FEMININE AND FEMINIST
TRANSFORMATION IN POPULAR CULTURE

An application of Mary Daly’s radical philosophies to Bust magazine

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Most communication research concerning women’s magazines addresses the negative implications these popular culture artifacts have on women’s identities in terms of constructing specific notions of femininity and appropriating feminist ideals. However, there has been little research on popular culture artifacts that explicitly contradict the messages of most contemporary women’s magazines. This study applies and extends radical feminist Mary Daly’s philosophical and rhetorical theories to a radically unique artifact, Bust magazine, to uncover the ways this magazine contributes to today’s feminine and feminist transformation. The application of Daly’s theoretical principles facilitates this study’s conclusion: that Bust is situated in a new space that uses humor as a means of resistance and control, and employs the power of language to combat patriarchal social control. This exploration of Bust also extends Daly’s theories to generate transformative strategies to address the specific demands of particular contexts, especially for the newest generation of young women.

KEYWORDS feminism; femininity; Mary Daly; magazines; discourse

Introduction

Contemporary women’s magazines have been accused of developing, packaging, and distributing a “cult of femininity” (Ferguson 1983, p. 5). Indeed, women’s magazines provide readers with a prescriptive method to become feminine, serving as “agents of socialization” (Ferguson 1983, p. 2) and promoting a particular ideology of the essential woman as defined by patriarchal norms of femininity. Readers can pick up the latest glossy magazine to discover that their inadequacies are sustained by the fear of lacking beauty, fashion sense, and self-confidence (McCranken 1993). Researchers have focused on the relationships among women’s identities, portrayals, and interests in women’s magazines with most findings focusing on detrimental consequences and implications of such portrayals (e.g., Durham 1999; Frith, Shaw & Cheng 2005; MacDonald 1995; Tincknell, Chambers, Van Loon & Hudson 2003).

For feminist communication scholars, it is essential to critique contemporary women’s magazines as constructions of patriarchal oppression. Patriarchy is defined as the
ideological systems, social structures, and practices created by men and reflecting male values (Wood 2003) that have both psychological and material components (Spender 1981). Specifically, hooks (2004, p. 18) argues patriarchy is a “political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior and [that they] maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence,” including the “exchange [of] submission for protection” (Lerner 1986, p. 239). Radical feminist philosopher Mary Daly (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 87) identifies patriarchy as fatherland, characterized by “oppression, repression, depression, narcissism, cruelty, racism, classism, ageism, objectification, sadomasochism, necrophilia.” Patriarchy claims a single, objective worldview defined and determined by the values, beliefs, and interests of men. Language provides the lens that makes the world comprehensible; women have learned the language of patriarchy, precluding the possibility for alternative viewpoints (Spender 1981; see also Lerner 1986).

However, feminism presents an alternative framework to patriarchy, renaming the world in relation to women (Spender 1981) in the pursuit of gender justice (Dow & Condit 2005). Daly’s (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 75) radical feminism is “the Cause of causes” that “exposes the basic model and source of all forms of oppression—patriarchy—and thus can open up consciousness to active participation in Movement, Transcendence, and Happiness.” This radical feminism allows women to disturb and disrupt the discourses over which men have had a monopoly (Clair 1998; Spender 1981), undermining the assumption that there is one, single, objective reality and highlighting the tensions and contradictions women face navigating the boundaries of multiple realities. Thus, in the study of women’s magazines, feminist scholarship in communication uncovers women’s marginalization, allowing women to reclaim language to define and redefine their lived experience.

Perusing bookstore shelves, it is nearly impossible to find popular culture texts that do not present patriarchal representations of women. In response to these missing texts, Karp and Stoller (1999) created a magazine in the early 1990s that privileged feminist ideals, targeting women frustrated with the contradictions of living up to a patriarchal feminine ideal. My goal is to discover the ways in which Bust magazine develops a counterhegemony (Kellner 1995), presenting forms of resistance; highlighting the tensions among feminine, feminist, and patriarchy; and, ultimately, contributing to today’s feminine and feminist transformation. As such, I take up Kellner’s (1995, p. 96) call to seek out and draw attention to positive “representations that help promote the struggle of the oppressed against domination.” In so doing, I uncover the ways in which Bust positions women to advance a contemporary counter-revolution through discursive practice.

A radically unique artifact demands the use of a radical theory. Radical feminist philosopher Daly provides feminist communication scholars with a philosophical and rhetorical framework that constructs the nature of the world as a duality of foreground and Background, and the relationship among language, ontology, and gender as one that can facilitate women’s liberation. Specifically, Daly (1973, 1978, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1992; Daly & Caputi 1987) calls on all women to develop the ontological courage necessary to confront and combat their alienation from their true Selves. Moreover, her rhetorical theory makes possible a critique of women’s communication from a feminist perspective (Griffin 1993) while, at the same time, her strategies provide techniques for women to begin the process of re-creating language. In this way, Daly’s ideal philosophy is put into practice in the contemporary world. Thus, when exploring opportunities for women to enact social change through discursive practice, one must consider Daly’s ontological philosophy, the
way in which she describes alienation and ontological courage, and finally the rhetorical tools and strategies Daly offers women to achieve these aims.

**Literature Review**

In this section, I describe Daly’s philosophical approach, indicate its usefulness in analyzing popular magazines, and provide a statement of my research question.

**Daly’s Philosophical and Rhetorical Approach**

*Be-speak the World into Be-ing.* Daly advocates a constitutive relationship between language and ontology to advance her arguments for women’s liberation. She “understands language as a whole, as a dialogical, transformative means of achieving a radically altered society for women” (Gray 2000, p. 231). To Daly, there is an intimate connection between the nature of Be-ing, “the constantly Unfolding Verb of Verbs” and the power of language (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 64). Language speaks the world and the woman into Be-ing, into existence, and into a process that is flexible, fluid, and radically feminine. Be-ing as the Ultimate Verb serves as a guide on the quest for gender justice.

The “verbness” of Be-ing combats an inclination to reify the Eternal Feminine of the foreground. In all her works, Daly describes “an ethical, institutional, and ontological duality that exists in society” (Foss, Foss & Griffin 1999, p. 134). The foreground is the “male-centered and mono-dimensional arena where fabrication, objectification, and alienation take place” (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 76). The idea of “being” as a noun is naturalized by language in the foreground, and this naturalization serves to marginalize women and trap them in fixed notions of femininity. Be-ing as the Ultimate Verb allows women to transcend the foreground, courageously recalling and reconsidering the idea that “Woman is in process, that women do not have a fixed, immutable nature” (Gray 2000, p. 227). This notion of woman as process be-fits the Background, the other half of Daly’s duality and “the Realm of Wild Reality” and “the Homeland of women’s Selves” where “all Other animate beings connect” (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 63). Daly’s construction of the world as duality and the implications of Be-ing as it relates to language draw attention to women’s alienation in the phallocratic foreground and the need for an ontological courage that can open the door to women’s consciousness-raising, paving the way for emancipation.

*State of animated death: alienation.* Daly (1973) articulates the hypocrisy of a universalized language or phallogrammar that alienates most people who use it. She claims that language of the foolocracy creates sex stereotypes by fostering artificial polarizations between men and women. Phallocratic ideologies normalize this bifurcation so that many women do not question prescribed feminine identifications that alienate them from their true Selves that reside in the Background. These manifestations of domination are “subtle, mundane … very deeply embedded in the psyches of [most] individuals” (Thompson 2001, p. 8). Victims of phalloglamour are fembots, or “female robots,” characterized as “the archetypal role model forced upon women throughout fatherland” (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 198). Fembots are unable to see the alienating implications of patriarchy because this social structure often takes on a life of its own (Thompson 2001). However, this alienation limits women’s freedom, creativity, and being to that defined by patriarchy.
Many women suffer through the alienation of phallogrammar and phalloglamour because they desire a sense of security and stability. This false sense of security of the foreground is brought on by the “pseudoexcitement and attractiveness of the elementary world and its products” (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 217). As a result, women are “prevented from controlling the conditions of their own existence by powerful vested interests” (Thompson 2001, p. 9). The patriarchal process of foreground feminization traps women in a *State of Animated Death*, “the beautiful, mummified state” and “the wound-up world of numbots” (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 229). Women need the courage to recognize and confront this alienation for true liberation, and they need a language that offers them the resources to do this.

**Ontological courage.** To avoid becoming a numbot, Daly (1973, p. 4) argues that women need existential and ontological courage that will allow them “to see and to be in the face of the nameless anxieties that surface when a woman begins to see through the masks of sexist society and to confront the horrifying fact of her own alienation from her authentic self” (italics in original). Confronting alienation coincides with the ability to define their own experiences. Many feminist scholars have attested to the powerful nature of discourse in constructing a reality that privileges patriarchal worldviews (e.g., Baxter 2003; Clair 1998; Lerner 1986; Spender 1981; Weedon 1987; Wood 1994). Most feminist scholars agree that women must be provided with a language that adequately illuminates their experiences and enables more productive self and everyday world constructions (Dragiewicz 2000). As a result, women must invent language to focus “attention to hidden systems, and to focus on and bring to articulation the social processes through which dominant institutions and practices were formed” (Deetz 2005, p. 102). Women’s ontological liberation, then, is the same as the liberation of language.

**Daly’s rhetorical theory.** Daly (1973, p. 8) cautions that “it would be a mistake to imagine that the new speech of women can be equated simply with women speaking men’s words.” This does not mean that women create an entirely new language but rather that liberation entails new words as well as new contexts. The new context is the context of women in the Background; it is not new to women but instead is new in the sense that language has historically evolved from men’s universalized experiences.

In *Websters’ First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, Daly (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 3) announces, “The Wickedary is a declaration that words and women have served the fathers’ sentences long enough.” Griffin (1993, p. 166) refers to Daly’s rhetorical theory as hagography: “Engaged in the process of establishing themselves as ontologically whole and credible communicators, background communicators make use of various Outrageous styles of communication.” Daly’s hagography provides a variety of eccentric, elaborate, and Elemental resources for women to reclaim language.

Daly and Caputi (1987) argue that changing the spelling of words and the context of words are ways Spell-Weavers can summon their ontological courage. This Shape-Shifting entails “transforming the physical form of a word in order to convey Super Natural meanings that have been masked and muted by man’s mysteries” (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 14). Women acknowledge the mystical power of words and the liberating magic of spelling. They breathe life into language by combating and disrupting the patriarchal contexts that force conformity. Spinning-off entails “combining parts of words or entire words, thus Realizing Other words and phrases of a heretofore unknown character” (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 17).
Finally, Daly’s (Daly & Caputi 1987) Sin-Tactics help Wickedarians dispel the controlling and limiting nature of phallogrammar, poking fun at the strict structure of a grammar that alienates and objectifies.

The Foreground Feminization of Popular Women’s Magazines

Critical research on popular women’s magazines has concentrated on the ways these texts “encode relations of power and domination, serving to advance the interests of dominant groups at the expense of others” (Kellner 1995, p. 56). Many feminist scholars have demonstrated the influence and impact of women’s magazines on the ways in which women’s identities are constructed in a patriarchal society because it is agreed that magazines “help to shape both a woman’s view of herself, and society’s view of her” (Ferguson 1983, p. 1; see also Creedon 1993; Garner, Sterk & Adams 1998; Hermes 1995; Mandziuk 2001; Smith 1993). This research has addressed the alienation that results from the contradictory messages and appropriated feminist discourse of women’s magazines in addition to some readers’ resistance strategies.

The social relations of patriarchal power found in most contemporary women’s magazines present women with contradictory notions of femininity and feminism as pseudo-liberation (McCracken 1993). For example, Zuckerman (1998) writes that Cosmopolitan advances an argument of sexual liberation, recommending that women make the most of the system as it exists. Yet Cosmo discourse calls on women to use their sex to get what they want simultaneously assuming sexual inexperience. In this way, the text in Cosmopolitan incorporates contradictions in terms of what it means to be a “fun, fearless female” (Machin & Thornborrow 2003, p. 465). The Cosmogirl is constructed as having agency to get what she wants but naive when it comes to getting a man. She is essentially alienated from her true Self by Cosmo discourse. This blending of contradictions is problematic in that fundamental feminist tenets such as independence and agency are arguably appropriated by this popular magazine to present a patriarchal prescribed feminism that is used against women (Dow 1992).

Consequently, feminist scholars are increasingly concerned with the use of feminist ideals against feminism itself (Dow 1992; Durham 1999; Lotz 2003). By printing readers’ letters that are critical of the negative representations of women in its magazine, Vogue is able to use controversy to appropriate feminist ideals (McCracken 1993). Printing letters critical of the magazine is consistent with Vogue’s insistence that its readers are intelligent, educated, and analytical; the contradiction lies in the fact that while projecting these positive attributes, Vogue presents fantasies of women rooted in patriarchal consumption (McCracken 1993). This appropriation is a type of plastic feminism or manmade pseudofeminism (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 217) that reinforces a dominant, patriarchal discourse.

Some studies address the role of a community of women in dealing with an individual’s perception and understanding of mass media constructions of femininity (Lueck 2004). This notion of community is inherent in Daly’s (1973) philosophies and essential in building women’s consciousness-raising and resistance. For example, Park (2005) recommended a community discourse to combat the social pressure to be thin produced largely by the mass media, and Durham (1999) reconceptualized a theory of resistance to popular media discourse that is rooted in feminist praxis and activism, offering a communal based approach to resistance that is consistent with women’s consciousness-raising efforts.
Summary and Statement of Research Question

Most women's magazines contain alienating and oppressive representations of women through contradictions, use of feminism against itself, and arguments for communal resistance. Prior research has criticized the naturalization of ideological positions and the reproduction of patriarchal representations (Kellner 1995). However, an avenue that has not been explored is the critique of a unique popular culture artifact that explicitly disputes these patriarchal manifestations, working to present a feminist ideal that is neither appropriated nor undermined. Reading media culture politically embodies both the feminist ideal of reflexivity as well as positions feminist scholars to argue for social change (Kellner 1995; Thompson 2001). While there have been historical accounts of the evolution of other feminist magazines as well as assessments of their readers (Hermes 1995; Smith 1993; Zuckerman 1998), communication scholars have yet to critically explore a popular culture feminist text like Bust magazine.

Furthermore, Daly's rhetorical strategies have been used infrequently. The use of feminist rhetorical perspectives to assess women's communication "would enable scholars to develop theories that better explain women's experiences and eloquence, challenging, if necessary, current knowledge about communication" (Griffin 1993, p. 158). To this end, Griffin (1993, p. 172) used Daly's strategies to analyze Ursula LeGuin's "A Left-Handed Commencement Address" and uncover LeGuin's "rhetorical journey into the Background." Zavalkoff (2004) also employed Daly's theories to argue that the way humans interact with both oral and written communication can have profound effects on our communities. Finally, Dragiewicz (2000) utilized Daly's theories to illuminate sexual harassment discourse and the use of language in maintaining existing power relations. These authors provide examples of the utility of Daly's rhetorical strategy as it destabilizes language and allows women to reconceive language (Gray 2000).

In light of current research on women's magazines as well as the usefulness of Daly's radical strategy, my research question is (RQ): How does the language in a popular feminist magazine contribute to today's feminist and feminine transformation?

Method

Texts

Bust is a women's magazine for an 18 to 34 year-old audience. Each issue is approximately 120 pages in length and contains roughly thirty articles including six features, an editor's letter, and letters to the editor. The magazine's statement of purpose reads,

With an attitude that is fierce, funny, and proud to be female, Bust provides an uncensored view on the female experience. Bust tells the truth about women's lives and presents a female perspective on pop culture. Busting stereotypes about women since 1993. ("About Bust" 2006)

The magazine also encourages support of advertisers with this statement:

Bust is a groundbreaking women's lifestyle magazine that is unique in its ability to connect with bright, cutting-edge young women. With an attitude that is fierce, funny, and proud to be female, Bust's revolutionary editorial mix addresses a refreshing variety of women's
interests, including pop culture, music, crafting, fashion, sex, news, and celebrity interviews. Hip, humorous, and honest, *Bust* is a cheeky celebration of all things female and a trusted authority on up-and-coming trends among young women. *Bust* has proven its ability to unite advertisers with a serious purchasing audience. To reach the highly sought after market of intelligent, creative, influential, and socially conscious individuals on women’s issues, you can’t do better than *Bust* Magazine, *Bust*.com and live *Bust* events. (“Advertise in *Bust*” 2006)

While the format of this magazine is similar to foreground women’s magazines, *Bust* co-founders wanted to create something that would appeal to women in ways that *Vogue* and *Cosmo* could not, by representing new-wave feminist concerns and goals in a humorous, down-to-earth way. These concerns addressed the contradictions and irony for those women who were "nearing or past thirty, still in dating hell … not knowing how to cook … not having any savings, and hearing the TICK TICK TICK of our goddamned biological clocks" (Karp & Stoller 1999, p. xi). The authors felt let down when they realized that their lived experience did not coincide with a traditional feminine framework that required them to marry and have children with their first boyfriend (Karp & Stoller 1999). At the time, *Ms.* magazine was one of the only mainstream outlets for feminist concerns. However, its articles primarily addressed political, social, and cultural issues with a scholarly focus (Zuckerman 1998). *Bust* co-founders did not want to create *Ms.* magazine for juniors, but rather a magazine using the language and ideals that came directly from their readers, and that would inspire future generations of feminists to come (Karp & Stoller 1999). The editors add, we “wanted to create a place where girls of all ages could let their voices be heard, in all their fierce, funny, feminist glory. Thus the idea for *Bust* was born” (Karp & Stoller 1999, p. xii).

**Procedures**

In 2005, *Bust* shifted from a quarterly to a bi-monthly magazine, significantly increasing the number of issues per year. With this increase, *Bust* also updated its appearance, changing fonts and adding more pictures and more sections on do-it-yourself crafts (Stoller 2005a, p. 6). I analyzed all issues from 2005 and 2006 as years of change for *Bust* magazine to include a broader range of the most current issues. In addition, my analysis concentrated on texts and sections that are consistently included in each issue although occasionally I highlight examples from feature articles that contribute to this analysis. Although images and advertising are essential components of women’s magazines (Inness 1999), a thorough analysis of images and advertising in *Bust* was beyond the scope of this study. My data gathering technique consisted of multiple readings of each issue, applying Daly’s rhetorical theories in an iterative fashion. I consistently revisited the texts, highlighting and taking notes on the statements, words, and discourse that were representative of Daly’s strategies for feminine and feminist transformation.

**Results and Interpretation**

In response to my question about the ways in which a popular feminist magazine facilitates feminist and feminine transformation through language, I found three themes. First, *Bust* is positioned in a New Space for women, on the borders of the Background and
foreground that directly impacts the topics addressed and the language used. Second, *Bust* employs a sarcastic sense of humor as a resistance strategy to foreground alienation and feminization while simultaneously enacting a form of feminist control. Finally, *Bust* affirms the power of language as a means of retaliation against foreground social control.

**New Space**

*Bust* is a New Space for women, a “Space on the Boundary of patriarchal institutions” and “created by women which provides real alternatives to the archetypal roles of fatherland” (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 84). This location impacts the magazine’s title as well as topic selection for each issue. This location also highlights the tensions of navigating this Space on the Boundary. The title *Bust* becomes a *New Word*, “not ‘new’ in the old sense (materially) but New in a New sense, having different meanings” (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 85). As a noun, *bust* is “a sculptured representation of the upper part of the human figure including the head and neck and usually part of the shoulders and breast”; and as a verb, *bust* is “to break or smash especially with force; also: to make inoperative b: to bring an end to” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary 2005).

*Bust* as a title of a feminist magazine, with the mantra “for women with something to get off their chests,” represents the naturalness of women’s bodies. A key element of each issue is addressing the naturalness and variety of women’s shapes and sizes. For instance, the February/March 2006 issue interviewed Ditto (2006) from the band Gossip on “Livin’ Large.” The *Bust* Boobtique, the magazine’s online store, has been criticized by readers for “hating on the fat chicks.” However, larger sizes were immediately added to their merchandise (Meire 2006, p. 7). This focus on women’s bodies is not only about being comfortable in your size, but also being comfortable in your skin and your own female desires. Stoller (2006b, p. 6) adds, “Being sexual has nothing to do with how you look, and everything to do with what you like.”

While the magazine incorporates empowering sexual discourse, it resists any oppressive patriarchal sexuality. In this way, the title of the magazine also signifies women’s ability to breakthrough, disrupt, and end the objectification and alienation of the foreground. Rather than resisting contradictory notions of femininity in contemporary women’s magazines, *Bust* explicitly presents a multiplicity of women in their fierce, funny, and feminist glory. In this way, *Bust* contributes to women’s Be-ing. For example, the first 2005 issue highlights skateboarding moms (Cruz 2005, p. 16) and a female fashion designer who uses “flexible designs, a fabric that ‘forgives,’ and a love of all shapes feminine” (Cohen 2005, p. 40). The “Fashion Nation” section of each issue asks ordinary women to describe their style presenting their responses next to their image. Daly (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 198) defines foreground fashion as “a primary means by which phallocratic fixers fix, tame, and train women for their own designs” attempting to “destroy female consciousness, embedding contagious anxieties and cravings, trying to trap women in houses of correction.” Yet, this section of *Bust* uncovers the ways in which women can co-opt foreground fashion to reclaim a fashionable femininity. Women featured describe fashion as emotional and what’s on the inside (Stoller 2006a); describe a desire to not be constrained by fashion rules (Stoller 2006c); and most wear vintage, a combination of inexpensive and expensive, and/or their own designs. Thus, as a New Word, the title inspires women to develop the ontological courage to foreground feminization.

*Bust* addresses what it is like to operate in this New Space on the margins between the Background and the foreground. Feminist media often attempt to facilitate change by
communicating their own understandings of what feminist politics entail (Smith 1993), and in the case of *Bust* it entails successfully managing Background identities with communication in the foreground. For example, the October/November 2005 issue features an article called “The Breast Defense,” the fight many moms are taking on “to make breastfeeding part of public life” (Hight 2005, p. 14). To these lactivists, the American public is sending a contradictory message similar to that expressed in many contemporary women’s magazines: in the foreground, using women’s bodies for sex is okay but using women’s bodies for nourishment is not. The February/March 2005 issue highlights the women who co-founded RightRides, a volunteer organization that presents an alternative for women in need of a ride on a Saturday night to avoid the dangers of walking home alone and the expense of cab fare (Boldenow 2005, p. 16). Finally, the June/July 2005 issue interviews the founder of Hard Hatted Women, a support group for women “working in fields where they are seen more as novelty acts than as coworkers—think construction, manufacturing, and trucking” (Miller 2005, p. 16). What began as a group where women could discuss their specifically gendered personal experiences on the job, evolved into a broad-based organization that offers job training and placement programs. Each of these examples presents a project that developed into a structured New Space as women began communicating about their situations. These three examples are indicative of *Bust* topics that feature women’s navigation of foreground/Background boundaries.

Section titles throughout the magazine have been reconsidered in an effort to create a language that illuminates this New Space. To begin this transformation, the names of consistent sections in each issue of *Bust* playfully shift foreground definitions to accommodate Background concerns. Some of the regulars include “Broadcast,” a section announcing the accomplishments of women across the country, combining the English definition of “broadcast” and reclaiming a slang term for woman, “broad” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary 2006), to create something new. “She-bonics” provides a space for declarations “out of the mouths of babes,” most of which articulate foreground frustrations. And the “Real Life” section includes crafts, cooking, home, and health, describing a Background reality that many *Bust* readers can relate to.

Finally, *Bust* is a New Space in terms of its professional location and identity. A visiting female editor was amazed at the difference between working at *Bust* and working for foolocracies run by snools of the fatherland (Daly & Caputi 1987): “One of the best things about working here has been coming to a female-friendly work place where the environment and material not only eerily address whatever else is going on in my life, but also inspire me” (Callahan 2005, p. 6). This all-female staff has incorporated male interns in the past “but they usually want to instantly be promoted to boss and never seem to last for more than a day” (Stoller 2005d, p. 6). In terms of space in career discourse, men are more likely than women to be in core positions within an organization (Buzzanell & Lucas 2006). As a New Space, *Bust* combats this patriarchal norm by maintaining an all-female staff including a female editor, publishers, and creative director. This separatist dimension of feminism gives *Bust* control over its own ideas and words to avoid appropriation and cooptation (Smith 1993). *Bust* is also in a New Space in the sense that it is situated in the middle of what some consider the feminist magazine triumvirate which includes *Ms.*, *Bust*, and *Bitch* (Williams 2005). While all three magazines are feminist in nature, *Bust* is the most similar to contemporary women’s magazines in terms of layout, appearance, and amount of advertising. *Bust* is also sometimes characterized as a blend of the other two or at least one of the only feminist popular culture magazines.
Humor as Means of Resistance and Control

The popular image of a feminist is one lacking a sense of humor (Walker 1988). The role of women is to laugh at men’s jokes, even when women are the butt of those jokes. MacDonald (1995, p. 58) concedes that “although women are acknowledged to be capable of bitingly acerbic wit and hilarious mimicry in the private sphere,” public displays of humor are not in keeping with the traditional notion of femininity. However, feminist humor does exist and can be employed as a form of resistance against women’s current cultural situation (Walker 1988). Daly (1978, p. 17) adds, “Hags can cackle and roar at themselves, but more and more, one hears them roaring at the reversal that is patriarchy, that monstrous jock’s joke.” In this way, feminist humor addresses “the very absurdity of the culture’s views and expectations of women, and by so doing would make clear that it is not women who are ridiculous (in the sense of being easy targets for ridicule), but the culture that has subjugated them” (Walker 1988, p. 143).

*Bust* be-laughingly employs humorous tactics throughout every issue. This humor works to resist patriarchal norms while at the same time exhibits a sort of feminist control. Indeed, *Bust* is a *Labrys* “that cuts through the double binds and doublebinding words of patriarchy” (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 142). To begin with resistance, the “News from a Broad” section, a consistent feature in each issue, directs readers to the hypocrisy, foolocracy, and absurdity of male-dominated cultures throughout the world. The title also draws attention to the magazine’s be-spelling methods to reclaim language. This section merges politics and satire to inform audiences about international and domestic women’s rights issues while providing contact information to become involved, enacting a transnational feminist front to combat foreground feminization (Hegde 1998). Headlines from the April/May 2005 issue read “Egyptian Feminist to Run for President: Will Then Run 5K for Breast Cancer” and “Iranian Women Sentenced to Death by Hanging, Stoning: Welcome to the Year 2005—B.C.E.” (Erlbaum 2005b, p. 20). The latter article concludes:

We’re as much in favor of cultural sensitivity as the next overprivileged Western woman, but this practice of punishing women for “immorality” by burying them up to their necks and throwing rocks at their heads until they’re dead just seems … well, terribly retro, and not in a fun, campy way. (Janice Erlbaum 2005b, p. 20)

In this way, “News from a Broad” uses satiric humor to depict the “contextually specific material practices” of marginalized women’s lives (Hegde 1998, p. 288).

The humor in *Bust* does not overlook the patriarchal culture of the United States. A February/March 2005 headline in the “News from a Broad” section reads, “Bush Wins Man Date from God! Heck, I thought we voted against them men dating” in response to Bush’s re-election (Erlbaum 2005a, p. 14). Later in the same issue, *Bust* created a “Moral Sex” quiz based on the Moral Values sweeping through US political rhetoric (McClure 2005, p. 18). The author uses capitalization to draw attention to the absurdity of foreground value systems in their attempts to regulate Background realities. She warns readers to “Laugh all you want at *Cosmopolitan* now, but just imagine what a *Cosmo* quiz could look like in 2008 if moral conservatives continue their quest not only to merge church and state, but also to separate sex from the single girl” (McClure 2005, p. 18). *Bust* willingly aligns with the *Cosmo* girl to combat patriarchy indicating that certain issues such as Moral Values may be able to transcend the bifurcation of the *Bust* feminist and the *Cosmo* girl, issues that work to enact an explicit form of social control on women’s independence and agency. In this way, the
The magazine employs an ironic humor to address a paradoxically common ground between two seemingly disparate identities (Trethewey 1999). When the reader is asked to score this quiz that includes answers like “Review the chastity pledge you signed in 10th grade,” she is reminded that “Silly, only guys can score!” (McClure 2005, p. 18).

Next, Stoller is a Hag who “haunts the Hedges/Boundaries of patriarchy, frightening fools and summoning Weird Wandering Women into the Wild” in each Editor’s Letter (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 137). She does so in a be-musingly feminist way. Stoller not only highlights the idiotology of foreground oppression in each letter (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 206) but also draws attention to the humor of feminists navigating idiotology (and sometimes enjoying it). In the August/September 2005 “Men We Love” issue, Stoller (2005d, p. 6) describes the change in atmosphere as the all-female-feminist staff became focused on an issue of men. She changes the context of foreground women’s magazines by declaring that “we give you men who, to us, represent the thinking gal’s eye candy (and mind candy).” Stoller (2005d, p. 6) adds that men from traditional women’s magazines of the Looking Glass Society (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 208) variety have “carefully manicured stubble, ripped abs, and tabloid-worthy fuck-and-run treatment of their girlfriends.” The representations of men in Bust have been reconsidered. They are “crush-worthy,” and readers will be “insta-obsessed.” As a Hag, Stoller uses hyphenation to combine words from the foreground, brewing new definitions for the Background. Her letter reminds feminists that it is okay to like men if they so choose, as long as these men meet the criteria of the thinking gal’s eye and mind candy. In this way, the notion of a feminist form of control that is enacted through humor is developed. The “Men We Love” issue clearly establishes a set of criteria for acceptable male partners. The irony is that these men may be objectified in the Background leading to questions about the forced bifurcation of the sexes and men’s treatment.

An article in the April/May 2006 issue further articulates the notion of a feminist control, using satire to describe the relationship that many women have with the chain store Target as exemplary of the attractiveness of the elementary world and its products. In other words, “Target is so ingrained in our pop culture that we think of shopping there as a bubbly pleasure” (McClure 2006, p. 22). The article poses a problem many feminists who are also Target shoppers face: should they continue to shop at a store that refuses to fill legal prescriptions for Plan B? The dilemma is that some women feel the simultaneous need to stand up for what they believe in and the foreground fabricated need to have “the cutest embroidered throw pillows ever” (McClure 2006, p. 22). Thus, McClure (2006, p. 22) wittingly writes, “between its brilliant marketing and our enthusiasm for well-designed crap lies an unspoken understanding that Target is where we just give in, buy into it, and buy too much.” However, Bust readers are left with a final message that advocates boycotting the chain that fulfills elementary desires in favor of advocating a right that many Background feminists believe in. In this way, Bust begins to explore methods of resistance. At the same time, Bust readers are essentially told what it means to be a Bust feminist in a message of control that is persuasively communicated through humor. With this, the magazine develops criteria for a Bust norm that may threaten the idea of woman as process. By providing its readers with appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, the magazine advocates a specific form of courage that is acceptable as long as it conforms to a Bust agenda. Here ontological courage is not developed from within but rather encouraged by a satiric message of control. Thus, Daly’s theory becomes inadequate as it is apparent that Hags not only poke fun at the controlling nature of patriarchy but may also use humor to exert a form of feminist control themselves.
Re-Claim Language to Combat Social Control

Radical feminists have historically relied on the power of textual media to enact forms of social change and to combat patriarchal oppression (Rhodes 2005). Bust be-witchingly draws upon the power of naming in multiple ways. To begin, as inspiration for Wild Wickedarians, Bust interrogates femininity and feminism in an effort to recover, recreate, and redefine their meanings. An inherent aspect of this feminist transformation is that femininity and feminine are not mutually exclusive, but rather can co-exist as part of a transcendent identity that is more accessible to ordinary women. Stoller (2006d, p. 6) writes, “We know that in the life of today’s modern gal, there’s room for crafting and sex and music and fashion and politics and, most importantly, that an interest in one doesn’t preclude an interest in the others.” A priority is to “celebrate women’s interests and lifestyles.” To that end, the last pages of each issue are devoted to “She commerce, services, and more” providing a space for women-centered businesses and organizations to advertise while the magazine also regularly includes an article from “Mother Superior” about the trials and tribulations of motherhood. The “Real Life” section is included along with articles that address politically, socially, and culturally charged topics. Articles about how to craft the latest D-I-Y fashions are juxtaposed next to articles that address specific feminist issues. For instance, the December/January 2005 issue features an article about American women who choose to convert to Islam, exploring the ways in which women who have grown up with feminism reconcile that background with a religion that seemingly opposes those feminist ideals (Coyne 2005, p. 86). This article is representative of other articles in which ordinary women work to merge their real-world identities of the Background with feminism while surviving and succeeding in the foreground.

In the June/July 2005 Editor’s Letter, Stoller (2005c, p. 6) writes, “we’re pretty femme around here—not the click-click-heel, high-maintenance, Sex-and-the-City-type femme, but rather the creeped-out-by-bugs, like-to-wear-makeup-when-we-go-out-but-not-necessarily-during-the-day kind.” Here Stoller provides a foundation for merging feminism and femininity into a Bust “femme.” Sex and the City refers to a Cosmo or Vogue fembot femme; the Bust femme is more accessible. Feminine representations in Cosmo and Vogue are arguably fantasy-based (Machin & Thornborrow 2003) and present readers with illusions of never-ending consumption of goods they cannot afford (McCracken 1993). However, the feminine representations in Bust, as described by Stoller, are not meant to be fantasy but accurate depictions of reality. Readers note: “I have loved your magazine for years, but when I got this new issue . . . I wondered where I end and you fine ladies begin. It’s like you know everything about me” (Baldock 2005, p. 7).

At the same time, some have critiqued Bust for not being feminist enough. In response to a free copy, the Women’s Studies Program at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, accused Bust of conveying “contradictory messages of feminism” (Johnson 2005, p. 8). The magazine replied, “Part of Bust’s mission is to dispel the negative stereotype that feminism allows no room for debate as to what constitutes ‘topics of concern to feminists’” (Stoller 2005b, p. 8). In this way, Bust “busts” through negative connotations of feminism to present a contestable, flexible, and more accessible version of feminism. Indeed, this critique of the unity of all women and all feminisms is an inherent feature of radical feminism (Rhodes 2005). Bust does not present a fantasyland of pseudo-liberation, but rather a land of accessible opportunity for a diverse and eclectic audience of feminine feminists. This is not to say that “anything goes” as far as defining feminism and feminine,
but to say that “definitions are tentative, open to challenge, must be argued for and substantiated, and can always be modified” (Thompson 2001, p. 6).

The inherent power of naming is also exemplified in a re-occurring theme of the “News from a Broad” section concerning reproductive rights. The August/September 2005 issue relays the situation many women across the country were facing as druggists refused to fill their birth control prescriptions because these druggists did not believe in birth control (Erlbaum 2005c, p. 18). The author declares that “the contra-contraceptives are coming for your pills” (Erlbaum 2005c, p. 18). In her own play on words, she points out the importance of language in the foreground in defining and determining the rights of women. The dispute centers on how to define birth control pills; opponents of the pill seek to define it as abortion. According to Erlbaum (2005c, p. 18) in this type of reversal, “the fundamental mechanism employed in the world-construction and world-maintenance of patriarchy” (Daly & Caputi 1987, p. 93), is used by the fatherland to maintain control over women, causing Bust authors to question “who’s controlling your birth control?” The February/March 2005 issue also addresses what the author Be-Musingly refers to as “Speech Problems” as the Bush Administration attempts to rename fetuses as “unborn children” (Erlbaum 2005a, p. 14). Daly (1973) has argued against these phallogrammatical means of social control, and Bust draws attention to the power and implications of naming and framing reproductive rights.

Finally, many articles attest to the retaliatory power of language in terms of frustration with the foreground, femininity, and feminism. One article interviews older women who date younger men. The headline describes how women have redefined a foreground word, changing the context to more accurately depict their experiences: “Originally a derogatory term for older women on the hunt for young man-meat, the word ‘cougar’ is being reclaimed as a badge of honor” (Simms 2005, p. 71). Queen Latifah argues for the use of bodacious and curvaceous instead of plus-size (Egan 2006). Lastly, in an interview with the all-female-political-pop-punk band Sleater-Kinney, band member Carrie Brownstein declares, “If we don’t have control over our own language, over our own definitions, over our own sense of who we are, then how are we going to open ourselves up to new possibilities?” (Egan 2005, p. 65). Here the magazine confirms the power to name as it becomes an essential Element of Self-Realization.

Discussion

Many contemporary women’s magazines today have been accused of providing contradictory notions of femininity while appropriating feminist ideals. Some research into resistance strategies to this patriarchal discourse has taken a feminist communitarian approach. Rather than focus on these magazines’ negativity, I use a radical theory to assess a radical artifact. The work of both Daly and Bust disputes the notion of a monodimensional reality and implicates the existence of multiple realities. Daly’s philosophical and rhetorical approach to this duality illuminates the uniqueness of this artifact. Indeed, Bust is a popular culture magazine situated in a new space that uses strategic humor as a form of resistance and control, advocates the power of language as leading to power against social control, and is built upon a solid, yet contestable, feminine and feminist foundation. The intersections of these themes contributes to a feminine and feminist transformation.
Daly’s rhetorical theory “provides a framework for exploring the intersection between the public and private, the foreground and Background” (Griffin 1993, p. 160). Exploring this intersection in terms of feminist transformation is helpful in that dimensions typically associated with the private can be brought to the public discourses (Thompson 2001). This is especially true of popular culture, housed in the public sphere, where political and ideological struggles are reproduced and represented (Kellner 1995). At the same time, *Bust*’s understanding of feminism and femininity extends Daly’s theories to account for the contradictions and ironies of navigating these boundaries.

Navigating boundaries directly impacts the topics addressed in this magazine, locating *Bust* in a New Space. *Bust* provides readers with feminine and feminist depictions of ordinary, everyday women. *Bust* readers, staffers, and interviewees openly struggle with restricting patriarchal definitions that force them to conform to an ideal they did not create while at the same time defining and reclaiming ownership on what it means to be feminine and feminist. Corin Tucker of Sleater-Kinney summed up this duality nicely in the band’s interview, “Our society is really flawed, and you want to comment on that, but I also think you have to realize the impossibility of removing yourself from our society completely. That’s not gonna actually change or solve anything” (Egan 2005, p. 65). Thus, Daly’s duality of foreground/Background rhetoric illuminates public and private discursive boundaries and highlights the use of women’s discursive practices in a public popular culture forum. These discursive practices draw attention to the contradictions and ironies of navigating boundaries. Daly’s philosophical approach articulates a simple solution of developing ontological courage to combat alienation. However, the discourse in *Bust* complicates this notion, highlighting the tensions and problems women face as they begin to recognize their own alienation and develop a sense of courage. Daly’s theories become a sort of ideal that is useful in illuminating foreground-Background boundaries. *Bust* effectively articulates the contradictions of reconciling Background and foreground realities, providing the space, the support, and the determination to navigate these boundaries and contribute to a feminine and feminist transformation in this way.

As a means of resistance, the hagographic humor of *Bust* highlights the absurdity of women’s oppression in the foreground, allows women to navigate the boundaries between the foreground and the Background, and also presents a potential means for collaboration and consciousness-raising in a dialogue with a multiplicity of women. The use of humor by women contradicts notions of traditional femininity (Walker 1988); therefore, *Bust* is able to successfully redefine femininity by incorporating a biting, sarcastic tone into its feminist stance. Femininity and feminism are associated with intellect, awareness, and reflexivity. *Bust* calls on women to reflexively view their situation as one fueled by patriarchal domination. The use of humor makes this situation more palatable and provides women with a form of resistance to their oppression. Here resistance through humor maintains a dialectical relationship with the forms of domination found in the current culture (Mumby 1997). Whereas Daly’s approach privileges Background realities and a denial of foreground foolocracy, *Bust* points out the impossibility of complete removal from contemporary society. At the same time, women are not expected to be happy with their situation. By addressing the unnatural relations posed by patriarchy, *Bust* uses humor as a means of resistance while at the same time acknowledging this arbitrary domination.

However, the use of humor as a means of resistance is not without its potential faults. Mass media can persuasively package feminist humor so that while the truth is not dismissed, audiences learn to detach themselves from the emotional impact and implications of that
truth (Jenkins 1994). Moreover, a focus on humor as a method to resist patriarchal control prevents an exploration of humor as a method of control itself. *Bust* privileges the use of satire in drawing attention to the hypocrisy of the foreground, but unwittingly presents its own version of a feminist form of control that determines and prioritizes Background issues, including selection criteria for the “men we love.” The magazine purports to empower women while at the same time presents paradoxical forms of social control (Trethewey 1999). This paradox is packaged in a humorous, ironic language of persuasion. Daly’s rhetorical strategies assume that the language of women operates beyond the confines of patriarchy; yet, this magazine highlights the contradictions of a feminist form of control. In the end, encouraging women to become more engaged with humor and bringing their ironic and sarcastic wit to foreground media outlets is a way to facilitate a universal understanding of patriarchal oppression based on localized individual experiences. Women not only gain a voice to define their lived experience but are given the means to acknowledge the absurdity and arbitrariness of their situation.

Finally, this magazine addresses the power and possibility inherent in language. To truly be-speak the world into being, women need the ontological courage to combat their own alienation from their true Selves. *Bust* begins this process, using language to combat patriarchal, grammatical social control. Because women have been culturally and discursively limited in their choice of identity and action by dominant ideologies, it is imperative to consider redefinitions as well as inclusive and exclusive feminine and feminist ideals. Thus, by acknowledging the power that language has in constructing and constituting reality and Be-ing, women can use the fluidity and flexibility of language to illuminate their experiences. *Bust* begins to develop and employ new words for old contexts and new contexts for old words, and, in this way, represents feminine and feminist transformation on one level. This creativity allows *Bust* to combat restricting definitions of femininity and feminism and collaboratively synthesize the two to create a current, contemporary, and accessible definition of today’s feminine feminist. The next level of feminine and feminist transformation is revealed through what *Bust* readers do with this language in terms of interpreting it, expanding it, revising it, and developing strategies and structures to employ, adapt, and recreate the language of *Bust*. Thus, this feminine and feminist transformation is multilayered, constantly changing, and contradictory, situated in a context of interpretation, revision, and reflection.

While this study provided a foundational analysis of a feminist popular culture magazine, it did have some limitations. This study was limited to articles within a two-year time span. It would be useful to review the magazine’s archive to examine how struggles between the ideals underlying *Bust*’s founding played out over the years and whether and how advertisements fit within the content, language use, feminist mission, and form of the magazine. Finally, future research should examine other popular media that advance an explicitly feminist and feminine message to find out if this is a growing trend in popular media that reflects feminism today.

*Bust* works to connect women’s individual lived experience with the broader notion of gender constructedness in a type of consciousness-raising reminiscent of early radical feminist texts (Rhodes 2005). In this way, *Bust* engages its audience, demanding they think critically about issues concerning femininity while interrogating the feminist movement itself (Rhodes 2005). In a broad move to integrate femininity and feminism in a new space, *Bust* combats the stereotypes perpetuated in most popular women’s magazines. As feminist communication scholars, we are not only obligated to critique those popular culture
representations that reproduce patriarchal ideologies but also those that claim to effectively combat and disrupt that patriarchy. This reflexivity will help feminism to evolve, addressing the concerns of women today, and laying the foundation to educate feminists of the future to work together for transformation and social change.

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NOTES

1. While there is disagreement among feminists that patriarchy is the source of all oppression, many agree that “it is the form we are most likely to encounter in an ongoing way in everyday life” (hooks 1989, p. 21). hooks (1989, p. 20) questions the assumption that sexist oppression is the root of all oppressions and that the elimination of patriarchy will lead to the elimination of other forms of domination such as racism and classism. However, she does draw attention to “paradigms of domination” in an effort to understand “that our capacity as women and men to be either dominated or dominating is a point of connection, of commonality” (hooks 1989, p. 20). That said, she agrees that the feminist struggle to end patriarchal domination should be of primary importance because this form of oppression determines relationships in the most intimate contexts of our private lives, social spaces, homes, and families.

2. Some find Daly’s philosophical theories to be problematic, resulting in her infrequent use. Daly has been accused of over-generalizing and ignoring the uniqueness of each woman’s lived experience. Much of this criticism has been focused on race. For example, in response to her reading of Gyn/Ecology (Daly 1978), radical lesbian feminist Lorde wrote a letter to Daly questioning Daly’s choice to depict non-European women exclusively as victims. After four months of waiting for a reply, Lorde (1984) published “An Open Letter to Mary Daly” in Sister Outsider. Lorde (1984, p. 67) writes, “To dismiss our Black foremothers may well be to dismiss where European women learned to love. As an African-American woman in white patriarchy, I am used to having my archetypal experience distorted and trivialized, but it is terribly painful to feel it being done by a woman whose knowledge so much touches my own.”

Because she did not reply to the letter, many quickly assumed that Daly was, in fact, racist (Katherine 2000). However, Katherine (2000) points out the importance of historical context. Daly’s radical feminism assumes that patriarchy is the root of all oppressions whereas Lorde offered a definition that was progressive at the time. Lorde’s patriarchy is “a global system oppressing all women but since it intersects, or interlocks, or interacts with racism, colonialism, and imperialism in different places at different times, women do not suffer the same oppression as women” (Katherine 2000, p. 290; italics in original).

Daly (1992) acknowledges Lorde’s letter in Outercourse: The Be-Dazzling Voyage, arguing that Gyn/Ecology was meant to be part of her own voyage that still continues. In other words, the book was not meant to be a work of perfection but rather Daly (1992, p. 232) “hoped that it would soar together with the works of Other women, which were coming and would come from different Realms of the Background. I looked forward to the
profusion of New Creation, which I believed could emerge from women of all races, cultures, classes—from all over this planet—speaking/Be-Speaking out of our various and vital heritages."

3. The author tried numerous times to contact Bust via telephone and email to verify current demographic and circulation figures but was left unanswered. This information is not available in common media circulation outlets such as Mediamark Research, Inc. (MRI) and the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC).

4. One reviewer suggested an examination of advertisements in Bust. Although space precludes such analysis, the reviewer’s point is well taken. A preliminary review of the advertisements reveals that some advertisements are more conventional while others, especially those of small businesses and organizations, are more creative in their use of language, humor, and contradiction. Stoller (2007) also notes that the number of ads for small, independent, women-owned companies is ever-increasing.

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