She is who a woman should be, defined by her relationships.

⁸⁷ Annelle is in *Steel Magnolias* and Charlene is from *Designing Women*.

⁸⁸ M'Lynn is from *Steel Magnolias* and Mary Jo is from *Designing Women*.

Her emergence as a southern woman is further proof that women from this particular region personify the ideals of women, regardless of region.

Steel Magnolias contains a perfect representation of the mothering character. M'Lynn is defined by motherhood and marriage. Her main relationship in the film is with her daughter. This connection defines these two women and is the basis for their personalities. As a nurturer, M'Lynn is denied her sexuality and her individuality, a common occurrence for such women. Part of the fascination with the south relies on the belief that family, and hence mothering, are more important there than elsewhere. When this film was released women were being forced to consider the importance of family in regards to their professional lives. Those women who had begun to infiltrate the workforce were making an effort to integrate home and work. M'Lynn, as a fierce and loving mother, was a stand in favor of mothering.

This chapter undertakes the task of analyzing three separate stories that depict the images of southern women. They were all released over the course of fifteen years and in retrospect it seems important that these characterizations emerged from that region, in that time period. These stories, though telling different stories, reveal commonalities of character and significance.

Steel Magnolias (1989) depicts the interactions of a group of friends from a small town in southern Louisiana. They converge regularly in Truvy's beauty parlor to reminisce and share gossip. There is M'Lynn, a middle-aged, middle-class woman and her oldest child Shelby, who is newly wed. Truvy, also middle-aged, owns the Beauty Spot and employs Annelle, who is newly arrived to the town. Clairee and Ouiser are best friends and ageing widows. The film follows the group over the course of a few years and describes the emotional rollercoaster that life can be from a wedding, to a funeral, to childbirth.

The movie *The Divine Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood* (2002) also takes place in a small southern Louisiana town but spans the entire lives of a group of women from the late 1930s to present day, friends from childhood. They have created a secret society based in nature and Native American folklore that has kept them connected. The story revolves around the relationship between Vivi, a Ya Ya, and her daughter Sidalee. The other members of the group, Teensy, Neechie, and Caro kidnap Sidalee from her home in New York in order to force mother and daughter to heal their strained relationship.

The situation comedy, *Designing Women* (1986-1993), is about four women who open a home decorating firm in Atlanta. Two sisters, Suzanne and Julia, and two neighbors, Charlene and Mary Jo, are the central characters. The television show, over the course of several seasons, put them in various situations that help define their characters. Forms of each of these stereotypes are used in each of the three-films/television shows studied here with some characters portraying more than one characteristic. Set in Atlanta, the show revolves around the four women who have pooled their money to open a home design firm. From the opening credits the audience is given a glimpse into the internal lives of each of the women. The first seems to be a table, perhaps at a front door, that holds a framed copy of a newspaper article that announces the opening of Sugarbaker and Associates design firm. Next to the frame, a copy of *Atlanta* magazine lays on the table. Then we are introduced to the cast. First, we see old photos of a pretty young lady in a sash and tiara (Suzanne, the pretty one). Second, eyeglasses lying on a silver tray next to a cup of coffee and plain toast, surrounded by crystal vases (Julia, the classy no-nonsense one). Third, a cluttered area with colored pencils and a degree for interior design (Mary Jo, the artsy one). Fourth, and last, a picture of Elvis Presley surrounded by perfume bottles (Charlene, the quirky one).

In the pilot, *Designing Women* (1986), the characters are introduced and the audience is informed of the marital status of each woman. Julia is newly widowed and her only son has moved away. Mary Jo is newly divorced and a single mother. Charlene is single and never married. Suzanne is divorced several times over and well taken care of by alimony. They are each defined by their lack of a spouse. But, now that they are all unmarried, they are finally able to realize their life dream, to be able to decorate other people's homes.

Julia is referred to as a tough broad, like Bette Davis. But she is always perfectly dressed: a business suit, pearls, heels. She is the image of the perfect southern lady, but with a sharp tongue. Almost every episode affords her a scene in which she verbally assaults an unsuspecting person who is in turn chastised. In the first episode it is a man at the sushi bar where they are having a meal. His open collar and gold necklace mark him as something of a predator and he sits down with the women. Julia tells him, in no uncertain terms, that he is not welcome and that sometimes women just want to be left alone. Her diatribe is aimed at all such men. This scene informs the audience that Julia has chosen her status as a single woman. In subsequent episodes there be no doubt that she will continue to enforce her views that a woman does not need a man in order to be fulfilled.

Suzanne is a former beauty queen who continues to reign over those who surround her. She is depicted as a selfish and spoiled girl, a belle on the brink of turning 30. She is highly sexual and uses her body to get what she wants, money and attention. In the beginning of the first episode she is handed a stack of alimony checks, arranged in alphabetical order. She is willful and egotistical and proceeds to woo her friend's ex-husband who buys her jewelry and weekend trips to Paris. But, the end of the episode shows her loving side and friends are once again more important than men.

Mary Jo is the mother of two children whom she is raising single-handedly with the occasional weekend off when her ex-husband keeps them. She is artistic and creative, but a little neurotic and bitter. Her husband left her for a younger woman after she worked so that he could attend medical school. She and Charlene are neighbors and have become very close friends.

Charlene has a thicker southern accent than the other characters and she is often depicted as naive, if not completely dumb. But, she is not dumb, just merely new to city life. As the only character never married, she is paraded on a series of dates and always has a story about the ones that do not work out. In the first episode she is dating a man named “Shadow” who has recently gone to jail.

These characters emerged in the middle of the 1980s in order to put a friendly face on career women. The country was attempting to come to terms with the fact that their world was changing. By putting these four southern women on the screen, working and living their lives, the public could see that the feminist movement did not really damage the status quo. Their southernness makes them appear less of a threat and hence made it easier for the general public to accept the modifications to the roles of men and women. Previous images of feminists were northern women, such as Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan, and perceived as cold and hard. They were the antithesis of southern belles. By setting *Designing Women* in Atlanta and presenting Julia and Mary Jo as ardent feminists, suddenly the movement was not as cold and distant as previously believed.

In November of 1989 the movie *Steel Magnolias* opened in theaters and generated more than five million dollars in revenue on its inaugural weekend. Centered on a group of friends in

a quaint southern Louisiana town, the film chronicles the ups and downs of life and how these women face each obstacle and miracle. This movie was one of the original chick-flicks.⁸⁹

In the decades since the theatric release, the movie has garnered a cult-like following and women's groups, clothing stores, country music acts and politicians have adopted the moniker "steel magnolia."⁹⁰ This idea of a hardened flower caressed the imagination of every woman who has seen the film. Joseph Flora says, "[t]he figure of the Steel Magnolia evolved during and after the Civil War, born of the collapse of the man's role as protector." It "describes an ambiguous style of elite white southern womanhood melding genteel femininity with strength, determination, and intelligence."⁹¹ This movie brought that image into the present day.

The movie revolves around Truvy's Beauty Spot and the group of women who meet there. During the opening credits the audience watches a lone woman, awkward and dressed in out-dated clothes, walking down tree-lined streets. She passes children on bicycles, families on porch swings, beautifully kept historic houses with columns and a little league baseball team. Eventually she arrives at her destination, Truvy's house and the location of her beauty salon. Truvy hires the woman, Annelle, and they begin to ready themselves for the day's customers.

Truvy owns The Beauty Spot and supports herself and her husband, an out of work contractor. She comes across as a down-to-earth woman who enjoys all the trappings of womanhood. She makes several remarks about compacts, girdles, and at the beginning of the movie she tells her new hire, "There's nothing natural about beauty."⁹²

⁸⁹ Historic Natchitoches. Web. 12 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.historicnatchitoches.com/>>.

⁹⁰ A quick Internet search for the term finds all of these and more.

⁹¹ Joseph M. Flora, Lucinda Hardwick. MacKethan, and Todd W. Taylor. *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002, 860.

⁹² *Steel Magnolias*. Directed by Herbert Ross. United States: Tri-Star, 1989. Film.

It is the day of Shelby's wedding and the reception will be held at her parents', M'Lynn and Drum Eatenton, home. The mother and daughter arrive at the salon and the ritual of hairdressing begins. Clairee and Ouiser, two graying women who enjoy razzing each other, soon join them.

As was seen with *Designing Women*, the public at large is more comfortable when women are confined to an indoor space. The audience rarely sees these characters in places other than interior locations. These restrictions relegate women to positions of subordinates. In other words, the women can be as vocal and authoritative as they want, as long as they stay inside. They move from beauty parlor to church to home, never straying from their designated positions or situations.

The females in this movie, like those in *Designing Women*, are defined by their marital status. The necessity of marriage in fostering happiness and fulfillment in women is evident in the elaborate wedding that is thrown for the youngest member of the group, Shelby. The colors she chose for her theme, two shades of pink named blush and bashful, are a deeper definition of her inherent femininity. She and her mother are presented as participants in the construction of the feminine in a new generation.⁹³

Shelby is presented as a woman through and through with no intimation of the feminist cause. In this case the younger woman is presented as anti-movement, she is the image of southern woman unaffected by the cause. Her stance, as such, eventually leads to her death after her health fails because of childbirth. This is presented as strength of character and resolve. Shelby wants a child of her own, one that combines her DNA with her husband's. Shelby is

⁹³ See discussion of this construction in Tara McPherson. *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 158-159.

afflicted by a terrible impairment of diabetes. Her desire to have a child ultimately leads to her death. To her, the need to procreate is stronger than her need to survive. In realizing her full feminine potential, as a mother, Shelby resigns herself from life.

Again, we see that the longing to be a whole woman can destroy lives. A career as a nurse was not enough for Shelby and she was willing to risk everything. "I would rather have three minutes of happy than a lifetime of nothing special,"⁹⁴ she tells M'Lynn when revealing that she is pregnant. M'Lynn realizes the dire consequences of the pregnancy while the men in the family register nothing but happiness. The idea that happiness only comes from a woman fulfilling her duty as procreator is pressed home in this film. The characters in this film share the concept that true femininity relies on the ability to conceive. The notion of motherhood is pushed to the forefront at this point because so many women had begun to postpone having children in order to pursue their careers. By portraying the maternal drive as an integral part of Shelby's personality the movie drive home the importance of childbearing.

In 2002 *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* celebrated its cinematic release to the tune of over 16 million dollars in its opening weekend.⁹⁵ The adaptation was a combination of two novels by Rebecca Wells: *Little Altars Everywhere* (1992), and *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (1996).

The movie opens with a shot of the Warner Brothers logo in black and white, causing the viewer to imagine an earlier time. Then a small hole slowly opens to show another image in black and white—the moon on water, surrounded by cypress trees. The scene is augmented by

⁹⁴ *Steel Magnolias*. Directed by Herbert Ross. Performed by Sally Field, Dolly Parton, Julia Roberts, Daryl Hannah, Olympia Dukakis, Shirley MacLaine, Tom Skerritt, and Sam Shepard. United States: Tri-Star, 1989. Film.

⁹⁵ "*Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002) - Box Office / Business." The Internet Movie Database (IMDb). Accessed April 17, 2011. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0279778/business>.

the sounds of a man, singing in French and accompanied by a solo guitar. Next the camera shows four young girls sneaking out of a window of a house, wearing nightgowns and shoes, carrying a cloth bag the size of a pillowcase. They run into the distance, to the sound of drums, and the camera focuses in on a car tag that reads “LA 1937.”

They run across a train trestle and settle around a small fire that they build and begin to engage in a ritual. They wear homemade headdresses, “the royal crowns of our people. And drink from an adorned cup, “to the queens who have gone before us.” They cut their palms with a small knife and grasp hands, so that their “blood flows together like it always has.”

The plot of the movie revolves around the troubled mother/daughter relationship between the characters of Vivian (Vivi) and Siddalee (Sidda) Walker. Sidda made a name for herself as a playwright in New York City but she is unable to commit to a relationship. She came of age during the feminist movement and as such we are led to believe, she is missing vital aspects of womanhood. She is an example of the feminist movement’s effect on women. Susan Faludi contends, “[w]omen are enslaved by their own liberation...They have pursued their own professional dreams—and lost out on the greatest female adventure.”⁹⁶ Sidda dresses sloppily and she lives out of wedlock with her long-time boyfriend. But, because of her ambition and detachment from other women, namely her mother, she is ultimately unfulfilled. Lori Robinson argues, “the love, pleasure and community that came so natural to her mother’s friends have eluded her.”⁹⁷ It takes her literally being kidnapped by her mother’s friends, the female community, for her to come to grips with her past and finally be able to marry a man. In this

⁹⁶ Susan Faludi. *Backlash: the Undeclared War against American Women*. New York: Crown, 1991, 2.

⁹⁷ Lori Robinson. "Bodies, Southern Nostalgia, and the Construction of Whiteness in Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 6 (December 2009): 1119.

way she can become a whole woman, and join the community as a full member. Only through marriage, succumbing to the masculine, can a woman wholly embrace her gender.

Her mother, Vivi, has faced problems of her own. The love of her life was killed in World War II, his body, and her life, never recovered. She married her second choice and began a lifetime of drinking too much. “She wanted a life bigger than one she was going to find being a cotton farmer’s wife with four kids,” says her daughter, Siddalee, in a *Time Magazine* interview. This seems to be the epitome of the feminine mystique written about by Betty Freidan in the 1960s.⁹⁸

In the early 1960s Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, which would become the catalyst for the second wave of feminism. In it she describes the mystique as the ailment of unfulfilled college educated housewives. Many of these women were literally losing their minds and seeking treatment in the form of medication.

Vivi had dreamed of a life as a famous journalist living with her true love and instead she remained in her hometown, raising a group of children and doing the work of a housewife. Out of desperation she flees from home and lands in a hotel some where by the ocean. After days in which she does little more than sleep she awakes one morning and returns home. A doctor prescribes pills that are supposed to help her quit drinking but instead eventually drive her insane. Vivi’s desire for more out of life, and her determination to accept less, leads eventually to a mental breakdown in which she beats her children until they bleed and she is taken off to an

⁹⁸ See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1963.

institution for six months. She is also suffering from her desire to embody the southern ideal of womanhood, a perfect house and home. This, in part, has led her to the brink of madness.⁹⁹

In a late scene in the movie she asks her husband, in their golden years, if she ruined his life. He says he always thought it was the other way. The topic of ruined lives returns when mother and daughter confront each other; it seems the desire for a larger life leads to ruining lives. Siddalee ruins Vivi's with the truth and Vivi ruins Siddalee's with her need for more. Both of these women are damaged goods who are in turn healed by being members of the community of femininity, just as we saw with M'Lynn and Shelby.

In *Designing Women* there is not a mother/daughter dichotomy but a sister/sister one. Julia is an outspoken feminist and Suzanne is her exact opposite; they of course come to an understanding of each other in under twenty minutes. The fact that Julia is a widow, and her son has grown up and left home, suggests that it is only in this position that she is allowed to speak her mind. *Designing Women*, as a situation comedy, never delves as deep as the two films but we are still able to see that freedom has its price. Basically a woman is free to fulfill her dreams only after she has satisfied her duties as wife and mother. Gloria Steinem points out, "[a]s Margaret Mead has noted, the only women allowed to be dominant and respectable at the same time are widows. You have to do what society wants you to do, have a husband who dies, and then have power thrust upon you through no fault of your own."¹⁰⁰

On the other hand, her sister Suzanne's only dreams are to be pampered and admired, which are recognized aspects of southern belles. As a former beauty queen she is fully aware of

⁹⁹ See the discussion of how southern women fight against but are drawn to the southern ideal in Tara McPherson. *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 173.

¹⁰⁰ Gloria Steinem. "Women's Liberation' Aims to Free Men Too - Documents from the Women's Liberation Movement." Editorial. Washington Post 07 July 1970. Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library. Web. 09 Mar. 2011. <<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/wlm/aims/>>.

how to use her feminine wiles to her own benefit. She has married and divorced several times and is rarely without male companionship. Utilizing a different kind of power, that of sex, she is able to live the life she proclaims that she wants.

Although there were quite a few “southern” films released in this time period to choose from, the three examples highlighted here share several commonalities, and are reflective of the others produced in the same time span.¹⁰¹ There is a sense of community, femininity, friendship and family, highlighted in each of them. Some believe that these ideals are marks of a southern identity. Placing these films in the South is a response to the fears of women in the Post-Equal Rights Movement. These women portrayed are acting in all the defined roles of femininity proving that although laws and social scripts may have changed it was not necessary for women to deny their inherent desires for beauty, motherhood and community. These standards still stood in the South, in the hearts and minds of its inhabitants and hence all was not lost. There was hope for society at large to find its way back to sensibility and convention.

There is also the confining of them indoors, the place where women belong. In *Designing Women* the characters bond in the business’ office, located on the first floor of Julia’s house. In *Steel Magnolias* they bond in a beauty salon. And, in *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, they bond in a lakeside cabin.

It is in these interior spaces, where women have always been consigned, that they are truly able to expose themselves and communicate with one another. This is in opposition of what the Equal Rights Movement sought to create, which was a feeling of freedom for women. With this freedom they could expose themselves to the world without fear of punishment. The Movement had dreams of women fully expressing themselves in the public sphere. In these

¹⁰¹ *Coal Miner’s Daughter* (1980), *Places in the Heart* (1984), *The Color Purple* (1985), *Crimes of the Heart* (1986), *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), *Miss Firecracker* (1989), *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), *Cookie’s Fortune* (1999).

films, and television shows, the audience is shown that in order to be free of your fears, and your past, you must return home.

There is also a theme of femininity versus feminism. These two are set up as opposites in response to the power structure that would need to be changed otherwise. In *The Beauty Myth*, Wolfe argues that importance was placed upon physical attributes in order to diminish the effects of the feminist movement and its participants.¹⁰² Combine this with the tendency for society to perpetuate binary categories for women and what remains is the idea that they may either be one or the other and never both.¹⁰³ Women can either be pretty or not pretty, feminist or feminine.

Although it is possible to possess both of these simultaneously but it appears that this is not a common held impression.¹⁰⁴ Although there are numerous blogs and websites available on the Internet that claim otherwise, many people believe that a woman may only be one or the other.¹⁰⁵ My understanding of this is that femininity is who you are, how one reveals herself to the world. As was seen in the previous chapter, femininity is passive and subtle. It is the ultimate performance of what is expected, in American society, from a woman. Hence, if a woman is active and vocal, as in protesting for rights, she cannot be feminine. There are certain

¹⁰² Naomi Wolf. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*. New York: W. Morrow, 1991.

¹⁰³ See discussion in Glinda Hall Fountain, "Inverting the Southern Belle: Romance Writers Redefine Gender Myths." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41, no. 1 (2008): 37-55. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5931.2008.00491.x., 39.

¹⁰⁴ See the discussion of feminism and femininity being opposite traits in Tara McPherson. *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 192-193. See a similar discussion in Betty Freidan, *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1963, 58-59.

¹⁰⁵ Feminine Feminists. Web. 12 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.femininefeminists.com/>>. Wadsworth, Laura. "Feminine Feminism." The Lilith Gallery of Toronto. Web. 12 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/fashion/Feminine-Feminists.html>>. "A Feminine Feminist." Church of The Most High Goddess - Religion of the Goddesses. Web. 12 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.goddess.org/sabrina/femininefem.html>>.

trappings of this performance, garb and gear, as well as comportment. On the other hand, feminism is something you do. Feminism seems to connote activism and political beliefs.

It seems that it is only in fiction that a woman is allowed to be both. Julia Sugarbaker is a good example of a woman who possesses both attributes. She carries herself with pride, she dresses thoughtfully and she has strong opinions. She is a beautiful woman with her fair share of admirers. Yet, her frequent diatribes appear to invoke fear in the unsuspecting people who are on the wrong end of her ire. In these scenarios she is revealed as a powerful being, using the power of words to wound. In one example she is being photographed for an issue of a magazine depicting "Women of Atlanta." When she realizes that the photographer means to exploit her sexuality she cuts him down verbally.

I'm saying I want you and your equipment out of here now. If you are looking for somebody to suck pearls, then I suggest you try finding yourself an oyster. Because I am not a woman who does that, as a matter of fact, I don't know any woman who does that, because it's stupid. And it doesn't have any more to do with decorating than having cleavage and looking sexy has to do with working in a bank. These are not pictures about the women of Atlanta. These are about just the same thing they're always about. And it doesn't matter whether the clothes are on or off... it's just the same ol' message. And I don't care how many pictures you've taken of movie stars - when you start snapping photos of serious, successful businessmen like Donald Trump and Lee Iacocca in unzipped jumpsuits with wet lips, straddling chairs, then we'll talk.¹⁰⁶

The Equal Rights Movement led to this discussion by shining a light on all of the conflicting ways in which women were expected to perform. In other words, Julia can speak about her revulsion to the photographer's desire for her to portray herself as a typical sexual being because the Movement gave her the power. A southern woman is in the best position to make these remarks because she is non-threatening because of her demeanor, the very same demeanor taught to her from childhood, according to Rhonda Rich.

¹⁰⁶ Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, writer. "The Women of Atlanta." In *Designing Women*. CBS. May 1, 1989.

“Around here we call her ‘The Terminator,’” says Mary Jo in the episode *Reese’s Friend*.¹⁰⁷ The Terminator, an assassin-robot portrayed by Arnold Schwarzenegger, is not a very feminine persona; there is nothing lady-like involved. Apparently when a woman reveals that she is intelligent and refuses to be taken advantage of, she becomes something else, a creature not of nature. A definite double standard seems to be at play. It is not womanly to act in this fashion, consequently when this attribute is found in a woman she needs to be characterized as something different. So, although Julia appears to be a feminine feminist, it is such an uncomfortable situation that in order for it to be palatable she must embody the Terminator when espousing her views.

Alternatively, the show feels the need to soften these women as different points during the lifespan of the series, in order for them to remain non-threatening as career women. At one point a former husband of Suzanne’s, writer Dash Goff, sends a letter to the ladies to thank them for the hospitality they had provided on a recent visit.

Yesterday, in my mind's eye, I saw four women standing on a veranda in white, gauzy dresses and straw-colored hats. They were having a conversation. And it was hot. Their hankies tucked in cleavages where eternal trickles of perspiration run from the female breastbone to exotic vacation spots that southern men often dream about. They were sweet-smelling, coy, cunning, voluptuous, voracious, delicious, pernicious, vexing and sexing... these earth sister/rebel mothers... these arousers and carousers. And I was filled with a longing to join them. But like a whim of Scarlett's, they turned suddenly and went inside, shutting me out with a bolt of a latch. And I was left only to pick up an abandoned handkerchief and savor the perfumed shadows of these women... these southern women. This Suzanne. This Julia. This Mary Jo and Charlene. Thanks for the comfort, Dash Goff... the writer.¹⁰⁸

The episode ends with Julia reading this aloud and shows the four women standing on a balcony dressed exactly as the letter intimates. The four women, so attired

¹⁰⁷ Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, writer. "Reese's Friend." In *Designing Women*. CBS. February 22, 1987.

¹⁰⁸ Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, writer. "Dash Goff, The Writer." In *Designing Women*. CBS. October 26, 1987.

and described, can then be returned to the pedestal where they can quietly reside for a time. The letter, meant to be complementary, serves as a means to quiet the “earth sisters/rebel mothers,” as Dash Goff describes them. In this vignette they are doing nothing but being admired, seen and not heard and thus, at least for a moment, perfect southern women. Their sexuality is at the forefront of the description and the writer longs to join them, to move amongst them in that instant. Yet, he is denied and they once again return to their sanctuary, their internal space where they are comfortable, and where only women are allowed.

Hollywood’s portrayal of southern women has expanded somewhat in the last century. They are no longer either a frail flower or a fiery temptress. Now, there are a wider variety of female southern characters to be portrayed but still restrictions abound. If these representations of southern women translate as illustrations of all white middle-class women there are lessons to be studied. According to this model, elderly women are to be relegated to the background. Also, these characters demonstrate that a complete woman is one who possesses children, a husband, and a group of female friends. We see that the desire for a life outside the constraints of friends and family may lead to not only loneliness but also possibly madness. The freedom that can be found in a career may also be what keeps a woman from her full potential, that of wife and mother. The attentions of a man can calm the opinionated beast and she will begin to dress and speak, as a woman should. Although these characteristics are not distinctly southern, they are embodied by southernness.

If this is what Hollywood wants us (both men and women) to believe, and we consume these representations so readily, without complaint and in droves, is it what we

want to believe as well? All three films were, and remain, extremely popular. Is there an underlying truth to these illustrations? The fundamental conflict is that the movies place the burden on the viewer to change, and not society. We create the myth because we have felt the loss but have not discovered the means to reconcile it.

In these stories from Hollywood we see that the feeling exists that the feminist movement had dire effects upon its members. We also see that the consequences of feminism then can be undone by reverting to the lifestyle, and demeanor, of our mothers and their mothers before.

CHAPTER III

SOUTHERN WOMEN IN PARADES

When I began this project I envisioned this final chapter to be an analysis of what I had termed “The Virtual South.” My plan was to focus on three or four websites devoted to popular representations of southern women online—namely *The Divine Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood*, *Designing Women* and *The Sweet Potato Queens*. But, as my research has deepened the latter has increasingly fascinated me. In what can only be called a phenomenon, Jill Connor Browne has created a monster that would have never come to life without the Internet, yet cannot be fully appreciated online. This is still a chapter on the Virtual South but one viewed through one lens instead of four. Moreover, this is a highly appropriate lens because through it we can see how important the age of the Internet is in regard to propelling certain images of southernness into the forefront.

In *Reconstructing Dixie*, Tara McPherson argues that the Internet creates new southern spaces in which those who long for a return to the perfect past can converse with each other and make connections with those that share their common values. In what she calls “campy revampings on the web,” Internet users are free to express their beliefs and their longings.¹⁰⁹ In

¹⁰⁹ Tara McPherson. *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 196.

this environment southernness is alive and well, women are still belles, and the South may rise again.

While there is a web presence for *The Divine Secrets of the YaYa Sisterhood* and *Designing Women*, the presence of the Sweet Potato Queens, and their “Boss Queen” makes the others pale in comparison. The first two sites are clunky and difficult to maneuver through, not user friendly. It is not easy to find specific areas on the site and overall they are dated in appearance. In stark contrast the two websites maintained by the Sweet Potato Queens are fresh, colorful and easily manipulated. This seems shining proof that those in charge of the marketing for them understand the vital force of the Internet.

I shied somewhat from the subject of the Sweet Potato Queens and their yearly takeover of downtown Jackson because of my closeness to it and the women who are involved. In the early 1990s I started a job that would become my life for the next decade. Located in downtown Jackson, Mississippi, in a circa 1923 GM&O freight depot building, Hal & Mal’s was a family owned and operated restaurant/bar/music venue that opened in 1985 by brothers Hal and Malcolm White, and his wife Vivian (herself an original Sweet Potato Queen). It was in that building that I began to meet new people--friends and regulars (people who frequented the establishment); among these was Jill Conner Browne and her group of friends who constituted the Queens. Most of these people had been coming to Hal & Mal’s for years and had participated in an annual bacchanal every March—the Mal’s St. Paddy’s Day Parade.¹¹⁰

Malcolm White began the parade in 1983. Jill and her friends participated from the very beginning. The parade and its crowd grew every year and soon Jill began to see that there was a

¹¹⁰ For a more complete description of the Mal’s St. Paddy’s Day Parade and the evolution of the Sweet Potato Queens see the “Meet The Queens” chapter in Browne, Jill Conner. *The Sweet Potato Queens' Book of Love*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999, especially pages 1-20.

market for her brand of fun and friendship. From these beginnings came the eight books, which led to the website and eventually to the virtual community.

The Jackson, Mississippi author, Jill Connor Browne has turned her successful book series into an international phenomenon. On her website people can create their own Sweet Potato Queen chapter and thousands have. There are chapters literally all over the world, in over twenty-two countries. What began in a tiny parade through the capital city of Mississippi blossomed into a movement. Every year thousands of women pile into the hotels in downtown Jackson for three days of dressing up in costumes, drinking margaritas and generally just having a good time. Browne has convinced these women to do something for themselves, pronounce themselves as still vital, and the message was heard worldwide. These women are experiencing a form of midlife crisis and as such have devoured the idea Browne pushes—they are still hip, desirable and significant.

In 1999 Jill Connor Browne published what would become the catalyst for a movement of middle-aged white women from all over the country, just like her. *The Sweet Potato Queens Book of Love* became a hit, a *New York Times* bestseller. These books use an approachable and quirky tone to speak of the indignities of aging as a woman and the ways in which Browne and her cohorts refuse to melt into the background as they face the world head on. To her there is a certain power in being an older woman that does not involve widowhood, which in other instances is the only instance that tolerates independence in a woman.

Sweet Potato Queens are not to be confused with Southern Belles. They are the anti-belles, the re-belles if you will. They are not meek, subservient or dimwitted. They are business owners and divorcees. They love to break rules and hearts and still will not miss a beat on the dance floor. They may not be belles or even ladies but they are women, southern women and

they are international. These women could use a quote from an interview in *The Feminine Mystique* as their motto: “I guess it wasn’t until I stopped trying to be feminine that I began to enjoy being a woman.”¹¹¹

In the beginning the parade was comprised of several groups of people, or krewes, which either marched or rode on elaborate floats through the downtown streets of the capital city. Each group had a separate attitude, name and sometimes costume. The all male O’Tux Society carried sprays of green and white artificial carnations, which they traded for kisses. The women-only Krewe of Kazoo costumes changed every year with the theme of the parade, although their pink parasols remained the same.

Over the years, the Sweet Potato Queens traded in the pick-up truck and thrift store gowns they used for the first parade for more ornate floats and intricately designed costumes. It was a purely local celebration in which the parade culminated in a huge party that would fill the street in front of the hub of all the merriment, the downtown restaurant Hal & Mal’s and each of the five bars inside. This all started to change toward the end of the 1990s.

The third weekend in March 2000 brought with it hundreds of middle aged white women, who had come to Jackson to participate in the festivities. The next year there were even more women, Delta Burke was selected to play Browne in a sitcom, and *Good Morning America* filmed live in the restaurant. What had seemed to be a fluke was growing. Browne jumped on the opportunity with both feet and continued to churn out *SPQ* books and merchandise showing no shame in marketing herself and her wares.

And market herself she did. She followed her first book with a stream of new bestsellers, eight in all, each as popular as the one proceeding. Her appearances on morning television and

¹¹¹ Betty Friedan. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1963.

public radio only enhanced her sales. In 2003 Warner Brothers began filming a television pilot based on the Queens starring Delta Burke.

In her book, and in comments on the website, Browne informed her fans that there would be no new Sweet Potato Queens. She and her friends were the culmination of that court. She encouraged her readers to declare themselves the Queen of what ever they chose, as long as it was not sweet potatoes. The term has since been copyrighted, trademarked and in every way possible protected from appropriation. In any case, the Sweet Potato kingdom was swelling as each passing March brought the barrage of middle-aged self-proclaimed Queens and Divas of hometowns and foodstuffs.

In Jackson there are varying viewpoints regarding Browne and her herd of women. But, love them or hate them, the fact remains that there is something there. What is it about this woman and her message that touched so very close to home for so many women that they would expend countless amounts of energy and funds to walk down the street in Jackson, Mississippi?

According to Leslie Shade, professor of Communication Studies, “There are two ways to produce content aimed at women: the ‘Wal-Mart’ approach, which offers a bit of everything to try to serve everyone, or the ‘specialization’ approach, which focuses on specific interests.”¹¹² The Sweet Potato Queens websites have definitely done the latter. Their sites are expressly targeted at a small group of (mainly white) women, who like the authors themselves have reached middle age. These women have money to burn and the time to spend it the way they like, and they like what Browne is selling, both literally and figuratively. Literally she is selling books filled with advice as well as wigs, tiaras and cat-eyed sunglasses. Figuratively, the story goes deeper. By purchasing Browne’s wares her fans are consuming the idea that their claim to

¹¹² Leslie Regan Shade. *Gender & Community in the Social Construction of the Internet*. New York: P. Lang, 2002.

sexuality and essentialness is valid.

Clicking on the “SPQ Store” tab on the website leads the user to a page where she (or he) can choose from six different departments: Accessories, Apparel, Books and Music, Certificates and Artwork, Food Related and For The Guys. There are close to fifty separate items to choose from ranging from an “O-fficial” red wig or tiara to a personally engraved “SPQ Revirginator” martini glass. All of the available items are witty and bawdy and may lend to a feeling of empowerment. Imagine a woman in Saudi Arabia wearing her big red wig under her burqa.

By presenting herself as a sexual, fun-loving woman who never shies from a party Browne has positioned herself as the cruise director for women going through their mid-life crises. With her encouragement, and the accessories for sale on her website, her fans are able to present themselves in a similar fashion. Her recommendations seem to be the antidote to the afflictions that have affected women for decades. Instead of the medications prescribed by doctors to the women that Betty Friedan interviewed, these women are seeking a different form of remedy. And, if this remedy involves frolicking through the streets of Jackson, so much the better for Browne.

The group began growing during the mid 1990s. The question is why then and why with a southern woman at the helm? The first question may be easier to answer. In the 1990s women who came of age during the Equal Rights Movement were hitting middle age. A different form of the feminine mystique had set in. These women had a career and a family; they had everything (they were told) they ever wanted. But, something was still missing. Now their children were moving out and the empty nest echoed around them. And along comes a book that speaks to them.

The subtitle to Browne's first book promised: "A Fallen Southern Belle's Look at Love, Life, Men, Marriage, and Being Prepared." The cover also shows a picture of six women; dressed in identical form fitting green sequined dresses with big red hair, pink opera gloves and sunglasses. The old adage that you can't judge a book by its cover could not be more wrong in this case. This book screams fun and funky. It also suggests that embracing sexuality is not only acceptable but enjoyable as well. Janice Radway, in discussing women's pleasure in reading romance novels, suggests that readers connect with heroines who control their sexuality "as a good example as any of the desire they share with feminists to believe in the female sex's strength and capabilities and in themselves as well."¹¹³ In other words, Browne's fans have made a connection to her and her power because they desire to feel the power also.

The answer to the second question is based more on speculation. Why is it important that a southern woman led this movement? Would it have become as widespread and popular if a woman from the Midwest had written these books? I do not believe that would be the case. Women from the south have long been regarded as the epitome of white womanhood, as well as freaks, exotics and others. Browne blends these and her southern heritage helps to give her fans the permission to join in the group.

Given the popularity of books such as national bestseller *What Southern Women Know (That Every Woman Should)* by Ronda Rich, it is evident that there is an ongoing belief that women from the south are the keepers of the secret of femininity. Rich was touted as "[a] funny, provocative reading for all women," and claiming "Scarlett O'Hara couldn't have said it better,"

¹¹³Janice A. Radway. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

this book is a substantiation of that belief.¹¹⁴ In this light it is easier to understand the fascination that thousands of women around the world have with the Sweet Potato Queens.

The main concept Browne is selling is that of a community of women that is welcoming, encouraging, supportive and above all fun. She is bawdy, sassy and a smart aleck. She is also promising something that may never happen, much like “The Promise” she touts in her books. A group of girlfriends or membership to the sisterhood is another form of fantasy, similar to that of a knight in shining armor. These fairy tales, told to women for centuries, leave women who exist without them feeling inferior. This same fantasy is being sold by the television shows, movies, and books discussed here. These types of relationships rarely occur outside of the Phi Mu or Tri Delta house and can be just as exclusive and cliquish. And, just like a sorority, there are fees involved which further increase the exclusivity.

But, there is the opportunity for the reader to insert herself into the story that Browne tells. In the simple act of reading fans are able to fantasize their way into the questionable activities in which the Queens participate. This is a common occurrence among romance readers who admit, “what they enjoy most about romance reading is the opportunity to project themselves into the story, to become the heroine,” according to Radway.¹¹⁵

Among the fourteen chapters in her first book, half of the chapters deal with men. Among these Browne offers “True Magic Words Guaranteed to Get Any Man to Do Your Bidding.” This is the aforementioned “Promise” of a group sexual act. Chapter Six, called “He Ain’t Nothin’ But a Man: You Better Have a Good Defense,” explains how it can be possible

¹¹⁴ "Ronda Rich: Author, Speaker and Syndicated Columnist - Books." Ronda Rich: Author, Speaker and Syndicated Columnist - Ronda Rich. Accessed April 04, 2011. <http://www.whatsouthernwomenknow.com/index.php?page=books>.

¹¹⁵ Janice A. Radway. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984, 67.

for a woman to experience the fun of multiple boyfriends and in the end turn the argument on them if she gets caught. Then there is the chapter on “The Five Men You Must Have in Your Life at All Times.” Browne describes them as such: “(1) a man that can fix things, (2) a man you can dance with, (3) a man who can pay for things, (4) a man you can talk to, and (5) a man to have great sex with.” It seems that as independent as the Queens purport to be, they still acknowledge the importance of men in their lives. For all the talking she does of female companionship and the strength of women, she has devoted half of her first work to men, like a common woman’s magazine. Her chapters detail how to get, keep, get rid of, manipulate and please the many men in her life.

Yet, the fact remains that historically, a woman who takes control of her sexuality can be seen as intimidating to men. Kathleen Browne details sexual encounters in the eighteenth century as arenas of domination in which elite white men desired a mate who would succumb to his will because, “feisty women threatened to outperform and emasculate their partners.”¹¹⁶ So, although Browne focuses much attention on male/female relationships, her acknowledged sexuality in fact empowers her, as well as her readers that follow her example.

Because of the nature of this organization, this affiliation, the parameters are narrow. Although it began with a book, which anyone can access at a public library, much of its growth happened online. The Internet is a democratic structure and anyone has the right to use the web and all of the information found there. The overall access to the online world continues to grow and affect more and more people. Gilbert Rodman, professor of Communication Studies, says the web “can function in ways that are analogous to an incredibly broad range of offline modes

¹¹⁶ Kathleen M. Brown. *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia*. Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1996, 328.

of communication.”¹¹⁷ But, this requires a computer, a costly investment. It also requires access to the Internet through home service, work or in a public space that may offer it for free, such as a coffee shop or café. This amount of restriction easily limits the amount of people who have admittance to any sort of online activity.

There is also a restriction when it comes to the travel involved in commuting to the annual gathering in Mississippi. It is a slim group of women who can afford to invest the time necessary to take a trip such as this. Even if a woman is able to communicate online with the rest of Browne’s community, if she is unable to go to Jackson she is left out of the events that make connections stronger; she is excluded.

Costs also arise in travel expenses such as lodging, meals and transportation. When you take into account the excessive costumery that is necessary to “become” a queen the price tag could easily be in the thousands. It is a shallow pool indeed that would be interested in such an endeavor, yet even in the shallow end there are thousands of swimmers. Once they found their leader they followed happily. Browne’s fans fill the Hilton in Jackson to the seams the weekend of the parade. They arrive with costumes, banners and all but take over the downtown area.¹¹⁸

This is another example of how belledom and southern ladyhood are ideas that no longer require genetic lineage but a healthy credit score. Increasingly over the past several decades there has been a claiming of nobility and class by those with the bank accounts strong enough to purchase all of the trappings. In previous generations, class status in the south, as elsewhere, depended almost solely on birthrights. Consumer goods were important indicators of class and generally unavailable to those without the lineage and ancestors who could pass them down.

¹¹⁷ Beth E. Kolko. *Virtual Publics: Policy and Community in an Electronic Age*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002.

¹¹⁸ I witnessed this first hand for several years.

Women cherished their family silverware and jewelry. The twentieth century saw the expansion of those with the means to purchase such goods and with fluctuating marketplaces it was now possible to own someone else's heritage. This created confusion in the area of class status.

Anyone with the means could now wear cultured pearls, send their children to private schools, and attend social functions that were previously restricted to the elite.

Browne furthers this movement in her books and on her websites by encouraging women to announce that they are a "Queen" or "Diva," or any other sort of title they so desire. This sort of self-esteem building must have been a revolution to her fans. Women who had been picked over their entire lives, from school years to the modern day, must have seen others wear the crown of beauty and popularity. Now, here is a woman telling them this need not be the case any longer. A woman can purchase her own crown, make her own sash and declare herself worthy of respect and admiration. She need not resign her self to never being seen as special by society. By publicly stating her self-assigned aristocracy she is demanding notice. Browne begs the question in her first book, "Who, I ask, would be more worthy and capable of wearing a crown—the women I've just described [her friends], or some eighteen-year old surgically altered twit whose sole accomplishment is finally learning all the words to 'My Way'?"¹¹⁹ The appeal could also stem from feminine self-empowerment. Browne is giving these women permission to control their own sexuality and desirability, somewhere away from the eyes and judgment of men, as well as other women.

Browne does not pretend to be young. In fact she calls every female younger than forty a girl because they are still, as she says, in their larval stage. Browne, like her fans, is growing older. Much of what she writes about deals with how to do so with a little bit of grace and a

¹¹⁹ Jill Conner Browne. *The Sweet Potato Queens' Book of Love*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999, 8.

whole lot of humor. Also, these women have hit a certain age where they have spent most of their lives taking care of other people. They have raised their children and possibly divorced their husbands and they are looking for some “Me” time.

The reasons women buy Browne’s books and create their own Sweet Potato Queen chapters probably vary from woman to woman. Maybe they are just looking for a good laugh and these books fit the bill. But whatever the reasons may be, the fact remains that these books sell and the number of chapters around the world continues to increase.

To date there are five thousand, nine hundred and twenty seven chapters of Sweet Potato Queen clubs world wide. There are “The Crumpet and Tea Queens of London,” three chapters in France, nine chapters in Germany, one in China and the list goes on and on. On the American Entertainment International Speakers Bureau website there is a biography of Browne, who is a client of theirs. In this biography they say that Neilson Bookscan has called her “America’s #1 Humor Writer” and that there are more than 2.2 million copies of her books in print (this does not include the last two books.) Her first book *The Sweet Potato Queens’ Book of Love* has been translated into German and Japanese, says the biography. There is also a Broadway musical in the works and Delta Burke shot a pilot for a sitcom based on the books. She has been featured in *The London Observer Magazine* (England), *Bella Magazine* (England) and *Today in English* (France).

On a June 2009 appearance on the *Today Show* Browne said, “The chord that this struck universally, because we have close to six thousand chapters world wide, including Saudi Arabia (their motto is ‘No Veils for Us’), is the power of play in our lives.” She said dressing up allows people to “step outside themselves for a little while,” giving them an escape from the drudgery of everyday. Browne’s books do employ what she calls a “sense of play,” but there is something

deeper there as well. It seems to have a lot to do with self-empowerment and self-acceptance. As a woman from the U.S. south who grew up in a small town near Jackson, Mississippi she knows about dealing with the influences and expectations of society. Being of an indiscriminate middle age she had to have been born sometime in the 1950s, a difficult time for women, both white and black, in America. She must have come of age just when the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing and there was war in Vietnam and women were beginning to form a movement. But, in the South, it has often been the case that to be a feminist was to be unfeminine. Glinda Fountain Hall argues that, “southern belles are not political; it is unladylike.”¹²⁰

In 1982 the Equal Rights Amendment surpassed its final deadline without ratification. What was a woman from Mississippi to do to assert her rights when her home state did not even discuss the passage of an amendment that would guarantee her rights? Some women may have moved away, some may have joined the NOW organization and wore their feminism overtly. Some just reverted to what their parents wanted them to be: wives. Even the Queens fell into this trap. “Of course all the Queens were brought up to be Aspiring Brides.”¹²¹

But then Browne and her friends did something vastly different. They took the image of the perfect woman and turned it on its ear. They appeared, in 1982, in the back of a borrowed pick-up truck wearing second-hand green formal dresses and showed the world that there is another way to be a beauty queen. If gender and femininity are nothing more than a performance then this was a performance worthy of Oscar nomination. They were feminine to the tenth degree. In subsequent years they developed a costume that would make any woman jealous and

¹²⁰ Glinda Fountain Hall. "Inverting the Southern Belle: Romance Writers Redefine Gender Myths." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41, no. 1 (2008): 48.

¹²¹ Browne, Jill Conner. *The Sweet Potato Queens' Book of Love*, 155.

any man excited, a size 25 swimsuit that was fitted at the waist and stuffed everywhere else. If Barbie had a rear-end and a sex-drive she could be a Sweet Potato Queen.

The Sweet Potato Queens are proud of their sexuality and they are not afraid to publicize it. When she was asked the difference between the Queens and the Red Hat Society on the Today show Browne said, “Well, we do have a libido.”¹²² There are whole chapters dedicated to sex in her books. The traditional southern lady not only did not talk about sex, she had it as rarely as possible. Some of this can be linked to the availability of birth control in the 1960s. But, there are probably still many southern ladies who would say that such talk is just plain tacky. I doubt Browne cares. She just does what makes her happy and encourages others to do the same. There is the trick; do what you want no matter what anyone says, as long as it makes you happy.

This is a new message coming from the south. Southern women continued to grin and bear the hard times long after the rest of American women had gone on to live fuller lives. Browne taught women to throw caution to the wind, throw on a boa and get out there. She showed them how to tumble around the ideals that society holds for women and come up with something that can work in today’s world. This kind of message works for women everywhere. The U.S. south is not the only place in the world that has a history of subjugating women. It is no surprise that these ideas would hold appeal for women in Saudi Arabia as well as Japan, two places that have historically suppressed women.

The worldwide popularity could also be linked with a desire for simpler times. Simply have fun. Life does not have to be so hard all of the time. Take some time for yourself. There is also the aspect of community and friendship imbedded in her message. If you create a chapter

¹²² The Red Hat Society is composed of several chapters of women who wear red hats and purple clothes in response to the stereotype that women of a certain age forget about fashion. The chapters often meet in restaurants for lunches and teas. More information at www.redhatsociety.com.

there will need to be chapter meetings. And, once your chapter is formed and registered online you are immediately part of a larger community, a global society that shares your beliefs and concerns.

The fact that these books are written by a self-professed fallen southern belle may or may not have any impact on their popularity. I am not sure that it matters that she was born in Mississippi or that the parade the Queens were born in takes place there. Would women be as intrigued by this concept if Browne was from Illinois? I guess we will never know but I cannot help but believe that it would not be as popular. Little Rock columnist, Philip Martin asks, “[a]nd even if real Southerners aren’t in fact much different than real Midwesterners, for the sake of the movies [and books] they must be.”¹²³ But, because southern women are the authority on being ladies it is important that this movement stems from the south.¹²⁴ It is imperative that Browne sells the myth that southern women are different; southern women possess the secret to unlocking the mysteries of womanhood. Hence, if a southern woman says that its okay to not always be a lady then it must be okay. Browne is giving her fans permission to take off the mask of femininity. She is also providing them with the means to assert themselves as not only women, or feminists, but as human beings. Susan Faludi says feminism, “asks that women be free to define themselves—instead of having their identity defined for them, time and again, by their culture and their men.”¹²⁵ But, in a twist, Browne encouraged her readers to do this by costuming themselves in unconventional recreations of conventional models.

¹²³ Philip Martin. *The Artificial Southerner: Equivocations and Love Songs*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001, xix.

¹²⁴ See Ronda Rich: *What Southern Women Know (That Every Woman Should)*.

¹²⁵ Susan Faludi. *Backlash: the Undeclared War against American Women*. New York: Crown, 1991.

In the appendix of the first book, *The Sweet Potato Queens Book of Love*, Browne told her fans that if they wanted more from her they could find it online. This example helps to underscore the importance of the Internet in creating this sensation. In all likelihood, without the web as a tool the connections would have never been made. Sociologist Marc Smith claims, “[c]ommunity is now conceptualized not in terms of physical proximity but in terms of social networks.”¹²⁶ In other words, these women can be seen as members of a distinct community although they may never see each other face to face.

On the “O-fficial” website for Browne and the Queens, fans could find the answers to all of their questions. Number one of these being—“Is this real—are there really Sweet Potato Queens and is there really a parade that I my ownself can be in?” The answer is yes, but not as a Sweet Potato Queen. Women are invited to name themselves queen of whatever they choose but again we see the exclusivity. No one else is allowed entry into the pink and green kingdom although they are encouraged to create their own. Browne has even given a name to those that are excluded from her inner circle, “Wannabees,” a moniker that these women cling to happily. They are willing to be called what they are, not queens. In *The Sweet Potato Queens’ Book of Love* Browne tells us, even “the Wannabees have gotten so snotty, they won’t let any new ones join, so we have a whole crop of women sucking up to them now.”¹²⁷ This community of inclusion and exclusion is puzzling. Women are encouraged to join in but not allowed full access. They may ride on a float, but not that of the Sweet Potato Queens. They may be the queens of what ever they choose, as long as they do not choose sweet potatoes. They may come in, but not all the way.

¹²⁶ See especially Chapter Seven “Virtual Communities as Communities” Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock, eds. *Communities in Cyberspace*. London: Routledge, 1999, 17.

¹²⁷ Browne, Jill Conner. *The Sweet Potato Queens’ Book of Love*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999, 39.

This type of segregation is not unusual in southern culture. There is a haunted history of separate but equal in the region. Assuredly Browne did not have this dark memory in mind when she created her group, but the similarity remains. But, more importantly there is the history of class separation also clearly visible here. These women who make up the over six thousand chapters of queens all over the world must be of a certain income level and mindset (read: bloodlines) that detaches them from members of other class statuses, much like the system of Greek societies that are so prevalent on southern campuses. And, like those societies, race holds sway in these groups as well. The bloodlines and mindsets that push women to join this group just happen to be historically Caucasian ones.

On the website, under FAQs, the question is posed and answered that the parade is a real thing and that everyone is welcome to not only attend but participate. The increase in people who wanted to be queens and take part in the “Million Queen March” every spring soon threatened to outgrow the confines of the original parade and eventually Browne removed herself and her entourage to another date and site. March 24, 2011 marked the inaugural “Zippity Doo Dah” parade, located in a historical neighborhood a few miles north of where the St. Paddy’s Day parade occurs. It has grown so large that it now has its very own website, zippitydoodahparade.com. Once logged to the site a user can access the FAQ tab and find out what the festivities consist of and why.

Zippity-doo-dah is a Freedom song—about Emancipation—and it resonates on multiple levels with people who understand that Jill Conner Browne’s books are not just funny—the bawdy, sassy, down-to-earth humor being the vehicle by which the Much Greater Message is delivered—they convey a message of self-reliance and empowerment, inspiring all to do what makes their hearts sing. (There are blighted individuals who miss that entirely and we are sorry for them but there’s really nothing we can do for them. God knows we have tried.)

There is much to find interesting in this proclamation. The festivities were named in reference to the Oscar winning song from the 1946 Disney film *The Song of the South* that has been since unavailable for consumption because of questionable race portrayals. Browne attempts to both acknowledge the peppered past of the song and lay claim to a new meaning. By utilizing the term “emancipation” she nods at the ghosts of her home state but pushes through in order to attempt to make this idea one of freedom for women. Again we see Browne appropriating blackness, as she does with the Queens’ costumes. She intends to reclaim the term and make it one of joy and fun. People who may be sensitive to the overtones of racism inherent in the reference are referred to as “blighted individuals” and she hints that they just do not get it, they cannot understand. According to the statement she is only encouraging people to “do what makes their hearts sing.” The freedom to be able to follow one’s dreams is also relative to one’s financial status, race and often gender. Browne claims her desire is for the participants’ hearts “to sing.” She truly is trying to convey to her fans that happiness is achievable. Her voice is re-rendering many of the concepts touted by feminism in the past.

The page goes on to tell us:

In the Queendom, it’s a very personal song. There are those who, through the Sweet Potato Queens®, have rediscovered their God-given capacity for joy and the overwhelming spiritual Power of Play. For some, it represents hard-won freedom from bad relationships in the form of abusive marriages, dead end jobs. For others, it means finally achieving a lifelong dream, often against staggering odds. And for some, it’s about just Still Being HERE, breathing in and breathing out, and living to love and laugh one more time. And for still others, it stands for the Biggest, Most Precious Gift of ALL—that their CHILD is still breathing in and breathing out, and living to love and laugh—for a lifetime. But whatever the personal history—we all come together—TOGETHER—for four days of, yes, truly unbelievable hilarity—but with a soul-deep undercurrent of equally unbelievable Power. This first annual Parade is but one outward manifestation of this philosophy and worldview as we raise awareness and money for Blair E. Batson Hospital for Children. Our plan is to use our local parade as a model for future Zippity Doo Dah® Parades around the country to help raise funds and

awareness for that community's children's hospital.

This “personal song,” Browne tells us, is the public statement of her fans. These fans have “rediscovered” their playful personas because of her books. And, because of her message and the power that it has given them they are coming “TOGETHER” to express these feelings of strength with rhinestones and feathers. Is this what Susan B. Anthony envisioned when she marched and spoke for the rights of women? Granted, it is extremely important for women to express their freedom and it is also important for people to have and express joy. Yet, it remains disconcerting that Browne is selling this as a declaration of power when the outward images are those of aggrandized stereotypes that have long plagued women.

Sign onto the Sweet Potato Queens' website and you are inundated with pink and green graphics and streaming photographs of women sporting big red hair, tiaras, cat-eye sunglasses and sequin body suits. This is ground zero for the so-called Queens and Wannabes. It is possible that through the overdone costuming of femininity these women are reclaiming their own bodies by ridiculing the ideals that have long been forced upon them. It is also possible that they really enjoy the trappings and that this gives them an excuse to be fully womanly, complete with glitter, tons of makeup and pink majorette boots. Sans the trappings, this is the same dilemma that arises in the books and movies studied here.

The front page of this site makes it possible for fans of the Sweet Potato Queens, and their leader Jill Connor Browne, to see with their own eyes that what they have read in the books is real. Across the top, under the shifting photographs of different “Tammys” [Non-Browne Sweet Potato Queens] are places to click that lead to different sections: “Meet the Queens,”

“News,” “Parade,” “Where’s Jill?,” “Hire Jill,” “Store,” “Gallery,” “Chapters,” “FAQs,” “Friends,” and “Contact.”

Under the links section is a multi-media slide show of parade pictures featuring photographs of women, riding on a float in a parade and all dressed alike and the crowds that line the street to watch and collect the trinkets that are thrown by the participants. Below that is a headline that reads “Recent News” and one that says “New Chapters: 6165.” Scrolling down there is a place to “Watch HRH on the Today Show” that streams an interview with Browne from 2010.

Here is another place where the self appointed nobility is evident. Browne has given herself the title of HRH, or Her Royal Highness. This elaborate title is one usually reserved for actual members of royal families. This could be an extension of southerners’ fascination with all things English or it could be just a joke. But, it is a lofty title nonetheless and it leaves behind the question of how the other Sweet Potato Queens may feel regarding Browne’s self-insertion into the leadership role of their group.

Click on “Meet the Queens” and you will be taken to a page that proclaims, “Come On In...Hunny! We are assuming that if you are, in fact, Here, then you already KNOW who the Sweet Potato Queens are because you read The Book. That's how you found the website – by reading it in The Book. [*The Sweet Potato Queens Book of Love*].” No where on this page does she introduce the rest of her clan. Her use of the word “we” on that page takes on the feeling of the royal “We” and it seems that she has left the rest of the queens in the dust.

That page goes on to tell you that “We are here to Sell Stuff.” She make no bones about their desire to sell you things. The meeting of the queens therefore is just an advertisement for Browne’s wares.

At any rate, for the sake of discussion, let's just say that We are Happy that our Stuff is going to make you a Happier, Better Person, but what we are really interested in is how Happy you are to Part with Your Money. If there was sound on this thing, you would hear me singing a perky little tune right now about how we want your money! we know you've got some! give it to us! by the boatload! lalalalala and so on and so forth.

So, pointing readers to the website is purely an economic endeavor. But, the fact remains that over six thousand chapters have formed literally all over the world. Women do buy the merchandise and the books. Thousands of them travel to Jackson, Mississippi every March for a weekend of events targeted to them. Some even get the logo tattooed on their body as Kim Davis did on an episode of LA Ink, a reality show on TLC.¹²⁸

This is conspicuous consumption at its best. By making these purchases these women are proclaiming not only their membership to this semi-exclusive club but also the fact that they have such a surplus of means that they can afford these trinkets and baubles. Also on the website there are also links to other websites where there is stuff to be bought. Browne makes no bones about her desire for her fans to purchase certain brands, drive certain cars, stay in certain hotels and listen to certain music. It seems that in many ways the glue that binds this group together is their ability to buy.

Couple this with the abundance on the websites of registered trademarks, ®, copyrights, ©, and unregistered trademarks,™ it is plain to see that what may have started out as all fun and games for Browne has become a serious business. Can something so economically motivated still achieve good, through consumerism can her fans become what they desire? The

¹²⁸ "Sweet Potato Queens Photo Gallery - Jackson, Mississippi." The Official Website for Best Selling Author Jill Conner Browne and the Fabulous Sweet Potato Queens from Jackson, Mississippi. Accessed March 21, 2011. http://www.sweetpotatoqueens.com/gallery2/v/LAInk/KimDavisLAInk.jpg.html?&g2_GALLERYSID=fc03fe50d5f6a8ac96c5b1967932959c.

women who frequent her websites and purchase her goods, attend her parade still appear (according to photos on the internet and media coverage in Jackson) to be having a wonderful time.¹²⁹ And, most of the money that is collected for participation fees for the weekend is gathered together as a donation to The Blair E. Batson Children's Hospital in Jackson. But does making it a charitable event erase the fact that it is a Dionysian celebration of such epic proportions of goods that it seems it is only about consumerism and flagrant displays of wealth?

Overall it seems that Browne has created not only a business but also a community of women who desire to be just like the persona she has created for herself. She is brash, funny and successful. She has built an empire from sequins and jokes. Those who follow her may be making their life better and they also may be just having a good time.

Conducting an online search for "women's groups" produces over two hundred million hits. Jessie Daniels claims, "[m]any individual women outside any formal political organization experience the Internet as a 'safe space' for resisting the gender oppression that they encounter in their day-to-day lives offline."¹³⁰ Online, women have found a place where they are free to be themselves, or some version of themselves. By connecting through a website such as one that is being studied here, they are able to unite with other women who share their values and desires.

The south may be dissolving into the rest of the world, as scholars are claiming. But, online it is alive and well. A simple search for "the south," or "southern" will garner numerous

¹²⁹ www.wapt.com

¹³⁰ Jessie Daniels. "Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender, and Embodiment." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1-2 (2009): 101-24.

¹³⁰ "Southern Women - Google Search." Google. Accessed March 21, 2011. [http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=southern women&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8#hl=en&client=safari&rls=en&q=southernwoman&revid=986807291&sa=X&ei=fJKHTZazC4q5tweRzq3eBA&ved=0CCgQ4QIoAQ&fp=10c8da8632e45a3b](http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=southern+women&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8#hl=en&client=safari&rls=en&q=southernwoman&revid=986807291&sa=X&ei=fJKHTZazC4q5tweRzq3eBA&ved=0CCgQ4QIoAQ&fp=10c8da8632e45a3b).

websites and articles. But, define it even more by searching for “southern women” and hundreds of thousands of websites, blogs and articles appear. The same happens when the term “southern belle” is typed.¹³¹ This “virtual south” is where southerners, and those who feel some sort of connection to the south, are turning to communicate and explicate what they believe to be the truth about the region that defines them.

¹³¹ "Southern Women - Google Search." Google. Accessed March 21, 2011.
[http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=southern women&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8#hl=en&client=safari&rls=en&q=southernwoman&revid=986807291&sa=X&ei=fJKHTZazC4q5tweRzq3eBA&ved=0CCgQ4QIoAQ&fp=10c8da8632e45a3b](http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=southern+women&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8#hl=en&client=safari&rls=en&q=southernwoman&revid=986807291&sa=X&ei=fJKHTZazC4q5tweRzq3eBA&ved=0CCgQ4QIoAQ&fp=10c8da8632e45a3b).

CONCLUSION

In a conversation with my mother several years ago, the seed to this project was planted. I had been studying the Civil Rights Movement and she was of the right age to have been impacted by the protests, marches and murders that occurred in Jackson, Mississippi—her hometown. I asked her how those years impacted her. She stunned me when she said she and her friends were so insulated that they had little if any knowledge of what was occurring mere miles from their homes. I asked what had influenced her life, politically speaking. “The pill.”

How was it that she was not impacted by the violence and hatred that was consuming her city? I found this so remarkable that I needed to find out more. I began asking other women of the same age and race similar questions. The response was always the same. So, what was important to that section of society? What did happen to them? Were they politically involved in the Equal Rights Movement?

This led me to do a little research. I was interested in finding out more about the women from the south who were my mother’s age, born mid-century, and white. Trips to the library and Internet searches produced nothing. Instead, where these histories should be chronologically in

the stacks, I found Marilyn Schwartz and Florence King. It seemed that southern white women had disappeared from academia and were only to be found in humor. They had become a joke.

These searches eventually led me to popular culture. White southern women abounded there, beginning just about the time they disappeared elsewhere. I started to wonder why. After that it was just connecting the dots. As I have shown they are the American woman writ large. By using the image of a belle or lady, fallen or not, truths can be reported in books, movies and television. She represents what may be missing or what appears in excess. The image of the southern belle/lady appears when there are questions regarding the role of women in society.

From 1970 forward, women's roles have been in a state of flux that completely shook up the status quo. In order to manage the emotions and questions regarding these changes, the American public turned to what they believed to be the essence of womanhood, southern belles. By utilizing the understood strengths and weaknesses of this symbol, writers and actors were able to soften the blow of feminism.

Marilyn Schwartz and Deborah Ford provide proof that certain manners and female ritual remain important to women. Their books promise that cooking, shopping and society continue to be significant in several circles. The popularity of their books is proof that weight is still given to these feminine pursuits.

Characters such as Julia Sugarbaker were the perfect ambassadors of the Movement. With her charm, wit and beauty (inherent southern qualities) she ushered in the new era. Who could deny her, or her arguments, when she spoke so eloquently and moved with such grace? In contrast, the characters in *Steel Magnolias* eased the fears that women would change so much with all of their new rights that they would forgo their family and friends.

Jill Connor Browne promises that following her advice can lead to good times. But, she also plays it a little safe and stays within the boundaries of her gender. Men still rank high on the scale of importance to Sweet Potato followers everywhere. Like Schwartz and Ford, she also places significance on food, clothing and society, just in a different way.

So what does all of this mean? I have documented several instances in which southern women have appeared in popular culture. I wonder if this is a fluke and these are the only such instances, or if there is actually a surge of wonder and fascination with southern women and her images.

It seems that it is no fluke. In recent years, from 2000 to present, southern women (both fact and fiction) continue to be featured in popular culture. Georgia native, Paula Deen, has made a name for herself through her love of butter and the word “y’all.” To date her name is on five separate restaurants, three of them in casinos. Not only is she the host of a show on the Food Network, she has published fifteen cookbooks and a magazine. Her cookware can be purchased at J.C. Penny’s and Wal-Mart.¹³² She is no longer just a southern woman—she is a brand.

Now in its fourth season, HBO’s series *True Blood* is the story of a woman, Sookie, and her mythological friends living in southern Louisiana. The series is based on an eleven book series penned by Tunica, Mississippi native Charlaine Harris. The show premiered in 2005 and quickly garnered a wide range of fans.¹³³

“Southern tradition meets modern ambition,” claims the website promotion for *Southern Belles: Louisville*, a reality program on the SOAPnet channel. It features five women in their mid-twenties who are trying to find love and balance it with careers and family, while

¹³² Recipes, Home Cooking and Decorating — Pauladeen.com. Accessed April 20, 2011. <http://www.pauladeen.com/>.

¹³³ "True Blood: Homepage." HBO. Accessed April 20, 2011. <http://www.hbo.com/true-blood/index.html>.

“[s]howcasing the intense friendships and family values that are part of the Southern way of life.”¹³⁴

Hollywood continues to utilize these characters in film as well. *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002) is the story of a small town girl who returns home from New York City and is confronted by issues from her past. *Southern Belles* (2005) is the tale of two sisters who dream of making the big time in Atlanta.

Published in early 2009 *The Help* became a bestseller in short order. Written by Jackson, Mississippi native Kathryn Stockett, it tells the story of a group of domestic workers living in Jackson mid-century and how their friendship with a white woman changes their lives. The movie rights sold quickly and the film is scheduled to premiere in the summer of 2011.¹³⁵

This all seems to push the point that southern women continue to hold appeal for partakers in popular culture. Images of southern women appear in times that the general public is struggling to understand the roles of women. There are countless different kinds of southern women portrayed, and they come in all shapes, sizes and colors. And, each character is made up of several layers of all the things that women worldwide are made of: joy, comfort, substance, drama and emotions.

The image of white southern womanhood is used as a template to represent white women everywhere. Sometimes this image represents comfort and a source of escape. Through a meal of bar-b-que ribs, macaroni and cheese, and a dessert of banana puddin' maybe you can feel your way home. She is a place that you go to forget your trials and tribulations. Sometimes the image represents a gentle ride through history. She is an escape from reality. She can welcome you

¹³⁴ "Southern Belles: Louisville." SOAPnet. Accessed April 20, 2011. <http://sn.soapnet.go.com/shows/southern-belles-louisville>.

¹³⁵ Kathryn Stockett, Author of *The Help*. Accessed April 20, 2011. <http://www.kathrynstockett.com/>.

with a tender embrace and rock you to the music of your ancestors. Sometimes she is something completely different from what you expect. She picks you up and shakes you around a little. She can make you laugh so hard that the rest of the world just fades away.

But, no matter what she is or what she represents for whoever is thinking of her, the southern belle, and the women she represents, will not be ignored. She continues to exist in imaginations everywhere regardless of what she has been through or what she has seen. What began as an ideal created by the male members of the elite planter class in the U.S. south hundreds of years ago has been transformed into an image that can be utilized by both marketing and community building. The most important fact here is that some women have been able to take control of this image and make it their own, mold it to fit their own desires. Because this image can be used to represent all white women it can also be an image of personal power and freedom to them. Proclaiming themselves belles or Queens is one way these women have of announcing themselves to the world as a person worthy of respect.

I have proven my assertions that this new image emerged in response to the Equal Rights Movement. These new characters, such as those in *Steel Magnolias* and *The Divine Secrets of the Ya Ya Sisterhood*, were replying directly to the fears of some that feminism would disrupt the status quo. Yet, it was not only as a backlash against feminism. Some of these representations, like Julia Sugarbaker, came about in order to ease the way for women into the new era of equality. Some of these characters, like the Sweet Potato Queens, were templates for members of the female community to use as a blueprint of who they could become.

My findings show that southern never disappeared from popular imaginings. Southern women are alive and well in popular discourse and if recent developments are any clue, they will continue to hold sway for some time to come.

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