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(Post)Feminist Genealogies in Kate Muir's *Suffragette* City ad Lisa Evans' *Old Baggage*

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Abstract:
This article explores Kate Muir's *Suffragette City* and Lisa Evans' *Old Baggage* didactic potential based on the interactions between women that belong to different (feminist) generations taking place in both novels. *Suffragette City* reproduces the conversations and encounters between the ghost of a Scottish suffragette fighting for her enfranchisement in the twentieth century, and her great-great-granddaughter living in New York at the beginning of the following century. *Old Baggage* also deploys the figure of the suffragette, but in this case, embodied by a Londoner in her fifties who has just been granted the right to vote, and a group of newly enfranchised girls. I argue that the intergenerational exchanges between an older suffragette and younger female characters metaphorically facilitate a dialogue between feminism and postfeminism illuminating the tensions and convergences between them. My reading of these novels is supported by what Stéphanie Genz calls the "genealogical approach" (2021) to postfeminism, which does not present both movements as dichotomous but acknowledges that different feminist moments should be understood as interrelated and not superseding each other in apparently distinctive "waves." My ultimate aim is to present *Suffragette City* and *Old Baggage* as didactic texts which reflect on what I refer to as (post)feminist debates to vindicate the pertinence of feminism in a so-called postfeminist context.

Keywords: *Suffragette City*, *Old Baggage*, suffragette, intergenerational dialogues, didacticism, (post)feminism

1. Introduction

Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, Oxford, Derry, Newport, Edinburgh and Belfast are among the cities that hosted Hope, a life-sized suffragette made of thirty-two thousand Lego bricks. Originally displayed in the House of Commons, Hope was built in 2018 to mark the centenary of voting rights for some women and will tour the UK until the 2028's celebration of the hundredth anniversary of the Representation of the People Act that granted equal voting rights for all women and men. The aim behind this 10-year project, known as the #StandwithHope campaign, is "to raise awareness of the need to continue to equalise political rights" (Mycock 2022) and to prompt reflection about "how we can collectively take steps to tackle the gender inequity still present today – as well as structural inequalities in society more broadly" (UCL Research 2022). Thus, over the next four years, Hope will visit more British regions to uncover local stories about its campaign, recover the, at times, forgotten voices of its pioneers and encourage conversations about democratic voting rights and equality at present.

At a literary level, that is precisely the goal of historical fiction, a genre where the past serves as a pretext to explore present concerns and issues (Wallace 2005, 2; Keen 2006, 176; Rousselot 2014, 5). Its commercial success illustrates the growing public demand for historical narratives, particularly those produced by and for women in the last decades, and the ever-growing interest in remembering the past (Keen 2006, 169; Mitchell 2010, 36). The woman's historical novel experienced a revival in the 1980s, which generated a boom of publications in subsequent decades (Wallace 2005, 176) and has continued to expand in the twenty-first century. The women's suffrage movement in the UK, particularly Emmeline Pankhurst's suffragette campaign (1903-1914), has been the target of most of the contemporary historical fictional narratives that have chosen to revisit this historical period to offer an overview of such a crucial phase of feminism and promote reflection about the evolution of the movement. Examples of such works include Kate Muir's *Suffragette City* (1999), Lucy Ribchester's *The Hourglass Factory* (2015), Ajay Close's *A Petrol Scented Spring* (2015), Lisa Evans' *Old Baggage* (2018) and Fiona Graph's *Things That Bounded* (2021).

In this article, I analyse Muir's and Evans' novels based on their innovative features. *Suffragette City* is one of the few texts of historical fiction that sets the story in Scotland instead of England, which normally occupies the centre of the narratives that revisit the women's movement (Elliott 2018, 324). The distinctive feature of *Old Baggage* lies in the timespan it covers. Instead of focusing on the years in which the suffragist or, more specifically, the suffragette movement took place and developed, Evans' novel focuses on 1928, when the Pankhurst's campaign was over. At that stage, some women already had the right to vote and

the rest were about to achieve it. In the same manner that the #StandwithHope campaign, Muir and Evans resort to a suffragette figure to revisit the women's movement for the vote in different contexts. By doing so, they not only give visibility to some of its lesser-known icons but also invite readers to assess and reflect on the evolution of feminism in a supposedly postfeminist context where the movement is both acknowledged and rejected as no longer necessary (McRobbie 2004). Thus, Muir and Evans utilise the past to engage in current debates and concerns.

Suffragette City is a historical novel which playfully appropriates the traits, plot elements, and humorous tone of chick lit, the most recognizable postfeminist genre, and centres on Albertine, a thirtyish New York's performance feminist artist haunted by the ghost of her great-great-grandmother, the Scottish suffragette Agnes McPhail. While learning about her ancestor's feminist past, Albertine reflects on her life and the challenges she faces as a twenty-first century woman through the conversations with Agnes' spirit that she first perceives as unwelcoming but eventually accepts and even longs for. Written in a similarly comic style, Lisa Evans' *Old Baggage* focuses on Mattie Simpkin, an ex-suffragette living in London in her fifties who gives lectures about the suffragette campaign and relies on its main axioms and methods to form the Hampstead Heath Girls' Club, specifically addressing young women who are apathetic about their political rights as citizens. Mattie provides her pupils, known as the Amazons, the tools for their new lives as enfranchised women. Despite the Amazons' apparent scepticism towards Mattie's pedagogy, based on the martial art of ju-jitsu, they ultimately enjoy and take full advantage of her teachings.

Through an exploration of the interactions between Agnes and Albertine and between Mattie and the Amazons, this article highlights the instructive and reformative potential of these intergenerational exchanges between pioneer feminist figures with both women characters within the novels and contemporary readers. By having a First-Wave Feminist figure literally establishing a dialogue with contemporary female characters, Muir and Evans metaphorically put feminism and postfeminism in conversation with each other, while insisting on the need to persist with the feminist struggle in a supposedly postfeminist context.

2. Intergenerational Dialogues: Feminist Mothers and (Post)Feminist Daughters

In this section, I introduce the theoretical framework which allows me to read *Suffragette City* and *Old Baggage* as texts that encourage a dialogue between feminism and postfeminism dismantling the idea that they constitute mutually exclusive historical periods. For this, I shall first refer to the different

articulations and connotations of postfeminism. Although the term appeared in the 1920s, after some women gained the vote in the British and the American contexts, it became popular in the 1980s-1990s after its proliferation in various Anglophone contexts (Faludi 1992, 70; Holmlund 2005, 116-117). The concept of postfeminism is notoriously complex and difficult to define because of its varied and contradictory meanings (Genz 2021, 195). Considering that there is not an encompassing definition (Hall and Salupo Rodríguez 2003, 878), my understanding of the concept is based on Rosamund Gill and Christina Scharff's introduction to *New Femininities. Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (2011), in which, taking different interpretations of the term as point of departure, they postulate four main definitions of postfeminism.

Gill and Scharff's first definition describes postfeminism as "an epistemological break within feminism" (3). Here the prefix "post" suggests "transformation and change within feminism that challenges 'hegemonic' Anglo-American feminism 'with its dominant and colonizing voice'" (Alice quoted in Gill and Scharff 2011, 3). Such an interpretation implies the interrelation of the feminist movement with "post-modernism, poststructuralism, and post-colonialism" (Brooks quoted in Gill and Scharff 2011, 3). A second way of approaching the term is to see it as indicating "a historical shift after the height of Second Wave feminism"; a temporal moment after the phase of the feminist movement of the 1970s. Here postfeminism does not refer to a time after the feminist movement altogether, but after a specific period of feminism, which is why it has been at times used as a synonym of Third Wave Feminism, especially in the United States (Gill and Scharff 2011, 3). A third way of interpreting the prefix "post" is as a synonym of "anti", and, thus, conceive postfeminism, as "a backlash against feminism" (3). Advocates of this last definition argue that feminism is the cause of women's unhappiness. Alternatively, they can adopt a conformist posture and believe women should be content with the feminist triumphs achieved so far or even assume that equality has already been accomplished and hence feminism is no longer required (3). To articulate this last definition Gill and Sharff depart from Angela McRobbie's theorisation of postfeminism as tied up in a "double entanglement" because it acknowledges feminist gains but considers that the movement has succeeded and, therefore, it is no longer necessary to keep fighting (2004, 255). Based on this idea, Gill proposes the notion of a "postfeminist sensibility" to refer to products that intertwine feminist and anti-feminist values (2007).

Considering the various understandings of postfeminism, I will reflect on the different notions of the term which I shall use in my analysis of the novels before proceeding to an in-depth exploration of them in the following section. The notion of postfeminism which seems to prevail in *Old Baggage* specifically

focuses on the carelessness towards women's claims after the achievement of women's suffrage that led many women to take their vote for granted as a birth right, and consequently, to perceive the movement as dispensable. In this respect, Evans engages with Gill and Scharff's third definition of postfemisnim, which here does not refer to a backlash against feminism but to "the supposed success and achievements of the 'first wave' of the feminist movement and enact[s] a demarcating line between past and present, casting the 'post' in evolutionary or historical terms as a progression of feminist ideas" (Genz 2021, 197). Contrastively, *Suffragette City* seems to rather engage with Gill's notion of a postfeminist sensibility, which emphasises women's independence, self-realisation, consumption and freedom of choice, equating them with women's liberation (2007, 149).

Both novels, however, ultimately engage with Ann Brooks' view of postfeminism as revealing feminism's "process of ongoing transformation and change" (1997, 1). As a result of the various understandings of the term at work in both novels, when analysing the novels, and particularly the progression of the main characters, I shall refer to the notions of postfeminism that better apply in each case. However, besides deploying the aforementioned definitions, I will introduce the term "(post)feminism" to underline the current need for feminism and highlight feminism's embeddedness and persistence within a postfeminist realm. My usage of the brackets is to denote the interconnection between the prefix and the word "feminism" as well as to honour the legacy of feminism and avoid the problematic connotations embedded in other articulations of the term. Stéphanie Genz's genealogical approach towards postfeminism is particularly useful to explain such continuities and interconnections. Genz acknowledges consecutive changes in the meaning of the term recognising its correlation with feminism (2021, 199) and "allowing for different postfeminist strands to co-exist, overlap, build upon, revise and replace others" (196). This perspective is innovative because it does not place postfeminism in a dichotomous or confrontational relation to feminism but highlights their connections and interrelations, thus responding to critical views of postfeminism that either attempt to promote nostalgia towards a unified feminist past or perceive feminism as irrelevant in the present (198-199). Instead, Genz sees feminism and postfeminism as "allied and entwined" (198), in a more complex and optimistic understanding of the term which allows for the coexistence of "contradictory and evolving notions of (post)feminism" at a given moment (203). Genz's theorisation is pertinent for my analysis because I read *Suffragette City* and *Old Baggage* as texts that do not intend to present feminism as a phenomenon of the past, but to vindicate its continuation, presence and significance in a supposedly postfeminist context. Such an idea is conveyed through the intergenerational dialogues at work in these

novels, which metaphorically place feminism and postfeminism in conversation. Readers are thus encouraged to understand "postfeminism's multiplicity, its modes of distancing and proximity, embeddedness and disembeddedness in relation to its feminist roots as well as its interconnectedness and overlaps with other post- concepts" (199). Evans and Muir critically address ideological controversies to reflect "it is not feminism that we are 'post' but one historical phase of feminist politics" (Ewington quoted in Genz 2021, 197). Therefore, the genealogical exchanges present in both novels serve to foment (post)feminist dialogue and are illustrative of Genz's genealogical approach to postfeminism.

The feminist and postfeminist interplay is realised through the interactions between characters from different backgrounds and generations. Evans and Muir follow the tendency of other literary and media narratives to include women whose differences prevail over their commonalities; women who "experience their subjectivity differently and dependent on context" and who are all feminists but "do not have the same choices and options" (Lotz 2001, 115). Their dissimilarities mainly derive from their age, a crucial factor to condition women's experiences and opportunities (115). The choice of characters who belong to distinct generations or, in feminist terms, to separate waves, reaffirms the relevance of the generational trope reiteratively used in various narratives to illustrate "girls and young women as enjoying the freedoms secured by the activism of their mothers and grandmothers" (Tasker and Negra 2007, 18). *Old Baggage* depicts a group of newly enfranchised subjects thanks to the efforts of the women's suffrage movement here epitomised by Mattie, a middle-aged ex-suffragette who continues with the struggle by urging the next generation to keep fighting to achieve full equality between the sexes. *Suffragette City* establishes a major generational contrast since Muir juxtaposes a young and empowered twenty-first century fully liberated woman, Albertine, with Agnes, an old suffragette struggling for her rights at the beginning of the twentieth century and who encourages Albertine "to relearn what has been forgotten" a hundred years later (Cockin 2004, 25).

Agnes' interactions with her descendant and Mattie's conversations with the girls break with the dichotomous perception of feminism and postfeminism as subsequent temporal phases, and instead present them as part of a genealogical development, thus giving way to my use of (post)feminism. By depicting the generational differences among women/feminists but also their connections, Muir and Evans draw attention to the various ways of understanding and doing feminism which are context-dependent and related to particular concerns and actions (Genz 2021, 202). The novels' double timeline emphasises the contrast between a feminist background in which women must fight for the vote and a setting dominated by McRobbie's idea of postfeminism, where it

is believed that the objectives of feminism have already been accomplished and, as a result, women are already enfranchised and apparently fully liberated citizens. Yet, the aim of these novels is not to present feminism as dispensable, but the opposite: to vindicate the continuation of the fight. For that reason, the intergenerational conversations and teachings in the novels attempt to convey that despite feminism "has never had a universally accepted agenda [, it promotes] a universal politics of equality for women" (202). The revival of First-Wave Feminist principles in the novels neither has nostalgic drives nor aims to suggest that the feminism of the past was better than contemporary feminist practices. Muir and Evans rather intend to "affirm the importance of establishing the cyclical and cumulative nature of feminist debates and the continued prevalence of sexism and misogyny in contemporary cultures" (Rivers 2017, 149). The authors establish these cyclical discussions not only for characters within the narrative itself but also for their readers, inviting and encouraging them to engage critically with these feminist debates and reflect on their own roles within these ongoing conversations.

Such a task does not prove to be difficult for a present-day readership. In a backdrop dominated by a double entanglement between feminist and anti-feminist claims (McRobbie 2004, 255-256), contemporary readers can presumably identify with the novels' historical settings because the periods they describe were also tumultuous and profoundly contradictory for women. Set in 1928, *Old Baggage* reflects the disillusionment and the anti-feminist backlash of the inter-war period (Wallace 2005, 26). Significantly, Evans' work came out in 2018 coinciding with the centenary of partial enfranchisement and reviewers were quick to point out the novel was "a timely read, not only for the anniversaries it commemorates but because of the present hostility towards feminism" (Feay 2018). Set and published in 1999, *Suffragette City* similarly illustrates the spirit of a decade which Wallace deems "postfeminist", as it became obvious that women's economic and political accomplishments were just illusory (2005, 202). Both novels thus speak to contemporary readers involved in a context in which feminism is "continually and simultaneously celebrated and undone" (60), and where feminism "ebbs and flows within generations, with various issues resurfacing in a cyclical fashion" (21). By recovering the spirit of the women's movement in their narratives, the authors "reach for historical recollection, desirous to re-member the past and to ensure it continues to have meaning" (Mitchell 2010, 37). Thus, Muir and Evans aim to contest the alleged death of feminism fostered by some strands of postfeminist discourse that simultaneously acknowledge and take the accomplishments of the feminist movement for granted and ignore the importance of continuing the fight (Budgeon 2011, 281; Rivers 2017, 4; Tasker and Negra 2007, 21).

Muir and Evans carry out their goal through the intergenerational dialogues fictionalised in the novels. In both texts, the suffragette protagonists instruct the younger characters, and by extension the readers, to combat the apathy towards and undervaluation of feminism and embrace the need to keep fighting. As it shall be developed in the next section, these exchanges reflect the synchrony between feminism and postfeminism and ultimately promote the notion of (post)feminism, that is, the aliveness and relevance of feminism in what Gill and McRobbie (2016, 13; 2004, 256) describe as a postfeminist context where the feminist claims and objectives are either perceived with hostility or taken for granted.

3. Feminism's Legacy: A Journey from Reluctance to Acceptance

This section focuses on the analysis of the intergenerational interactions literally taking place in both novels among Agnes and Albertine and Mattie and the Amazons, respectively. I intend to reflect on the development and outcome of these exchanges illustrating how they are first presented as hostile but eventually viewed in a positive light by Agnes' great-great-granddaughter and Mattie's pupils. This shift ultimately leads to a greater self-understanding for these young protagonists. Through an analysis of the dialogues at work in the novels, I will reveal how Albertine and the Amazons are initially reluctant to the encounters and conversations with their suffragette ancestors but progressively come to embrace, appreciate, and even long for these interactions and the instructiveness derived from them. Ultimately, I shall argue that such a progression reinforces my claim that *Suffragette City* and *Old Baggage* vindicate an interconnection between the different feminist periods and between feminism and postfeminism and insist on the necessity and relevance of feminism in the present.

Suffragette City links the First Wave of Feminism with the postfeminist context of the 1990-2000s (Wallace 2005, 202) through the exchanges between Agnes and Albertine, two women that belong to different centuries and navigate the challenges of societal change. Albertine's first-person narrative is interrupted by dialogues with Agnes' ghost and chapters recounting Agnes' life as a suffragette in the 1890s-1900s. To explore the tensions between feminism and postfeminism, Muir resorts to the chick lit frame. Agnes' spectral presence is useful to bring the (feminist) past back, whereas the chick lit frame becomes handy to reflect on the successes and failures of feminism (Harzewski 2011, 150) from a genealogical perspective. Albertine represents the conventional postfeminist attitudes, recognisable in heroines of chick lit, "our most culturally visible postfeminist fiction" (Harzewski 2011, 2). She embodies a thirty-year-old white, middle-class,

single, heterosexual and American career woman living in New York, one of the recurrent urban settings of chick lit (Ferris and Young 2006; Harzewski 2011, 29; Mabry 2006, 193). Albertine possesses the prototypical authenticity and relatability of other protagonists of the genre, narrating the story of her life to her readers in a confessional format (Ferris and Young 2006, 4; Mabry 2006, 195). Albertine alternates the accounts of her occupation as a performance feminist artist with the descriptions and explanations of her dating experiences, echoing the efforts of chick lit heroines to reach happiness by finding an equilibrium between their professional and personal lives (Benstock 2006, 254; Harzewski 2011, 29-30).

Albertine reproduces the postfeminist sensibility's rhetoric characteristic of her generation and environment as soon as the narrative unfolds, reflecting on the precariousness of her job and her single status: "I was right in the U-bend: my work stank, my room-mates stank, and I hadn't had sex for 187 days" (*SC* 2).[1] Her specific reference to sex exposes chick lit's postfeminist take on women's sexual liberation and empowerment (Ferris and Young 2006a, 10; Harzewski 2011, 152; Mabry 2006, 200; Tasker and Negra 2007, 2; Wells 2006, 49). Moreover, Albertine employs the typical sassiness of the genre, revealing the characteristic oscillation of the heroine between negativity and optimism (Harzewski 2011, 185). She perceives her life as stagnant but aspires to find a man, be fashionable, and become rich, thus reflecting on the postfeminist tendency to "connect feminist notions of gendered empowerment and choice with cultural practices of commodification and individualism" (Genz 2021, 204).

The novel also presents Albertine and her friends as autonomous and empowered subjects, capable of freely choosing how to live their lives and thus of allowing themselves to dispense with feminism (Harzewski 2011, 155; McRobbie, 2009 in Gill and Scharff 2011, 4). Albertine works as a performance artist and joins the New York Dolls, a club whose main aims are "to swap contacts, ideas, and probably, [...] lists of single men" (*SC* 120). When describing the club's members, Albertine reiterates chick lit's obsession with consumerism and brands (Harzewski 2011, 181): "New York Dolls [wear] black leather jackets (eight), executive business suits with heels (eleven), rubber dresses (one), tortoiseshell Armani spectacles (five), and a 'Fuck the Shut Up' T-shirt. Kate Spade and Prada bags outnumbered Hermès and Vuitton nineteen to four" (*SC* 120). In fact, one of the Dolls argues the requirements to be a woman are working on Vogue and wearing Chanel (*SC* 124), voicing a recurrent postfeminist understanding of femininity (Negra 2009, 47) and equating freedom with consumerism (Benstock

1 From now on, *Suffragette City* and *Old Baggage* will be respectively referenced as *SC* and *OB*.

2006, 254). The Dolls also demonstrate the prototypical postfeminist lack of engagement with politics (Harzewski 2011, 185), shared by Albertine herself, who confesses: "I tried to remember when I had last voted. Maybe once at art school? Anyway, the choice in America wasn't that great: capitalism, or capitalism lite, so why bother?" (*SC* 123).

Albertine's postfeminist stance clashes heavily with that of Agnes, present in the narrative as a ghost and comically introduced as a "rigid, serious, anti-sex and romance, difficult and extremist" feminist that contrasts with the "pleasingly moderated" postfeminist subject that Albertine represents (Negra 2009, 2). Muir relies on the spectral motif to revisit the First Wave of Feminism turning the conventional ghost figure into "a bossy Glaswegian suffragette who [...] instructs Albertine to change her life" (Hesselgreen 1999). Frustrated with the superficiality and lifestyle of Albertine's generation, Agnes haunts her descendant in crucial moments. For instance, when Albertine is on a date, Agnes appears to urge her to reconsider her priorities: "You need to get yourself sorted out [...]. Here you are, with all the opportunities in the world and you're wasting time with men like that, sitting around doing nothing all day" (*SC* 35). Love is one of the many issues of contention between Albertine and Agnes, whose different understandings of women's empowerment and feminism stem from the significant timespan that separates their worlds, an idea exploited in the novel to emphasise the continuities and discontinuities between the two periods of time they inhabit.

Muir's usage of the haunting metaphor, recurrent in neo-historical novels, allows her to engage in a representation of the past as "simultaneously other and familiar, accessible and distant" (Rousselot 2014, 12). More interestingly for the purpose of this article, Muir employs the intrinsic liminality of the ghost to illustrate the continuities that (post)feminism entails. Agnes' in-between position, neither totally present nor fully absent, disrupts the idea of linearity, so that "the link it establishes between past and present is not so much a hyphen, bridge, or other linear form, but is rather a repetition. Or, more precisely, it is repetition with a difference" (Mitchell 2010, 157). In this sense, the resource of the ghost serves as a bridge between feminism's past and present because Agnes' revenant gives Albertine direct access to her remote ancestry, and, in turn, insight into feminism's origins.

At first, the effectiveness of Agnes and Albertine's interactions is hindered because Albertine mistrusts Agnes and describes her visits as "unasked and unwanted" (42), presenting herself as a victim of Agnes' harassment, which illustrates her apparent repudiation of her ancestor and reproduces chick lit's recurrent postfeminist negative and disparaging perception of feminism. This idea is conveyed when Albertine compares her generation with the previous ones:

> Here I am, the end product: taller, more streamlined, better educated and built from Breakfast of Champions and vitamins and greens [...]. Here I am, brought in generations of sacrifice and struggle from Europe, contained in genes stretching back to Dublin and Glasgow, of immigrants funnelled through the docks of Boston and raised up by the Colgate factory in New Jersey [...]. And along the way, a whole slew of women dying in prison for the vote, fighting all those battles so there are none left for me to fight. Now I've ended up a waste of space in New York, all that hope of generations boiled down to a few dregs of cynicism. I don't know what to do, and I don't even have a proper job. (*SC* 55)

Albertine's statement suggests the "modern woman has been displaced, even paradoxically disenfranchised by the suffragettes" (Cockin 2004, 24) because she perceives her life as lacking purpose. Yet, at the same time, Albertine reproduces the taken-for-grantedness of feminism by relieving herself and her contemporaries from the pressure of becoming the feminist superheroines their foremothers were (Mazza quoted in Harzewski 2011, 45). While Albertine highlights the challenges faced by women from her generation, her claim that suffragettes ironically disenfranchised women is problematic. Such a stance ignores the many barriers women still face nowadays and presents the First Wave Feminism as a burden for contemporary women. By identifying feminism's legacy as a source of pressure rather than empowerment, Albertine risks underestimating the ongoing relevance of feminist struggles in addressing contemporary issues.

Although Agnes comes to Albertine's rescue, Albertine initially considers her a "disapproving feminist mother" (Cockin 2004, 24) and sees her interventions as intrusive rather than instructive. A clear instance of Albertine's reluctance to listen to Agnes' reprimands can be found in the fashion show organised by Albertine's flatmate, Wanda. Wanda uses Agnes' inherited suffragette items to create fashion designs inspired by the movement, despite acknowledging she is not particularly passionate about it. Wanda's fashion show scene prompts reflection on the commodification of the movement. By using the suffragette mottos in her designs—"the while silk Votes for Women sashes made into a tackily short A-line skirt, topped with a waisted purple jacket and an acid-green driving hat held on by a chiffon scarf" (*SC* 101) —Wanda fosters what Tasker and Negra perceive as a postfeminist narrative which "generates and draws strength [...] from a rhetorical field that produces buzzwords and slogans to express visions of energetic personal empowerment" (2007, 3). Of course, Albertine voices her concern with the exploitative appropriation of Wanda's designs and criticises the show for opening with David Bowie's "Suffragette City" claiming the lyrics are "more about the merits of short, sharp and brutal sex than the suffragette

movement" (*SC* 101). In light of this comment, it seems contradictory that Muir calls her novel after this song. Nevertheless, the title could be reinterpreted in a vindicatory vein. Muir's excavation of the past can be read as a recreation of New York as a city of suffrage where the spirit and values of feminism have not been fully overshadowed or forgotten as attested, for example, by Albertine's job as a performance feminist artist.

Witnessing Wanda's treatment of Agnes' possessions, Albertine feels guilty for her indirect contribution to what she categorises as a disastrous show: "I had an edgy feeling I'd desecrated something by handing over Agnes's clothes. I hadn't known then that Agnes had been so serious about the suffragette stuff" (*SC* 101). This becomes a turning point in her journey from reluctance to acceptance, as her remorse rises when she sees some of the models wearing "striped dresses and narrow pants in Edwardian prison arrow material [combined with] handcuff bracelets and ball-and-chain earrings" (*SC* 102-103), which Albertine concludes "is utterly tasteless, when all those suffragists died after hunger strikes and force-feeding and stuff" (*SC* 103). Agnes concurs with Albertine and believes her descendant is very much representative of her generation's trivialisation of suffrage and of previous feminist struggles:

> You and your under-educated, ignorant friends have no sense of the past. In fact, you've no sense at all, no comprehension of integrity, of a cause worth fighting for, have you? Your songs with dirty words – [...] Your stupid clothes…I find it wasteful, so wasteful that you go about leading your insincere, ephemeral wee lives when you could do something worthwhile, something that mattered. I didn't fight for you for this. And this man isn't your solution. Nor the so-called friends you live among here… (*SC* 104)

Agnes' reproach redirects the tensions between mothers and daughters frequently incorporated in chick lit novels. Agnes' remarks are, thus, illustrative of the anti-postfeminist posture according to which "the feminist 'foremothers' have attacked their 'daughters' for their historical amnesia and misappropriations of the feminist/familial legacy" (Genz 2021, 201). On her part, Albertine's attitude reflects "the monstering of feminist 'mothers" (Rivers 2017, 32), a phrase that refers to the rejection of women who are or were involved in shaping various facets of a feminism which is now considered old-fashioned (32). Despite the actual family ties between both women, the word "daughter" can be understood metaphorically. As a prototypical chick lit heroine, Albertine challenges elements of an earlier feminism but still recognises herself as a reluctant daughter or the offspring of the movement (Harzewski 2011, 153). In acknowledging her relation to her First-Wave Feminist ancestor, Albertine suggests once again her changing

attitude towards Agnes and their interactions. From this moment on, she starts to openly manifest her receptiveness to and eagerness for Agnes' teachings.

Agnes' words during the show, thence, are crucial to spark a change in Albertine. Albertine begins to understand the commodifying implications of Wanda's show and evolves thanks to the knowledge acquired from her conversations with Agnes, which she eventually comes to consider enriching and instructive. However, the tensions between them do not disappear at this point. Albertine blames the levels of superficiality that characterise her generation as an effect of the accomplishments of the previous ones. When reflecting on her job as a performance feminist artist, Albertine recreates the postfeminist rhetoric that presents feminism as responsible for the supposed purposelessness of contemporary women's politics:

> I considered my paintings to be radical, or sort of feminist in their own way, they were about women's lives, after all, but Agnes had a somewhat narrow conception of art and women, I reckoned. She was all noise and fury, when there was nothing much nowadays your average Manhattan career woman needed to get noisy and furious about. We'd drunk the potion of Feminism with a big F, and thrown the bottle away, forgetting the recipe. (*SC* 114)

Here Albertine displays the simultaneous "doing and undoing of feminism" that McRobbie ascribes to postfeminism (quoted in Gill and Scharff 2011, 4) since she considers her work as feminist, even radical, but nevertheless presents the movement as dispensable. The concurrent acknowledgement and rejection of feminism is precisely the flaw Albertine associates with her generation altogether, a conclusion that derives from her exchanges with Agnes.

Towards the middle of the novel, Albertine's apparent ambivalence and hostility transform into an acceptance of their common ancestry and their shared feminist genealogies. In fact, Albertine starts requesting the presence of her ancestor: "'Agnes?' I said quietly, feeling stupid. 'Agnes?' There was no response. Perhaps she has bugged about me swearing at her last time. Perhaps even my personal ghost had abandoned me. 'Where are you? I want to talk.'" (*SC* 163-164). Albertine's preference for Agnes over her friends challenges the belief that "women are as likely, or perhaps even more likely, to identify with their *generation* than their *gender*" in turn, acknowledging the potential of a feminism based on intergenerational connections (Budgeon 2011, 280; italics in the original). With Albertine's ability to discern the spectre of her suffragette ancestor comes her awareness of the enduring essence of feminism. Symbolically, this is realised when Albertine points at the portcullis brooch Agnes received for her period in prison and tells her: "I think you were pretty brave doing that.

Makes me kinda ashamed of the sort of things we do now" (*SC* 263). Thus, as Albertine herself verbalises, she ultimately perceives the visits of her ancestor with optimism: "Agnes' prolonged and persistent interference in my life [...] had gone from being an irritation to a comfort" (*SC* 279).

Nevertheless, Albertine is not the only one to be transformed, Agnes also profits from the exchanges with her descendant and comes to appreciate Albertine's contributions to the movement: "I just want you to know that I have, against all expectation, grow quite fond of you, and what you do" (*SC* 305). Agnes' progression becomes evident in her response to Albertine's feeling of embarrassment towards her own generation: "different strokes for different folks [...] I'm not saying that what you do is a load of foolishness. [...] Now, I think you've too many choices. Women can do anything, so they choose nothing. This painting business: well maybe it has a point. They don't seem to march or protest about anything nowadays: it might be just the only thing you can do. I'll reserve judgement on that" (*SC* 263). Agnes critically reiterates the postfeminist tenet of choice that upholds "*anything* can be feminist as long as it is chosen" (Banet-Weiser et al. 2019, 11; italics in the original). Agnes' words, thus, unravel that, even though they share a collective fight for equality, each feminist wave has its own aims and expressions (Genz 2021, 202). Her opinions confirm "feminism continues to be an active and important force in contemporary society but often materializes in identities and practices that are not immediately associated with previously established forms of feminism" (Budgeon 2011, 281). This is an idea Agnes expresses at the very end of the novel when readers come to realise Albertine's transformation is completed because she no longer needs the guidance of her ancestor, she finally comes to terms with herself and understands it is possible to find a balance between her personal life and her professional career as a feminist artist. In *Suffragette City* generational differences are ultimately presented as enriching and empowering (Cockin 2004, 25) and the intergenerational tensions are solved in favour of a mutual process of learning.

In *Old Baggage* the tensions between feminism and postfeminism are mainly represented by the figure of Mattie and the younger generation of girls on the verge of gaining the franchise, some of whom become Mattie's pupils. Although these intergenerational connections are represented as essentially positive, in the beginning there is certain scepticism towards Mattie's teachings and tactics on the part of her trainees, the Amazons. With the imminent achievement of universal suffrage, most characters in *Old Baggage* feel the women's movement is no longer necessary because its main objective has been accomplished. Such an attitude prevails within Mattie's own generation, even among other suffrage campaigners. Despite universal suffrage is about to be approved and the suffragette movement is over, the novel opens with Mattie giving lectures about the campaign as she

thinks it is still necessary to keep fighting. These lessons do not have the effect she expected for the audience, mostly of her same age, either question some of the claims about the movement or show apathy towards her talks neither asking questions nor creating discussions. One of these lectures is attended by Jacko, a fellow suffragette. After listening to her comrade and witnessing the effect of her talk, Jacko thinks Mattie should devote her energies "to a living cause [instead of retreating] old ground" (*OB* 48). Jacko believes Mattie's lecture "quite brought back the old days" (40) and argues "there's a wider battlefield these days, and a younger generation to address" (41). Mattie counteracts these ideas claiming her lecture "is supposed to be a clarion call to those who think feminism is safely in the past" (*OB* 40), thus challenging the perception of feminism as aged and ineffective (Tasker and Negra 2007, 11). By addressing a sceptical audience and, by extension, readers who might also view feminism as outdated, Mattie effectively highlights the enduring relevance of feminist issues in contemporary society. Her lecture necessarily functions as a reminder that feminism is not a relic of the past but a vital and ongoing struggle and inspires action, ensuring the movement continues to resonate with both current and future generations.

Yet, like Mattie's contemporaries, the generation of younger girls who will be soon able to vote neither show much interest towards the campaign that led to the accomplishment of their imminent new right as citizens nor towards exercising that right. Yet recalling the representation of the Dolls in *Suffragette City*, these girls exhibit the dominant apathy towards feminism characteristic of the context in which they live. Such an attitude becomes clear when Jacko and Mattie decide to check some girls' understanding and concern for the matter. For instance, when the old comrades meet for a coffee, they ask a seventeen-year-old waitress how she plans on exercising her franchise and she hesitatingly replies: "my dad, he votes for the labour party" (*OB* 47), implying she will simply do the same. Ida, a teenager who works in Mattie's house, also displays her lack of knowledge about politics and the choices available when talking about the subject with Mattie, who further testes Ida's learning by asking her to name three important women in history, and the girl mentions Queen Victoria, Queen Elizabeth and the Virgin Mary. When enquired about Mrs. Pankhurst, the only thing Ida knows is "she threw a brick at the King's horse" (*OB* 56), which reflects popular perceptions and misconceptions of the suffragettes and their leader as inherently violent. Realising that being granted the right to vote does not grant women with voting criteria and perspective, Mattie wonders how these girls could "be rescued from the fog in which they were currently wandering" (*OB* 57). Ultimately, Mattie sees teaching as the solution, for she believes her knowledge and experience can be helpful and empowering for the youth. At this point, inspired by Jacko's suggestion, she decides to abandon

the lectures and focus on teaching the younger generations instead, specifically targeting teenage girls.

Mattie believes in reinforcing intergenerational patterns of communication to establish a "continued dialogue with the women (and the feminists) of the past, [and] also a continued sense of shared struggle" (Cooper and Short 2012, 166-167). As an ex-suffragette, Mattie becomes an epitome of First-Wave Feminism, whereas the younger girls represent the disillusionment and indifference towards the struggles of their feminist "mothers." Through Mattie, the novel speaks not only to her sceptical "daughters," but to contemporary readers who accept the postfeminist assumption that the feminist struggle is obsolete (Tasker and Negra 2007, 5). Evans explains her choice of a middle-aged suffragette protagonist by establishing a parallelism between more contemporary intergenerational tensions: "by 1928, these women – especially slightly older women like Mattie – would have been regarded as absolute dinosaurs. The women getting the vote at twenty-one in 1928 would have been born at the height of militancy and for them, Mattie and her encore were fossils. It's a little bit like a feminist born in the 1960s and how they're viewed now" (2018). Mattie's solution to these tensions is to create the Hampstead Heath Girls' Club, which is based on the philosophy of the women's movement and addressed to youthful girls. Mattie explains those who join her club can find in it: "an opportunity to develop and maintain fitness of both body and brain. [She remarks the] Equal Franchise Bill has just had its first reading, and it is more than likely that, by the end of this year, every British woman of twenty-one and over will be allowed to vote [adding that the] girls need to learn to question and to analyse, so that they can step to the ballot box with confidence and knowledge" (*OB* 95). One of Mattie's main purposes is to "instruct the Amazons both to refrain from and to raise above petty teasing" (*OB* 85). The proceedings of the club are somehow inspired by the WSPU's reunions and jujitsu lessons for the Amazons meetings are divided into three parts: "firstly discussion or debate; secondly, recreation; and thirdly, training" (*OB* 70). The girls wear green sashes over their clothes, reminiscent of those worn by suffragettes with the union's colours—purple, green and white—(Purvis 2000, 119). Like the medals and badges imprisoned suffragettes received after being released (Crawford 1999, n.p.), the girls are awarded insignias and stars when they achieve specific goals. In one of their encounters, Mattie also leads her pupils to Parliament Square, a recurrent location for suffrage demonstrations and gatherings. On their way, they stop at another key site, the Embankment, to contemplate the statue of one of the suffragettes' icons, Boadicea. When the girls discover the unknown figures that appear next to Boadicea are her daughters, Mattie denounces that "innumerable are the unnamed women of history" (*OB* 131) and claims that the purpose of their visit is precisely to learn about great and often forgotten women and, by extension, to un/learn how history has been told.

Yet, the Amazons are initially ambivalent towards Mattie's pedagogy, which is reflected in their questioning attitude. When Avril, a club member, enquires about the purpose of training, Mattie responds it will be essential "for your lives as twentieth-century women, to enable you to take your places as equals in society, in Parliament and in the professions" (*OB* 70). A question about the usefulness of jujitsu serves as a pretext to tell her recruits more about the history of the suffragettes and the role of jujitsu in their campaign. As women living in a postfeminist reality, where postfeminist here literally refers to the aftermath of the suffrage milestone, the girls reiterate their perception of Mattie as an "old baggage," as a feminist mother figure seen as old and obsolete, and, consequently, unreliable and irrelevant (Rivers 2017, 42), even though the girls are only a few years younger than Mattie.

Although the mother/daughter relation between Mattie and the Amazons is metaphorical, there are also some family connections at work in this novel. Mattie has blood ties with Inez, one of the young ladies who joins the club and proves to be her brother's child; "a scion, flesh of her flesh, a hand from the past, reaching out to grasp hers!" (*OB* 139). Aware of Mattie's past involvement with the suffrage movement, Inez only wants to join the club to know more about her mother, Venetia Campbell, who was also a suffragette. Inez, however, is not interested in learning about her mum's deeds and contributions to the Cause; she is just curious about Venetia's appearance and gestures. Inez's carelessness is apparent during the Amazons meetings when she claims she will never vote, arguing that "if you have enough money, it doesn't matter who's Prime Minister" (*OB* 213). Mattie is willing to reform Inez regardless of her lack of enthusiasm, which shows she shares Agnes' predisposition to guide and influence her descendant, and by extension, her generation.

As in *Suffragette City*, the teaching is reciprocal. Despite the Amazons apparent objection to Mattie's lessons, their interactions are in due course perceived as motivational and inspiring. This transformation is evident even in the case of Inez, who learns the importance of making decisions democratically when she suggests that the events of the club should be decided by voting. On her part, the girls also teach Mattie a lesson because she finds their eagerness and commitment constitute a true source of motivation —something she lacked while lecturing more apathetic audiences. Thus, the novel ends positively because it suggests the reciprocity of these intergenerational relations and the genealogical connections between Mattie's feminist past and the girls' future. Therefore, Mattie and the Amazons' interactions metaphorically promote the idea of (post)feminism, as these exchanges ultimately reflect the presence and validity of feminist principles in a postfeminist frame.

The development and outcome of the novels confirm both Muir and Evans challenge the conflicting interactions among feminists, and instead present

intergenerational exchanges as enriching (Gillis et al. 2004, 3). By depicting the relationships between older and younger women they also confront the linear perception of feminism as a terminated period and advocate for a movement that relies upon intergenerational actions (Rivers 2017, 5) and constant transformation to survive and renew itself. Responding to the conventional division of the feminist movement as formed by a series of receding waves, Rivers suggests looking at its history as a single wave, as "a movement that is constantly in flux, rolling back as often as it rolls forward, gaining strength from what it brings with it rather than losing momentum due to what it leaves behind" (21-22). With the inclusion of characters that belong to different (feminist) generations and engage in conversation with each other, Muir and Evans reject temporal divisions in favour of continuities and advocate for a genealogical approach sustained by renewed feminist alliances (Gill 2016, 17-18). The novels' ultimate message adheres to my understanding of (post) feminism as they both convey that feminism is still present and necessary in a postfeminist context.

4. Conclusion

Suffragette City and *Old Baggage* address contemporary (post)feminist dilemmas by invoking feminist values and premises. The novels reproduce the postfeminist rhetoric based on the assumption that women have reached their goals and there is no need to keep struggling not to support or perpetuate this belief but to challenge it. The intergenerational dialogues between the protagonists at work in both texts has allowed me to read these historical fictions based on Genz's postfeminist genealogical approach which challenges dichotomies such as the one between feminism and postfeminism vindicating their coexistence and the interconnection between different feminist waves. Agnes' apparitions and Mattie's lessons are oriented to instruct and influence the younger generations towards an equalitarian future. Despite the timespan that separates Agnes and Albertine is more pronounced than the one between Mattie and the Amazons, in both novels there is a predisposition to engage with the roots of feminism since Albertine can see and hear Agnes' ghost and the girls are willing to join Mattie's club and learn from her. The reciprocal teaching stemming from these interactions both defies the postfeminist tendency of presenting feminism as redundant based on its accomplishments and appreciates contemporary feminist politics. Similarly, readers encounter the *herstory* of feminism and understand its main aim, equality between sexes, is yet to be achieved. The ultimate goal of these novels is, thus, to urge for a continuation of feminism's common aim: equal rights between men and women.

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