

# Catfight: A Feminist Analysis

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## Introduction: The Anatomy of a Catfight

In 1997, the popular sitcom *Seinfeld*, a show well known for its successful lampooning of pop culture stereotypes, aired an episode called “The Summer of George.” One of the main issues of this episode evolves from a situation the female lead, Elaine, encounters at work. At the beginning of the episode, Elaine and two male coworkers observe a new female worker in the office walking by them rather stiffly. The first man scoffs, “What’s with her arms? They just hang there—like salamis!” The second man agrees, “She walks like an orangutan.” When Elaine joins in their banter, saying “Better call the zoo!” the men immediately respond with sounds like an angry cat (“Rawr!” and “Hiss!”), and as they walk away, one man looks at Elaine disapprovingly and says, “Cat-ty!” Elaine is left open-mouthed in disbelief. Clearly, her coworkers are associating Elaine with the catfight, a caricatured image of female competitiveness widespread throughout popular culture today.

Later in the episode, after an altercation between Elaine and the female coworker has taken place, Jerry asks Elaine if she has spoken to her boss about it. Elaine, somewhat in disbelief, tells him that her boss thought it was “some sort of catfight.” At just the mention of the word, Kramer, who is on his way out the door, stops in his tracks and says, “Catfight?” his eyes wide at the prospect. This response prompts Elaine to ask, “What is so appealing to men about a catfight?” Before Jerry can even respond, Kramer has excitedly yelled “Ay yay! Catfight!”

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at Elaine's use of the word again, and his actions are accompanied by an extended laugh track, implying that Kramer's response, though ridiculous, is quite humorous. Jerry then attempts to answer Elaine's question and explain the appeal of the catfight: "Because men think that if women are grabbing and clawing at each other, there's a chance they might somehow...kiss" ("The Summer of George"). Jerry's explanation confirms the notion that catfights are framed as sexually appealing to men. *Seinfeld* writers further lampoon this belief in one of the final scenes of the episode. Elaine has approached the police with concerns for her safety, as the female coworker with whom she has been involved in an altercation has been leaving her threatening voicemails. As soon as the policemen hear that she is having a conflict with another woman, rather than take her complaints seriously, they start to meow and hiss so much that Elaine can't even finish her sentence. She begins to say, "Just because I'm a woman doesn't mean it's a catfight!" but the policemen's mocking continues. Their juvenile devotion to the cultural stereotype of women as catfighters is clearly problematic, as the *Seinfeld* writers demonstrate.

An entire episode of a primetime sitcom devoted to the catfight would not have been possible were it not for the cultural baggage regarding women and competition that we, as a society, already carry. Our culture has come to believe that women constantly in competition with each other is just "the way things are," and we see this competition in particular ways: as sexy, ineffective, and amusing. The *Seinfeld* episode reveals some of the contours of the catfight, but this cultural stereotype requires further questioning. In this essay, I will identify and analyze the particular features that define the catfight: the ineffectual nature of the physical process of catfighting furthers the stereotype of women as weak; the titillation of the catfight contributes further to the sexual containment of women. By reflecting on these features, we can see that the catfight is used as a tool of the patriarchy to keep women further divided from each other and prevent challenges to the male-dominated status quo from occurring collectively among females.

The image of two women, rolling around in the mud, scratching each other with perfectly-manicured nails and pulling at each other's long, shiny hair is familiar to the average American. The fact that this particular brand of female-on-female altercation has its own name

proves that the catfight has made its way into the consciousness of Americans as a cultural phenomenon. Catfight imagery pervades mainstream popular culture, appearing in media from children's television and sitcoms to full-length films and pornography.

Catfights don't just appear on the small and big screens; they can also be spotted in bars that are plastered with posters of women wrestling in Jell-O, oil, or mud, advertising the latest girl-on-girl fighting event. Catfights are also a staple of pornography, yielding incredibly graphic and hugely popular results in Internet searches for websites like [catfightcentral.com](http://catfightcentral.com), [fightingfelines.com](http://fightingfelines.com), and [latincatfights.com](http://latincatfights.com), all of which feature huge archives of video and still images of beautiful women clawing at each other and pulling each other's hair, often while naked or in the process of tearing off each other's clothes.

The pervasiveness of catfight imagery is important because this is a cultural narrative that is everywhere, but has by and large gone unexamined by scholars. Because it's unexamined, its prevalence can make it familiar and compelling. It can come to seem descriptive rather than politically loaded; in other words, the catfight can seem normal, as if this is simply what women are like. What I will do in this paper is challenge the normalization of the catfight by examining its cultural workings within what I am calling the "catfight culture."

The term "catfight culture" refers to the cultural belief that women tend to be overly competitive with each other. This belief is continuously bolstered through the mainstream media by the pervasive image of women fighting in erotic, humorous, and ineffective ways. As business professor Catherine M. Dalton observes in her analysis of the "queen bee" phenomenon, an ideological extension of the catfight that is alive and well for women in the workplace, "Women throughout the ages have been ensconced in, and have even assisted in the development of, a culture that perpetuates a portrait of women as driven by jealousy, to the point of seeking the destruction of rivals, real or imagined" (349). Dalton's description helps to define the catfight culture that surrounds women in the form of a popular belief that women are "naturally"—and irrationally—more competitive with each other, a belief which is often reinforced by problematic scientific research (motivated by this perception) and a bombardment of mainstream media images of catfights. Women are currently entrenched in the catfight culture, and

it continues to push in on them from all sides, dehumanizing them and working in the service of the patriarchy.

It is no coincidence that the image of the catfight began gaining popularity in late 1970s and early 80s America, precisely the era that feminist cultural critic Susan Faludi denotes as the “most recent round” of cultural backlash “triggered by the perception—accurate or not—that women are making great strides” (xix). Faludi details this notion in her book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. According to Faludi, in the years following the women’s liberation movement, a “powerful counterassault on women’s rights” has developed. This backlash functions as “an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did win for women” (xviii). Within this framework of the growing backlash against the idea of women having power in American society, the image of the catfight developed, in an attempt to portray women in the political arena as no more effective than bickering schoolgirls. The catfight is one product of the backlash that occurred in response to the gains the women’s movement had made in the 1960s and early 70s; to counter the political gains that women were achieving, the belittling image of the catfight took center stage as a way to render women competing on the political stage as ineffectual.

Despite such damaging consequences of the pervasive image of the catfight, academic research surrounding this cultural phenomenon virtually does not extend beyond the field of evolutionary psychology. There has been a recent upsurge in non-academic contributions to the interest surrounding women and competition, with the publication of such books as *Woman’s Inhumanity to Woman* (2001), *Mean Girls Grown Up: Adult Women Who are Still Queen Bees, Middle Bees, and Afraid-to Bees* (2005), and *Tripping the Prom Queen: The Truth About Women and Rivalry* (2006). However most of these works, including Leora Tanenbaum’s 2002 work *Catfight: Women and Competition*, address the catfight by name only, or as a less-than-serious term to be applied to women in the media and on reality television shows. Only cultural historian Susan Douglas, whose work *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (1992) includes the chapter “E.R.A. as Catfight,” takes on the political and cultural implications of the catfight. This book has been largely influential in my own broader examination of the catfight

as a damaging caricature of female competition.

Before examining the political and cultural implications of the catfight, it is important to first establish the identifying factors of a catfight. That is, what makes such an altercation not just a fight, but specifically a catfight? Who is typically involved in a catfight? What is being fought about in a catfight? What does a catfight look like? The answers to these questions confirm the existence of the catfight as a specific, culturally identified image with the potential to dehumanize women and inhibit their political and social power.

### **Origins of the Catfight**

The origins of the catfight in popular culture can be traced back surprisingly far in terms of the word's etymological history. The *Oxford English Dictionary* finds that the use of the term to describe a fight between women in particular first occurred in 1854, when it was included in *Utah and the Mormons: The History, Government, Doctrines, Customs, and Prospects of the Latter-Day Saints, from Personal Observation During a Six Months' Residence at Great Salt Lake City*, a detailed account by Benjamin G. Ferris. Chapter XVIII, addressing "Social Intercourse" of Mormon doctrines, describe the procedures of the infamous Mormon social practice of polygamy, in particular the style of house building that best facilitates this practice. Ferris notes that homes were to be built in order to separate the different wives of a household, in order to "keep the women...as much as possible, apart, and prevent those terrible cat-fights which sometimes occur, with all the accompaniments of Billingsgate [vulgar and coarse language], torn caps, and broken broom-sticks" (308). This explanation is notably followed up by a description of a typical catfight between two Mormon women over their husband as a part of the "Amusing Scenes Growing out of Polygamy" (Ferris 309). Even as early as 1854, the idea of two women fighting, notably over a man, was regarded as simply an "amusing" image, rather than as a demonstration of power or strength typically associated with a fight.

Writing over a century later, in her critique of the mass media's effect on women, Douglas provides a working definition of the widely popularized image of the catfight as "a staple of American pop culture" in the 1970s (221). Surprisingly, the early description of "those terrible cat-fights which sometimes occur" such as ripped

clothing and “broken broom-sticks” ring true with Douglas’ analysis a century later. By the 1970s, she writes, the catfight

had evolved into various forms of especially sloppy faux combat between women, like female mud wrestling or Jell-O wrestling. In its purest form, it features two women, one usually a traditional wife (blond), the other a grasping, craven careerist (brunette), who slug it out on a veranda, in a lily pond, or during a mudslide. Usually they fight over men or children. Sometimes, as in *The Turning Point*, they just hit each other with their little purses. Other times, as in the incessant catfights in *Dynasty*, Krystle got to slop a big, gushy glob of cold cream in Alexis’s face, or Alexis got to throw pond scum down Krystle’s blouse. (221-22)

Douglas’ description of the image of the catfight here is interesting because it brings together many of the problematic aspects of the catfight that have come to define what makes a recognizable catfight: sloppy, ineffectual, eroticized fighting between women for stereotypically “feminine” reasons. These defining characteristics are evidence for the effect of backlash on the images of women in the media, particularly women who are attempting to gain power; as the women’s movement attempted to give women more autonomy in their lifestyle choices, this gain in women’s power became portrayed as a caricatured struggle between the “grasping, craven careerist” and the “traditional wife.” These and other factors have become more and more extremely caricatured in later representations of catfights throughout American culture. Clearly the catfight had become no less “amusing” by the 1970s as its first recorded reference to women’s fighting in 1854.

### **Defining Characteristics of the Catfight**

The most obvious defining characteristic of the catfight is that it only occurs between women. Both Ferris’ brief mention of catfights in Mormon communities and Douglas’ extensive description not only include specific references to women, but they also refer to such typically female-associated items as “broom-sticks,” “little purses,” “cold cream,” and “blouse[s]” as standard props of a catfight. Items

such as these help further establish the catfight as a distinctively female practice that is inconsequential and “amusing.”

Besides including only women, another defining aspect of the catfight that Douglas almost immediately points to in her definition is the fact that, while catfighting is, technically, “fighting,” it is defined by “especially sloppy faux combat.” This characteristic is a critical determining factor of what can be classified as a catfight because of the implication that a catfight is most definitely not a demonstration of strength. Catfight, as a verb, is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “To have a vicious fight or altercation; spec. (of women) to fight in a vicious, cat-like manner, esp. by scratching, pulling hair, and biting.” This definition particularly focuses on the nature of the actual physicality of catfighting, and notably includes such ineffectual motions as “scratching, pulling hair, and biting,” which actually have little relation to the more physically aggressive and effective features of a typical fight—that is, a *male* fight.

Unlike most instances of male fighting, female fighting is regarded as amusing; catfights are characterized as humorous rather than valiant. For example, the television show *Saturday Night Live*, featured in one of its most recent episodes Madonna and Lady Gaga singing together. Fueled by the popular media’s belief that a multi-generational rivalry is occurring between these two highly successful (and often controversial) female singers, the sketch featured the women first appearing to sing and dance in unison, but then pull each other’s hair and slap each other, before collapsing to the floor in attempts to fight each other. The audience laughs as the male “host” of the sketch cannot control the women, despite his imploring them, “Behave, bitches!” (“Deep House Dish”). As seen here, catfights are purely amusing, and most often it is men doing the laughing. While men may be seen to fight in order to become heroic and victorious, there is no equivalent outcome of most catfights. In fact, the catfight attempts to debunk women’s alleged increase in power. What is the goal of a solid woman-on-woman scratching and hair-pulling session? The answer to that question lies in another defining characteristic of the catfight.

Most catfights are staged for male attention and satisfaction, as Jerry Seinfeld points out in his explanation of why catfights are so appealing to men. The eroticization of female violence has contributed deeply

to the development of the catfight as a cultural phenomenon, and is a major factor in the problematic nature of the catfight. Mainstream depictions of catfighting, such as on episodes of the 1980s television show *Dynasty* that Douglas cites, almost always include erotic and overtly sexual aspects.

For example, a highly sexual catfight took center stage during the 2003 NFL Playoffs when a Miller Lite advertisement featuring a catfight aired. The ad opens with two women—notably, as Douglas predicts, a blond and a brunette—arguing over the best reason to drink Miller Lite beer. This already asinine argument then escalates into a full-fledged catfight as the women get up from the table and slap and claw at each other while grunting and moaning suggestively. They continue wrestling and end up in a pool, tearing each other's clothes off until they are both only in their bras and underwear. The commercial ends with the scantily clad women falling into a pit of wet cement while locked together in a physical embrace, reminiscent of the example of mud wrestling Douglas identifies as a prime stage for a catfight in the 1970s (“Miller Light: Catfight”).

This advertisement can immediately be defined as a catfight because it portrays a fight comprised of two women, whose actions are physically ineffectual for fighting. This advertisement was, in fact, creatively titled, “Catfight,” and Miller Lite proceeded to produce and air three more spots in this series of ads based on the premise that catfights are sexy for men. The ad is almost a parody of the sexual implications of catfights, as the overtly sexual visual and auditory imagery repeatedly—and pointedly—occurs from beginning to end. Their orgasmic grunts as they fight each other undeniably implicate the women in a sexually suggestive scene, and the fact that they end up not only in a pool, but a pit of wet cement, seems to be an attempt of the advertisers to parody the ridiculousness of the scene. The women are thin, tan, and conventionally “beautiful,” with long, straight hair, and the near-immediate removal of their clothing in the process of the fight is purposefully staged for the sexual arousal of heterosexual men. It is already clear that this ad is catering to a male audience, as the ad was designed to be aired during NFL playoffs. Unlike the typical narrative of male athletes participating in heroic combat on the football field taken very seriously by advertisers and spectators alike, the ad shows a

contrasting view of women's fighting as merely amusing. In addition, the ad's purposeful depiction of the highly sexualized nature of the women's fight makes it indicative of this key aspect of the catfight in today's culture.

Catfights are almost always sexy, another belittling characteristic of the image of the catfight as a production of the backlash against women's perceived gain of power by the 1970s. Even in her relatively short list of catfight examples, Douglas includes the instance of "Alexis [getting] to throw pond scum down Krystle's blouse," which implies that this particular image was obviously a production choice designed to appeal to the American male fascination with breasts. Additionally, the prevalence of pornography featuring catfights highlights the sexual nature of the catfight. Typical Internet searches for information about catfights will most often first yield a variety of explicit websites and videos offering "hot catfights" for the purpose of sexual entertainment. The overwhelming instances of sexualized women within the context of catfights points to the fact that female competition almost immediately becomes understood as an erotic performance for men. The fact that the sexual image of a fight between two scantily clad women is "every man's fantasy" has greatly contributed to the development of the catfight as a cultural phenomenon.

### **Political and Cultural Implications of the Catfight**

The image of the catfight functions as a caricature of female competition that undermines women's credibility, as well as their humanity. This caricature reflects the obsession our culture has with competition between women. As professor of gender studies Susan Shapiro Barash notes in the introduction to her 2006 book, *Tripping the Prom Queen: The Truth About Women and Rivalry*, "Not only [are] numerous movies and TV shows structured around this ever-fascinating theme but the media [seem] to report endlessly on feuds, competitions, and catfights between famous women in entertainment, business, and politics...few stories [are] as popular as two women competing over the same man" (16). The catfight image in particular has very real roots in a patriarchal culture that profits from keeping women subordinated, and it has dangerous potential for the future of women in every arena from political status to their relationships with each other. The catfight is a key piece of symbolism that perpetuates and maintains a culture

that frames women as constantly in competition with each other -- and therefore unable to compete effectively with men.

Literary scholar Sianne Ngai discusses competitiveness within marginalized groups briefly as part of article "Competitiveness: from *Sula* to *Tyra*." Though her work primarily focuses on the existence and implication of female rivalries in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, she also devotes a few words to a broader examination of women's competition in society at large from a feminist perspective. She explains, "There should be no agonistic rivalry between You and I, feminism says, when we so badly need to make an Us to counter Them" (113). Her statement points out the importance of combating the catfight culture for the sake of feminist progress. She goes on to explicate the implication of competitiveness within the "You and I" framework she introduced:

And when disharmony or conflict arises between You and I (as it inevitably does), what we need to be especially alert to is whether that conflict is serving their profit or amusement: a dilemma allegorized in the "battle royal" that opens Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1950), in which the African American narrator is made to fight another African American boy to the hoots of the white men in the audience. (113-4)

The African American men participating in this "battle royal" are members of a marginalized group being taken advantage of for the amusement of those white men in power. This example can be likened to the implications of the catfight on women as a marginalized group. Reducing competition between women to nothing more than ineffectual, sexy catfights for the primary purpose of entertaining men has dangerous implications for women. Women are no longer taken seriously as competitors (or otherwise), thus further entrenching them in the catfight culture as objects of male amusement. Indeed, as Ngai explains, the catfight "belittles the seriousness of conflicts between women by implying a gaze for whom all are *equally* reducible to entertainment" (114). No woman can be recognized for her strength or seriousness when *all* women are constantly disparaged by the imagery of the catfight culture.

Late 20<sup>th</sup> century American culture is inundated with images of ineffectual fighting between women in the form of the catfight appearing

in the news media, television, movies, and advertisements, and the effects of this repeated image on women's collective consciousness are tangible. Women must desire to be the ultimate catfighter, the queen bee, because that is what they are told is part of being a successful, desired woman in today's society. In perfecting the art of the catfight, women become unwitting players in the perpetuation of a social stereotype that actually works to keep women from attempting collective political action. Additionally, it provides yet another limited (and limiting) cultural view of women as weak—furthering the dominant patriarchal ideal that men are superior to women. Examining the implications of the catfight image in terms of its particular defining characteristics shows how the image is, by its very nature, damaging to women as an already marginalized group. Tanenbaum explains, "It seems to me that the stereotype of the competitive female gains cultural force as women accrue social power, because the more power we have, the more threatening we become" (31). This, of course, is a key point. Women's power is threatening, so how can it be contained? By making it seem ineffectual, by making it into pointless entertainment for men, and most importantly, by encouraging women to use it against each other

The immediate implication of the prevalence of the image of the catfight is that it perpetuates the stereotype of women as naturally overly competitive. This is a particularly damaging effect of the catfight being such a firmly engrained part of American culture. Dalton explains that, even from a young age, "we are literally surrounded by examples of unhealthy female rivalry. Some of our earliest experiences are impacted by images of women competing in an unhealthy manner, and certainly not collaborating" (350). Dalton points to such fairy tales as *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Rapunzel*, which are presented to girls as stories of ideal women (often some of the first role models girls develop) who are embroiled in intense female rivalry. "Success in these fairy tales," Dalton notes, "is ultimately defined in terms whereby one woman gains via the losses of other women" (350). Through this narrative, girls learn that the acceptable mode of behavior for women among each other is not cooperation, but competition, and the stereotype of women as naturally competitive is reinforced. These stories inform girls that the evil stepmother and the ugly stepsisters

will naturally stand in the way of their happiness as they grow up, so they come to expect other women as obstacles.

Images of competitiveness between women blanket essentially all aspects of American culture today. Even beyond fairy tales, a recent Internet search reveals plenty about catfight culture today. Indeed, the most up-to-the-minute information about the status of the catfight phenomenon in today's culture can be found on the Internet, and there is no denying that catfight culture is indeed alive and well there. Clearly, the damaging potential of the image of the catfight, coupled with its prevalence throughout American culture, reveals how extremely problematic the catfight is. This image has created a culture of competitiveness that women must constantly work to overcome if they are to be taken seriously. Because the catfight has such cultural weight as an image that is readily applied to all women, the common traits of that image are important mechanisms by which dangerous stereotypes are perpetuated. In addition to the prevalence of the catfight, the very traits that have come to characterize that image have dangerous implications in themselves.

### **Catfights in Mainstream Media**

More than any other aspect of the catfight in today's culture, the catfight's sexually arousing potential is exploited for numerous purposes. The phenomenon of catfighting as erotic entertainment for straight men is widely documented throughout the Internet, television, film, and even pornography.

On numerous websites such as [catfightsdump.com](http://catfightsdump.com), [catfightcentral.com](http://catfightcentral.com), [catfight.org](http://catfight.org), [catfightfilms.com](http://catfightfilms.com), [catfighttheatre.com](http://catfighttheatre.com), [latincatfight.com](http://latincatfight.com) and [fightingfelines.com](http://fightingfelines.com), web users are overwhelmingly presented with catfighting as highly sexual, even pornographic. So many websites act as sources of catfights as pornography that it would be hard to believe the catfight can be interpreted in any other way. These sites advertise such promises on their page descriptions as, "CATFIGHT THEATER is a catfight movie lovers dream. With sexy models in the sleazy and glamorous world of catfighting" ("Welcome"). Or users are welcomed to "a website of classy women wearing various types of lingerie catfighting!" ("Catfight City"). Venturing onto either of these pages (and many others) will lead a viewer to an abundance of videos and images of objectified women fighting with each other by pulling

hair, scratching, and even biting each other. The interpretation of the catfight as sexy and gratifying for men is hardly uncommon on the Internet, and helps reveal one of the most problematic implications of the image of the catfight for women; the portrayal of catfights as sexy further contributes to idea that women's competition is not a serious subject but is purely entertainment for men.

In the 1980s, before catfights could be found all over the Internet in obviously pornographic form, they were offered on primetime television. *Dynasty*, a television show about a wealthy Colorado oil family, was ABC's answer to the highly popular *Dallas* series on CBS. The show, which lasted nine seasons from 1981 until 1989, is remembered for the frequent catfights between the main male character's current and former wives. *Dynasty* has become a widely recognizable source of the popularization of the catfight.

Perhaps the most famous catfight of all time occurred in season three, episode 24 called "The Cabin," which aired in 1983. In this episode, Alexis (a brunette) approaches Krystle (a blonde) about what Krystle has done to "alienate her daughter from her." The verbal argumentation continues in the context of the women's children and husbands, and the fight escalates into a full-fledged catfight when Alexis mocks Krystle's infertility. With the rallying cry of "You bitch!" , Krystle pushes Alexis into a lily pond. Both women become completely submerged in the water, which works to both prevent the women from being able to effectively fight each other and adds an element of sexuality. In the pond, the women can no longer move as quickly or decisively, and their soaking wet clothes cling to them suggestively. The women slap each other and jump on top of each other, and Alexis even spends a surprisingly long time hitting Krystle with her hat. The catfight ends when the male character, Blake, observes Krystle and Alexis fighting as he drives by the pond in his limo. When this male character is introduced to the scene, the camera angle is from the vantage point of the limo and viewers see how the catfight how looks to Blake's eyes. The long angle is voyeuristic, as viewers seem to be covertly spying on Krystle and Alexis splashing in the lily pond, hearing their distant shouts without being close enough to rightly discern if they are, in fact, having sex. The "peeping Tom" perspective of the scene startlingly suggests that this fight occurs

for the pleasure of the male gaze. As he gets out of his limo, Blake demands to know what is going on and, as if the women were no more than girls fighting in a schoolyard, he sternly scolds them. “No matter what the provocation is,” Blake reprimands Krystle, “I will not have my wife acting this way...Like a couple of female mudwrestlers,” (“Dynasty”).

The entirety of this scene suggests that the women are fighting for completely inconsequential reasons, as they are scolded for engaging in a fight at all. Rather than if two male characters were brawling, for which they would most likely be praised, Krystle and Alexis are clearly posed here as objects of male desire who are not capable of “real” fighting. Most importantly, this fight takes place in a lily pond for gratuitous eroticism for a male audience. This infamous *Dynasty* catfight scene emphasizes the catfight’s dehumanizing potential as a limited and limiting framework in which female fighting must be viewed, and further works to contain women’s competition as sexy. The scene in particular ultimately functions to uphold patriarchal authority by not only gratifying erotic interest, but also by presenting the man in the scene as a father figure, positioned above the women’s ridiculous combat.

A more overtly sexual catfight occurs on the big screen in the 1996 film *Two Days in the Valley*, starring Teri Hatcher (as Becky Foxx) and Charlize Theron (as Helga Svelgen). In this catfight scene, Helga appears as a platinum blonde dressed in a white spandex outfit, and Becky is a brunette wearing athletic shorts and loose-fitting sweatshirt. The fight takes place in the close quarters of a hotel room, and the conversation is largely sexual and centered on Becky’s ex-husband cheating on her. The two women are having an obviously heated discussion that escalates when Theron tells Becky, “Now lower your voice, you little bitch.” Becky responds, “What did you call me?” and Helga nonchalantly says, “a bitch?” Helga next attacks Becky’s treatment of her ex-husband and tells her that she “deserved alimony,” a pointed attack on her status as a good wife. The dramatic nature of this argument is heightened by frequent quick switches in camera shots from Becky to Helga’s faces and rising music in the background.

The heated verbal argument becomes physical upon Helga’s statement that Becky’s husband cheated on her because she “couldn’t

even satisfy him in bed.” The physical fight (accompanied by loud rock music) consists of mainly punches, kicks, and the use of props (throwing each other into hotel tables and dressers, smashing a glass vase into the face, etc.). But the climax of this catfight occurs notably on the hotel room’s bed, on which the women wrestle with each other for a gun. The undoubtedly sexual nature of this scene is confirmed by the camera’s angle in capturing the bed-wrestling scene, which is at eye-level with the women on the bed, allowing the viewer to feel as if he or she is experiencing the fight from the vantage point of the bed. It is scenes like this that contribute to an implication of the catfight as not only further objectifying women as sexual beings, but using a narrative of ridiculous sexual combat in order to further contain women’s autonomy.

### **Implications of Catfight Culture**

Catfights are not meant to be arousing for the women who are participating in them, but rather are part of a sexually arousing performance for men. Our culture’s construction of femininity is such that women have come to believe that their role they are to play is to be sexually satisfying to men. The catfight provides yet another way for women to enact a male-centric sexual narrative. This is problematic because it furthers the construction of sexuality for women determined by the male gaze. Thus, women do not determine their own sexualities, but simply perform “sexuality” in order to arouse men. The catfight becomes one of these performances because it is framed as satisfying for male sexual appeal. Women’s actual sexual autonomy is replaced with their ability to appear sexually desirable to men. The perpetuation of the catfight contributes to women no longer being able to determine their own sexuality, instead female sexuality is defined entirely by what is appealing to men, rendering men, not women, the only legitimate perspective on what constitutes female sexuality. Real sexual pleasure for women is replaced by an image of male fantasy: the catfight.

In addition to being sexy, catfighting in American culture today is also typically recognized by its comedic intent. That is, catfights typically represent women’s fighting as sloppy and, ultimately, ineffectual. Because catfights portray women as not really knowing how to fight, they are therefore amusing to watch in the attempt. The catfight image not only adds to the stereotype of women as weak,

especially in the decidedly “male” realm of fighting, but allows women to be relegated to mere objects of amusement. Women’s competition is primarily displayed in ineffectual catfights, while for men, fighting is seen as healthy competition, and an opportunity to showcase prowess and gain honor.

As compared to the perceived heroics of male combat, catfights as simply humorous further damage the cultural image of women as capable members of society. The hit primetime sitcom *Friends*, widely popular in the 1990s, involved catfights between female characters as part of its comedic storylines on multiple occasions. A particularly memorable instance of catfighting on *Friends* occurred between two of the female leads, Courtney Cox (Monica) and Jennifer Aniston (Rachel). The premise of the fight is that Rachel has started dating a man Monica likes as well. The fight escalates beyond words when Rachel flicks Monica on the forehead for interrupting her. Following the first flick, a series of flicks occur punctuated by Rachel and Monica’s purposefully child-like arguments, “Quit flicking me!” and “You flicked me first!” They then start slapping each other and screaming in high pitched voices, and the catfight culminates with the image of Rachel throwing Monica onto a couch, Monica dragging Rachel off of it by her foot, and Monica pulling off Rachel’s sock and hitting her with it (“Jennifer Anniston”).

None of the actions Rachel and Monica’s engage in as part of their catfight could possibly be considered real fighting, and neither of the women ever seem to be in pain. Additionally, the scene is obviously meant to be amusing, as evidenced by the frequent invoking of the show’s laugh track as a supplement to the women’s childish actions and vocabulary. The lack of seriousness of this fight is playing upon the widely accepted notion that catfights are funny because they are so ineffective, thus dehumanizing the women who take part in them as no more than objects of amusement.

The prevalence of catfight images in mainstream media has resulted in real-world implications of the catfight culture for women. The damaging implications of catfight images provide the groundwork for adverse political, social, and economic effects on women who are now forced to navigate their way through the cultural narrative of women’s competition.

Two major concepts that have developed as extensions of catfight culture are the stereotypes of the “mean girls” and “queen bees.” Both of these notions rely on the perceived inability of women to collaborate with one another, as a “mean girl” fights her way past others to be the most popular girl in school, and the “queen bee” pushes past other females in the workplace in order to come out on top. Catfight culture bolsters the gender norm of women as competitors even in young women, as is seen in the surge of the “mean girls” culture in the early 2000s. Girls in prime stages of the development of their identities—early adolescence—became cultural targets for continuing the damaging catfight culture. Lyn Mikel Brown and Mark B. Tappan describe the trend:

By the dawn of the new millennium...a spate of popular books defined and elevated concern about ‘mean girls.’ As is so often the case, mainstream media followed suit, and soon a series of PG-13 movies targeting adolescent girls, such as *Mean Girls* and *Bring it On*, lampooned and reified the mean girl image. It was just a matter of time before the same messages could be found on popular TV sitcoms and pseudoreality shows like *The Simple Life*, *Laguna Beach*, and *My Super Sweet 16*. (49)

Young women are not spared when it comes to the perpetuation of the damaging stereotype of women as serial catfighters—they are actually looked to as prime targets for keeping women entrenched in this limiting culture of competition. This phenomenon is also paradoxically fueled by the fact that girls, in comparison with boys, are not socialized to fight or deal with conflict assertively. As Sarah Gibbard Cook notes, girls are informed by their environment to engage in non-confrontational aggression: “A boy who gets mad at another boy punches him out. A girl gathers her girlfriends around and whispers. They point fingers. They exclude and ostracize” (25). This particular version of competition that girls are encouraged to participate in is brought to the forefront and exaggerated by the “mean girls” seen in movies and on television. As a result, young women are presented with a specific narrative to invoke as they engage with other young women: that of mean girls. Barash describes the environment that many adolescent girls inhabit as, “a snakepit of

backbiting, competitiveness, and unbridled rivalry” and “the one place in our society where female competition, envy, and jealousy are readily acknowledged” (66). This image is regularly invoked when discussing young women in middle and high school, leaving little room for any other mode of interaction to develop between young women. The limited and limiting framework provided by the cultural narrative of mean girls disparages the autonomy of young women and allows them to be seen as pawns in the catfight culture.

As women get older, the pervasive image of the catfight is no less damaging. Having been encouraged from a young age to compete with each other, the stakes are raised as women enter adulthood and the catfights now occur in the workplace, in competition for “queen bee” status. Dalton defines queen bees as “women who achieve success and then affectively build a moat around themselves rather than build bridges to enable and mentor other women” (350). This queen bee phenomenon can be seen as an extension of the catfight culture encouraging women to compete with each other in all stages of life, with equally tangible implications of such a culture that encourages—and is entertained by—women competing with each other. As Dalton notes of this cultural development, “Based on a belief, deserved or not, that women have taken rivalry to a near art form, the tactics women employ as they compete in the workplace have been designated as far more brutal than those typically engaged in by men” (350). Women have already been implicated as overly competitive with other women by the cultural narrative of the catfight, and this perception has fostered the belief that, in order to succeed in the workplace, women will engage in “brutal tactics” as they seek queen bee status. Going hand in hand with Dalton’s observation, Cheryl Dellasega writes in her book *Mean Girls Grow Up: Adult Women Who are Still Queen Bees, Middle Bees, and Afraid-to-Bees*, “In an odd paradox, today’s women are often encouraged to ‘go for the gold,’ but to do it like a lady” (37). In other words, because society does not allow women to compete in the same realm of men, as they are designated to a specific narrative of female competition, they must seek “the gold” in the only way their culture permits, by fighting other women. This expectation results in women believing they must out-compete their *female* colleagues to succeed in the workplace.

By fostering stereotypes of women as inherently competitive, catfight culture limits women's cooperative abilities. The women in Elaine's office in "The Summer of George" *Seinfeld* episode do not attempt to mediate any conflict between the two women, but rather encourage the fight between them. Similarly, the plotlines of many fairy tales do not leave any space for female characters to rely on other women to seek out Prince Charming; rather these tales present female relationships in the narrow scope of competition to be considered the "fairest in the land." The idea of women as capable of cooperating with each other has virtually been wiped from American minds as the catfight culture infiltrates so many aspects of popular culture. This lack of emphasis on women's abilities as collaborators in American culture has serious political implications for women's empowerment.

Douglas and Barash both argue that catfight culture devalues the idea of cooperation between women. As Barash writes, "The news media, TV shows, and ads nurtured this worm burrowing through the apple of sisterhood, personifying and dramatizing female competition wherever possible, erasing or simply refusing to represent (with a few exceptions) the power of female friendship, cooperation, and love" (225). When images of competitive women abound, and women as catfighters are lauded as sexy throughout all aspects of popular culture, women accept competition as the proper (culturally accepted) way of acting and strive for that ideal. The danger of this trend is exemplified by the lack of strength of the feminist movement in uplifting women from marginalized status. Tanenbaum writes, "Today, pockets of feminist activism exist, but it is generally rare to find collaboration among women as a class of people" (22). This observation locates a major consequence of the prevalence of women being pitted as competitors throughout catfight culture; as long as women are confined to exist in the narrow realm of catfight culture, the public allows women no space to operate as collaborators.

The catfight culture has made sure that the concept of sisterhood is no longer an ideal that holds much sway in the minds of today's women. As feminist bell hooks notes, "We are taught that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience. We are taught that women are 'natural' enemies, that solidarity will never exist because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another" (43). This

conception that women have of their fellow women is dangerous not just to our relationships with each other, but also to the greater goals of feminism. The normalization of images of women fighting with each other has destroyed any notion of trust or possible collaboration between women, and as a result, utterly inhibited any form of political advancement for women collectively. Especially considering the tenuous nature of feminism among women in American society today, this is a particularly dangerous implication of the catfight culture.

Rather than the idea of collectivism, the American ideal of individualism is presented to women in particular as an extremely desirable quality. This particular tenet of American society aligns well with the catfight culture, as it keeps women focused on their own, individual success, and further divided from each other. Both individualism and the catfight culture work together within a patriarchal society that benefits from the subordination of women. The mantra that Douglas describes is familiar to any woman who has grown up in this society: "Each of us was special and unique; each of us had a shot at being distinctive in some way; each of us was encouraged to imagine herself as apart from the herd, as someone people somewhere, someday, would notice stood out" (224). However idealistically American this "uniqueness" might be, its potential for damaging women's social and political status is recognized by those attempting to fight women's oppression. For even as feminists writing in a later generation, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake note in their 1997 anthology, *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*, "Becoming invested in the images of individual success that are applauded by the dominant culture keeps political action from happening" (41). According to catfight culture, women should be more concerned with making themselves stand out as individuals—and with taking down female rivals attempting to achieve similar ends. As women are embroiled in this battle for individual success, encouraged to participate in catfights with other women along every step of the way, there is conveniently no space left for collaboration or collective political action. The failure of what could have been one of Second Wave Feminism's greatest achievements is therefore a perfect example of the political implications of a culturally constructed phenomenon as the catfight. Women who compete in politics may find it very difficult

to escape from being labeled catfighters. Women at the forefront of the political arena are rarely taken seriously, as they are often reduced to their clothing choices or hairstyles, rather than their ideas about policy. Catfight culture exaggerates this distinctive treatment of women in politics. Evidence of the image of the catfight negatively affecting women in politics can be seen in the portrayal of Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin in the 2008 presidential election.

While these two women were arguably the most powerful women in politics throughout the 2008 election, they were still constantly critiqued for their ability to adhere to female gender roles, with their political opinions often pushed aside or even ignored entirely. Palin and Clinton are already subjected to undue criticisms of everything from their “management styles” to their choice of designer pantsuits as a result of merely being women in the male-dominated sphere of politics. The media’s framing of their campaigns as a catfight further disparages their status as capable politicians, instead putting the focus on two women tearing each other apart for individual success. The problematic portrayal of Clinton and Palin specifically as catfighters can be seen in the presence of these two political women on the blog “The Catfight Report” (“This Month”).

This blog touts itself as “Your resource for Catfights, Female Combat, Female Wrestling, and More!” The site focuses largely on the sexual nature of catfights, and seeks to report all instances of catfights for the primary purpose of showing how sexually appealing their participants are. Enter Palin and Clinton as stars of one week’s “battle poll.” The site asks audience members to vote between Palin and Clinton to see who would win a catfight between the two, and it lays out very particular criteria with which these highly powerful political women are to be judged. The description of the “battle” reads,

Both of these women are loved and hated by many. Both of these women are chock full of ambition. And.....neither of these women are that hard to look at! However, politics aside, we want to know who the better woman is! We are not talking about the one who can speak the best, or act the best, or lie the best. We want to know who the better woman would be if these two political hellcats went one on one, toe to toe, mano a mano! (“This Month”)

This excerpt encompasses why catfights matter and have tangible implications for women being perceived as powerful and capable. Not only are the women diminished to their physical appearance, but this poll does not even care who is the better politician—the very realm in which these women are successfully making careers. Palin and Clinton, in this description, become merely toys, sexy playthings for audiences to ogle. Their accomplishments are swept away as irrelevant when they are reduced to “hellcats” fighting to be deemed the “better woman.” It would be much more difficult to imagine two male political figures being pitted in this way, but it seems disturbingly natural to present two female political figures in such a ridiculous way.

The effects of the catfight culture both in the media and on real-world women are wide reaching. The mainstream media cultivates a highly problematic image of the catfight, forcing competition between women to be portrayed as not effective or affirming, but as primarily sexy and humorous. The effects of this process extend beyond a cultural image of women’s competition, as the catfight culture problematically implicates real women in a narrative of competition that is dehumanizing and robs them of their social, economic, and political power.

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