Conclusion

Conclusion

Despite examining hundreds of films and television shows that represent rape, attempted rape, or the threat of rape in some way, in this book I have really only touched the surface of the plethora of representations of rape in twentieth-century U.S. popular culture. I have even covered only a fragment of the many representations that saturate the last twenty years or so of film and television. Representations of sexual violence pervade our social lives, occupying both public (e.g., movie theaters) and intimate (e.g., living rooms) spaces and defining gendered and racialized social relations. Whether this ubiquity naturalizes depictions of rape for us so that we hardly notice them, draws our attention to them so that we feel overwhelmed by their presence, or places us somewhere in between along this continuum of awareness, it is impossible to avoid encountering representations of rape *often* in our daily lives.

Given this ubiquity (coupled with the general lack of attention to rape in media scholarship generally), feminist media scholarship needs to respond to, make sense of, challenge, and work against the insidiousness of rape representations. One way to do this is to explore their complexity in specific contexts. As I suggest in the book's introduction, rape narratives in various historical and social contexts define and organize social relations in a variety of ways. In this book, I focus on rape narratives in the particular context of post-1980 U.S. postfeminist discourses and film, television, and video texts. I argue that, since about 1980, rape narratives and postfeminist discourses have existed in a co-constitutive relationship, depending on and supporting each other. Postfeminist discourses rely on rape as an easily recognizable and hence salient feminist issue; rape narratives rely on postfeminist assumptions about women's desires, goals, and experiences. In the process, they work together to define feminism in particularly limited ways in terms of gender, race, class, and sexuality. The totality of late-twentieth-century feminist theory and activism certainly is more complex than the feminism postfeminist rape narratives discursively produce, but in popular

culture feminism in general includes only white, middle-class women who want (and have) individualized choice and equality in relation to work, family, and (hetero)sexuality, and the few women of color and men who share these visions.

I am not arguing that white, middle-class, heterosexual women should not have access to choice and equality. (Although I would argue that they might want to ask, What forms of disadvantage are produced by supposed access to choice and equality? What other choices are untenable because of access only to the particular forms of equality available?) Rather, I am suggesting that when a pervasive set of discourses defines feminism in these (or any other) limited ways, other options are closed down, other experiences are unaccessed, other possibilities are denaturalized, and other forms of activism are discouraged. On the one hand, I would argue that the larger popular cultural process of incorporating social movements, such as feminism, is basic to mainstream U.S. popular culture. Media function to identify, absorb, transform, and therefore at least partially to disempower movements for social change, even as they give those movements voice within popular culture. It is no surprise that this has happened to feminism so systematically. On the other hand, it is nevertheless important to identify the particular ways theories and practices of social change, such as feminism, are transformed in popular culture. By focusing on one important area of feminist research, activism, and concern—rape—I have tried to identify some of the implications of the particular limits postfeminist discourses place on feminism. Specifically, I argue that postfeminism's version of feminism assumes that antirape activism is no longer necessary, ultimately holds women responsible for responding to rape, often recenters white men in the name of feminist antirape activism, and perpetuates a long-standing tradition of excluding women of color, particularly Black women, from rape scenarios in ways that negate rape's complexity and frequency in their lives.

Throughout this book, I also look at the relationship between postfeminism's version of feminism and rape from the opposite direction—from rape to feminism. On the one hand, films such as *The Accused* (1988) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991) do raise awareness; challenge rape myths and patriarchy; produce public discussions of rape and antirape activism; perhaps influence judges, lawyers, and juries to think through a rape case from a woman's (if not a feminist) perspective; and even, ideally, influence some men to give up or never engage in sexually coercive behavior. Many other films and television shows also include important

components of feminist antirape logics, such as an acknowledgment that rape often occurs in such masculine contexts as the military, sports, and fraternities; programs also demonstrate an understanding of some of some women's post-rape experiences, such as feeling a constant need to bathe, being uncomfortable with physical touch, and desiring or engaging in revenge. On the other hand, I also argue that rape films and television shows contribute to the production of the limited versions of feminism that postfeminist discourses propagate. Counterintuitively, these films and television shows, collectively, define rape as *necessary* to feminism. Even while acknowledging some feminist antirape logic, they often simultaneously offer narratives in which a woman's experience of rape releases a supposedly already available latent feminist consciousness with which she pursues abstract equality in the name of family. In these texts, rape empowers feminism. Other rape films and television shows might define feminism as responsible for the existence of rape, for example when independent behavior or the pursuit of equality with men leads to rape or when feminist perspectives make it *more* difficult to tell the difference between coercion and consent. *When rape narratives produce and maintain feminism or suggest that feminism leads to rape, then feminism is used against (other potential versions of) itself*. Furthermore, these texts overwhelmingly subsume rape under a depoliticized version of feminism that is interested only in an unacknowledged whiteness. *When rape narratives perpetuate a social separation of gender and race in the name of a universalized (and therefore implicitly white) feminism, then, again, feminism is used against (other potential versions of) itself*.

In this book, I respond to these co-constitutive relationships between representations of rape and postfeminist discourses about feminism in two general ways. First, in chapters 1, 2, and 3 I describe the relationships I see among rape, feminism, and postfeminism in film and television. Here, my goals are to identify typical representational forms for rape and to identify the most common ways that discourses about rape and postfeminism support each other in their construction of feminism. In pursuit of these goals, I emphasize multiple examples, arguing that no one film or television show matters in and of itself. For example, the relationship between women and independence that runs throughout the history of rape films is available in the 1980s to help postfeminist texts link particular kinds of independence (those related to heteronormativity, corporate capitalism, and the family) to women's social identities. And, the role of rape as narrative instigator, as the fulcrum of narrative causality, again, has long been central to fictional rape

films (among other forms of representation) and thus naturalizes post-1980 texts that depend on rape to tell stories about postfeminism's version of feminism. Together, these two aspects of the history of rape in film normalize more recent films and television shows that represent rape as the cause of a woman's actions, actions that lead her directly to make postfeminist choices and to seek postfeminist equality.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, however, I explore the "limits" of postfeminist discourses, developing three types of case studies and using my critical practice to resist and work against postfeminism as a social concept. In the chapter on *Thelma and Louise*, I look for aspects of a single film that move beyond postfeminist definitions of rape and of feminism. This case study illustrates that one single film, even a mass-mediated film such as *Thelma and Louise*, offers possibilities for escaping the bounds of its critical reception, and will always allow for more meanings and critical readings than any one reception context (such as the popular press) acknowledges. On the one hand, as I also emphasize through my readings of *Duel in the Sun* (1946), *Shanghai Express* (1932), and *Sadie Thompson* (1928) in chapter 1, this means that theoretically any rape film has the potential to be read in ways that are feminist and resistant. Hence, spectators can empower themselves through their responses to texts that bring (representations of) rape into their lives. On the other hand, I would also argue that when feminist media critics (including myself) provide these alternative readings, as so many have with *Thelma and Louise*, we should do so with consciousness of how representations of rape may facilitate our readings. Unfortunately, very few scholars who have written about *Thelma and Louise* address the role of rape in the film, revealing a relative blind spot about rape in feminist media studies.

In chapter 5, I challenge postfeminism from another perspective. Rather than examining and partially reclaiming a highly mediated film that has been used by the popular press in decidedly postfeminist ways, in this chapter I seek out representations that are generally excluded from postfeminist discourses: those that represent Black women. Here, I resist postfeminist discourse that ignores Black women by selecting less common examples for analysis. Then, through my critical reading practices, I resist how those very texts often decenter Black women from the stories that nevertheless depend on their experiences of rape. In other words, I turn my critical attention both to postfeminist discourses and to where many of these films and television shows that include Black women suggest it does not belong: on Black women themselves. Furthermore, in anticipation of the final chapter, which

moves away from mainstream examples altogether, in chapter 5 I spend a significant amount of time exploring the representation of African American women in relation to rape in some films that exist on the margins of mainstream cinema; these films are produced by African American filmmakers (John Singleton, Spike Lee, and Julie Dash) who define themselves as antiracist activists and consider their filmmaking part of that activism. This critical move both challenges postfeminist discourses by moving away from the mainstream context in which they thrive and challenges the films for the ways they, to varying degrees, collude with postfeminist discourses' displacement of African American women.

In the final chapter, I look to antirape activist films and videos in the hopes of finding alternative forms of representation for rape, forms that might undermine postfeminism's definitions of rape, feminism, and their intersections. Unfortunately, these antirape activist programs illustrate more how pervasive postfeminist ideas are than how antirape activism has been able to resist and undermine those ideas. This particular approach to studying the representation of rape—exploring texts that one would expect to be both feminist and critical of more mainstream representations—is especially important in a project such as mine that seeks both to understand and to challenge how far-reaching postfeminist discourses are.

Overall, I speak back to postfeminism in the second half of the book, and the critical approaches I take to the texts (reading a media spectacle rape film from multiple perspectives, focusing critical attention where it is discouraged, and examining nonmainstream activist films and videos) do illustrate some spaces into which postfeminist discourses do not go and do help broaden those spaces through critical practice. Nevertheless, collectively chapters 4, 5, and 6 also illustrate just how pervasive postfeminism is and how tenacious particular forms of representations of rape are. For example, the absent presence of rape in myriad texts, codified in the self-regulating Hollywood Production Code, reemerges in some feminist media criticism that grapples with important questions of feminist possibility in more recent popular culture texts, such as *Thelma and Louise*. And, the myopic focus on Black men and white women in (some) antiracist and feminist antirape activism, respectively, emerges in the relatively few films and television shows that do represent a relationship between Black women and rape, even a highly praised feminist film such as *Daughters of the Dust*. Furthermore, postfeminist and rape discourses do not only support each other in their discursive constructions of feminism

in mainstream post-1980 fictional films and television shows, but they also function co-constitutively in activist films and videos designed for an educational context in which one might hope critical perspectives on mainstream culture, on popular definitions of feminism, and on rape would emerge.

What does the tenaciousness of postfeminist logics and particular (limited and limiting) types of rape representations mean for feminist media criticism and for antirape activism? It means a need to be vigilant, as I have tried to be throughout this book, about identifying and challenging representations of rape for their contributions to discursive definitions of gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality, and feminism. It means a need to be open, again as I have tried to be throughout this book, to the complexity of narrative and of representation, to the possibility that the overwhelming presence of rape in our representational world does not function only to debilitate, frighten, and confine. In other words, I hope this book provides strategies for confronting the inevitable representations of rape and sexual violence that pervade contemporary U.S. media culture, strategies that open up spaces for alternative definitions of rape, feminism, antirape activism, and media generally.

One of the reasons I consider a critique of both postfeminist discourses and rape narratives to be imperative is because of the ways they function pedagogically. In defining pedagogy, Henry A. Giroux (1994) writes, "There is no absolute sign under which pedagogy can be defined. Instead, pedagogy refers to the production of and complex relationships among knowledge, texts, desire, and identity" (29–30). Given this definition, he includes popular culture as a "pedagogical apparatus" (43) generally. More specifically, not only the educational antirape films and videos I discuss in chapter 6, which explicitly depend on pedagogical discourses, but also many of the mainstream postfeminist texts I discuss throughout the book draw on sound bites of feminist antirape logics to "teach" the audience how to understand rape, feminism, and women's experience.

This teaching function of texts such as *The Accused* and *Rosewood* (1996), for example, is troubling, because the particular versions of feminist antirape activism they teach are limited and even sometimes internally contradictory. In other words, when *The Accused* instructs its audience, through the character of Ken, that it is imperative to speak out when one sees a rape, to bear witness, it evades the question of why Ken did not try to stop the rape itself. When *Rosewood* draws on a "real" historical example to teach its audience that racist white lynchings and mas-

sacres of African American men and communities were often supported by cultural myths about rape produced and sustained by (not individual white women but) entire white communities and actively supported by powerful white institutions such as the police, it leaves another lesson as only an implicit and muted aspect of the film: that African American women simultaneously face repeated and unavoidable sexual coercion in multiple areas of their work and daily life. This is not an argument that the media should (or could) represent rape in a way that is complex enough to address the nuances of the theoretical and activist feminist perspective I draw on and articulate throughout this book: I am not arguing for "better" representations here. Rather, I am arguing for critical thought and pedagogy that draw attention to the ways even well-meaning profeminist and antiracist texts and discourses in popular culture can simultaneously reinscribe sexism and racism.

Despite the downright exhausting ubiquity of representations of rape in the entire history of film and more recently in postfeminist discourses of late-twentieth-century fictional U.S. films and television shows, I hope this book suggests strategies for responding to, researching, and teaching about these texts. In other words, this book offers methods for drawing attention to the role of rape in the history of film (and thus by implication in film studies), for addressing the pervasiveness of representations of rape, and for challenging the ubiquity of postfeminism.