

Pushing the boundaries: *Weeds*, motherhood, neoliberalism and postfeminism

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Weeds (2005-2012) ran for eight seasons. It is a U.S television comedy-drama which centres on Nancy Botwin, who is a mother, widow and drug dealer. Dealing in drugs can be seen as a departure from her life as a stay-at-home mother which removes her from the conservative, patriarchal suburban norms of middle-class suburbia, and its expectations of women and mothers. Throughout the seasons there is a dissident portrayal of motherhood as Nancy through her willfulness, entrepreneurial plans, overt sexuality and feminine tactics becomes a successful businesswoman. *Weeds* deals with taboo issues related to gender, sexuality and morality. I consider how in *Weeds*, Nancy's transgressive nature situates her within a postfeminist neoliberal discourse. *Weeds* presents a world in which a woman can achieve success by embracing masculine, capitalist, individualistic endeavours whilst still adhering to feminine behaviours.

Introduction

Weeds (2005-2012) is a subversive television comedy-drama concerning the challenges facing a white, young, middle-class suburban widow, Nancy Botwin, played by Mary-Louise Parker. *Weeds* was commercially successful. The first season premiered to 540,000 viewers in the U.S. and was Showtime's highest-rated original series in 2005, winning Golden Globes and Emmys (Rogers 2011). Nancy is depicted as a strong feminine character, who as a widow and facing a financial burden is trying her best to support her family through the selling of marijuana. She is coy, yet assertive. She is sexual and a mother not afraid of going outside her comfort zone. Indeed, Nancy's transgressive nature may situate her as a postfeminist heroine. Similar to television heroines since the 1990s, in *Weeds* there is "articulated a postfeminist sensibility in which 'feminism' [is] no longer openly in play, but which, nevertheless, exist[s] in the narrative in the form of a question regarding the heroine's feminine identity" (Horbury 2014, 215). Nancy's journey into postfeminist terrain, engaging with femininity and being a desiring sexual subject, is complicit

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with neoliberal discourses in which individuals may be seen as entrepreneurial actors who foreground choice and empowerment. *Weeds* presents the postfeminist neoliberal illusion of ultimate individual success by foregrounding female empowerment, ambition and sexual desire.

Postfeminism has celebrated women's empowerment, agency and choice. Angela McRobbie argues that "post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force" (2009, 12). The feminism that is taken into account is liberal and relates to equal opportunities with a focus on a more individualistic discourse. However, according to McRobbie, this only results in a notional form of equality for women. There is little critique of the patriarchal and capitalist constraints that were articulated by feminism. Rosi Braidotti elaborates that:

Post-feminist neo-liberalism is pro-capitalist and hence it considers financial success in the world as the sole indicator of status of women... social democratic principles of solidarity are misconstrued as old-fashioned welfare support, and dismissed accordingly...it fosters a new sense of isolation among women. (2006, 45)

Overall, postfeminism has been characterized in many ways: a feminist backlash, a historical move within feminism, and within media and cultural studies, as Rosalind Gill suggests "deeply enmeshed with neoliberalism" (2016, 613). Nancy, as a postfeminist heroine, exemplifies the individualist values of neo-liberalism in which success is measured through financial gains, as well as achieving autonomy in the male dominated drug world. Unlike traditional female-centred dramas, romance and female friendships are not presented as a priority. As the seasons of *Weeds* progress Nancy has fewer associations with other women. Her life revolves around the men around her and what she can achieve from her liaisons. She is working in a man's sphere and she is defiant and ambitious. Nancy's successful drug dealing situates her within neoliberalism and as a postfeminist, entrepreneurial subject. Nancy's individualism is not necessarily antithetical to feminism. In negotiating the hegemonic masculine and dangerous terrain of the drug underworld, she is not submissive. Her actions don't simply reinforce patriarchal norms in relation to middle-class femininity and life in suburbia, but instead in a somewhat nuanced way they expose and challenge them.

Writing about the link between feminism and neoliberalism, Catherine Rottenburg asserts that this produces a postfeminist “subject who is not only individualized but entrepreneurial in the sense that she is oriented towards optimizing her resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative and innovation” (2014, 428). In *Weeds*, Nancy plays the widow, mother, drug dealer, gangster, lover, wife and entrepreneur. She conveys a trajectory of empowerment by overcoming adversity and in the series we follow her journey “from a weed-dealing single mother to a weed-dealing matriarch” (McNutt 2011). Indeed, as a widow and mother, Nancy is not expecting the state to support her. She follows:

the neoliberalist logic...that individuals can and should be responsible for themselves”. That is to say, postfeminism assumes that the gains of second wave feminism have been “taken into account” (i.e. equal opportunity, wage equity, autonomy) and individuals, not structures, are to assume responsibility for the conditions of their existence. (Orr Vered and Humphreys 2014, 157)

The title *Weeds* also may be read as a play on widow’s weeds, but instead of donning the black sombre garb, Nancy’s dealings with the illicit substance can be understood as a feature of her mourning. Her foray into dealing weed, a substance that is thought to mellow mood and provide an escape from the wearisomeness of the everyday, could be a coping strategy for the grief-affected widow. However, Nancy never takes drugs – she deals them. Rather, the dealing of drugs and burying herself in this work, can initially be seen as a form of escape from her grief. Dealing in drugs and flirting with danger, can also be seen as a departure from her life as a stay-at-home mother which removes her from the conservative patriarchal, suburban norms of her middle-class, gated community.

Weeds ran from 2005-2012. In its eight seasons, *Weeds* pushed the boundaries of the televisual representations of motherhood and introduced an account of American family life that strayed from mainstream suburbia. This paper examines how *Weeds* also continuously pushes boundaries of narrative and character, not least by dealing with taboo issues. The female protagonist’s foray into the web of otherness and moral ambiguity, especially the focus on gender and race politics, as well as notions of motherhood, is an intriguing aesthetic dimension. Within a postfeminist and neoliberal context, the potent mix of a darker side of America, motherhood and family life is a compelling feature of *Weeds*.

Suburban Motherhood

With its dissident portrayal of motherhood and traditional representations of female domesticity, *Weeds* dramatically extends the representation of female subjectivity developed in female-centred television shows such as *Desperate Housewives*. This non-normative representation of motherhood continues a trend in television families in the 21st Century that contest established, idealised representations. *Weeds* moves beyond the television family depictions in which the suburban mother displayed nurturance, chastity and virtue. These attributes that were particularly prevalent in television's Golden era (1950s-60s) the time when suburbia, and the woman's role in the suburban home, was celebrated. Instead, as Waters and Harrison (2012, 3) point out, 21st Century television mothers are: "Unabashedly sexual, idiosyncratic to a fault, and seriously deleterious in their caretaking skills" and seem to inhabit the high end of popular culture. A comparison can be made with mothers that feature in long-running sitcoms in the 1980s through to the 1990s such as Rosanne in *Roseanne* (1988-1997) and Peggy Bundy in *Married with Children* (1987-1997). Roseanne and Peggy conveyed working-class suburban life, combatting the 'feminine mystique' by not conforming to notions of the 'happy housewife' or the 'perfect' mother (Friedan 1963). Roseanne was an overweight, working-class mother "who groaned and whined her way through motherhood and constantly greeted her daughters with either a complaint or an insult" (Charon and Charon 2002, 185) at the same time, Roseanne worked hard, along with her husband, to support her family. In contrast, Peggy was a stay-at-home mother who was married to a low-paid shoe salesman. She lived in high heels, low cut tops and tights. She spent her time shopping or watching television shows such as *Oprah* and the home shopping network. She showed affection to her children but refused to do any housework. Both women were presented as brash, wise-cracking, opinionated mothers who transgressed notions of passive femininity and traditional television representations of motherhood.

Across both eras these television mothers from female centred shows share a strength of character and willfulness in their approach to life. In Sara Ahmed's terms these television mothers could be seen as 'willful subjects' (2014). Ahmed writes that "willfulness is a diagnosis of the failure to comply with those whose authority is given" (2014, 1). In relation to the representation of motherhood, the authority could be seen as patriarchy and its constraints. Rather than viewing willfulness as a negative, from a feminist viewpoint it may be considered as being assertive, a means of getting one's own way and a "hope that those who

wander away from the paths they are supposed to follow leave their footprints behind" (Ahmed 2014, 21). Certainly in the context of *Weeds*, Nancy departs from well-worn paths and conveys a representation of motherhood and femininity that can be read as an expression of the neoliberal postfeminist subject. Nancy's personal journey takes her away from the supposed security of the family home in suburbia and in this way, Nancy exhibits willfulness, and a trajectory of empowerment, which enables her to overcome adversity and her adversaries. Indeed, such characterization has infused other Showtime series, with Showtime "develop[ing] a reputation for programming content based on the anti-heroine mother protagonist" (Bradshaw 2013, 161), suggesting a turn in the media towards a postfeminist subject who is relatable through her flaws and vulnerability, and yet defiantly transgresses traditional conventions of motherhood.

Weeds begins with Nancy Botwin turning to low-level marijuana dealing in a fictitious, gated upper-middle-class Californian suburb to support her two sons after the sudden death of her husband. *Weeds*, has been described as "*Desperate Housewives* plus one, a little more outrageous, a little more vulgar..." (Brown 2010, 260). *Desperate Housewives*, like *Weeds*, revolves around female characters that are youthful, slender, middle-class and conventionally attractive. However, *Desperate Housewives* panders to conservative fears regarding the demise of family values, class status, gender roles and otherness, whereas *Weeds* caters to liberal sensibilities in showcasing class differences, embracing otherness, challenging gender norms and even "reflecting the popular culture sentiment that marijuana does not need to be illegal when its purpose is solely personal use" (Goldstein 2009, 143). Nancy, a white, middle-class suburbanite mother dealing drugs exists in sharp contrast to the well-worn stereotype of a drug dealer, such as an inner-city male (black/ethnic) street hustler. Instead, Amy Long asserts that "*Weeds* engages with the trope of self-made masculinity but by exploring the trope through a female protagonist the show undermines and reworks the genre's typical functions" (2008, 17).

McRobbie's notion of the 'phallic girl' of postfeminism is useful here to describe Nancy. Though Nancy is in her forties, she conveys many aspects of girl-like behaviour in her youthful dress and social mannerisms. Girlish behaviour in adult women affronts feminist ideals. Moreover as the phallic girl, she has taken on a male role, operating in a male domain, alongside the "freedoms associated with masculine sexual pleasures ... without relinquishing her own desirability to men" (2009, 83). For

McRobbie this would be seen as false empowerment. It is a fantasy that the phallic girl can have any 'real' power within the patriarchal world. Nevertheless, Nancy eventually inhabits a masculine sphere where she is a fascination for men and a target of hostility and envy from women. Her transgressive form of femininity challenges traditional patriarchal constraints of suburban life in which the roles of mothers and wives revolve around the home and family, rather Nancy embraces neoliberalist masculine ideologies of work, capitalist success and the individual. Her behaviour also has an impact on neighbours in her gated, suburban community. For example, Celia Hodes, played by Elizabeth Perkins, is a mother and wife who is in envy of Nancy and attempts to emulate Nancy's transgressive ways. Nancy is seen as a role model for her entrepreneurial characteristics and her transgressions in terms of sexuality, dress and unabashedly unapologetic behaviour. As the seasons progress, Nancy doesn't display the middle-class pre-occupation with 'what the neighbours might think?'

Weeds explores the suburban milieu and bourgeois lifestyle in its early seasons. Like a weed this initially appears harmless, but as it spreads it turns out to be treacherous. Sarah Goldstein contends, "*Weeds* demonstrates that while gated communities are attempting to control external threats, there are often bigger threats from within their own community" (2009, 103). As such, *Weeds* serves as a metaphor of a suburban scourge that at first appears innocuous. Kera Bolonik, author of the book *In the Weeds*, which describes the TV show's wit and candor, suggests that *Weeds* symbolizes the "people and the problems that unexpectedly turn up, that isn't easily removed and reemerges often stronger and worse than before" (2007, xi). This unexpectedness can be associated with the willfulness that Nancy exhibits as a widow and mother facing adversity. As Ahmed asserts "willfulness involves a persistence in the face of having been brought down" (2011, 239). *Weeds* presents a view of the underbelly of suburbia, in which Nancy Botwin, at first, precariously shuttles between outward respectability and inward turmoil.

In this way, Nancy echoes the place of suburbia. As Maya Montanez Smukler highlights:

Suburbia embodies duality: the calm and fearful, perfection and failure, individuality and conformity. It offers some of the best that America can be: home ownership, safe neighborhoods, community; and the worst: conventional, isolationist and homogeneous. In many

ways, Nancy personifies these contradictions, imperfections and inconsistencies. (2008, 16)

The myth of the happy housewife and mother is shattered in *Weeds* as Nancy, newly widowed, faces the harsh reality of survival in the suburbs with its focus on outward respectable appearances and its symbols of late capitalism such as McMansions and four wheel drives. Significantly, the theme song for *Weeds* is 'Little Boxes' (1962), by Malvina Reynolds and throughout the first three seasons of *Weeds*, various artists covered the song, each artist bring[ing] their own take to this song critiquing middle-class conformity and suburbia, in which homes "all look just the same". Notably, at the end of Season Three, Nancy rejects suburbia, with its "white, middle-class privilege; patriarchal gender norms; and licit capitalist consumer culture" (Long 2008, 104) and burns down her family home, with her final words to her late husband "Judah, if you are still here, I tried." Rejecting the pressures of suburbia, Nancy leaves the gated community and moves to a small town near the San Diego-Tijuana conurbation where, in Season Four, her life involves trafficking drugs across the USA/Mexico border.

While Nancy's behaviour is 'deviant', the position of marijuana in liberal discourse (not a "serious" drug) mellows this deviance, making it 'attractive' (Goldstein 2009, 128). Indeed, in the first three seasons, Nancy deals drugs to her middle-class, suburbanite neighbours. Nancy's foray into the male dominated world of drug dealing may be considered postfeminist in that she enters a traditional masculine sphere, whilst not losing her traditional feminine and sexualised manner (Long 2008) and yet this also highlights gendered restrictions on her behaviour, with Long suggesting that Nancy's

position as a white, suburban mother may accord her certain privileges, but it also presents her with specifically gendered (as well as raced and class-based) oppressions. Unlike the mostly male protagonists of suburban-centered texts, Nancy's feminine gender undercuts her ability to partake in the privileges conferred upon her male counterparts. Throughout the series, she wrestles with patriarchal forces that undermine her attempts to succeed both as a middle-class suburbanite and a drug dealer. However, through its use of sitcom serialization, *Weeds* demonstrates the ways in which Nancy's process of self-fashioning—which eventually culminates in the gangster identity she enacts in the third season—allows her to

negotiate and maneuver within the structures that oppress her. (2008, 104)

In *Weeds*, Nancy's disillusionment with suburban life is evident. Indeed, Nancy's transformation from suburban housewife to gangster also follows a postfeminist agenda of a makeover paradigm. As Gill states, "This requires people (predominantly women) to believe, first, that they or their life is lacking or flawed in some way; second, that it is amenable to reinvention or transformation..." (2007,156). Nancy espouses a postfeminist identity in which she works with the structures of patriarchy and authority to re-fashion herself and manipulate situations in her own interests. As in *Desperate Housewives*, "the programme suggests that individual women need 'tactics' to deal with a patriarchal world (see de Certeau 1984); this is part of the postfeminist discourse, which is packaged for entertainment" (Rodan 2006/7, 4). *Weeds* explores through humour, irony and drama a postfeminist journey. The makeover paradigm in which Nancy sexualizes her persona, and her various plans for 'success' and competitiveness in her drug dealing ventures, relate to postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of achieving individual power and financial capital. But, it also signals her tactics of venturing into a male terrain. In McRobbie's terms she is the phallic girl who appears sexually desirable to men through her feminine garb, such as wearing short skirts and high heels, yet she behaves like the men.

As a mother, Nancy's character does not conform to the stereotype of the suburban American mother on mainstream U.S. television. As I have discussed, some television shows since the 1980s have challenged this representation of the 'perfect' mother and housewife. Nonetheless, this dominant representation of the quintessential white, middle-class mother who provides a nurturing environment for the family continues to prevail. At the same time, the sit-com genre has more postfeminist characters and Lauren Rabinovitz contends a feature is the "white, middle-class women who were divorced or single moms attempting to cope with the tensions between self-fulfillment and selfless mothering" (1999, 146). In the series Nancy conveys these tensions.

Such tensions emerge in the contrast created by the comparison between Nancy and Celia, who appears in the first five seasons and can perhaps best be described as a frenemy of Nancy. In comparison to Nancy, Celia is positioned as the 'bad' mother, in an unhappy marriage. Celia is seen constantly criticising her curly haired (half Jewish), lesbian daughter for not conforming to white, middle-class feminine modalities. She is self-

centred, obsessed with materialism, and envies Nancy's sexualised, carefree approach to life. Celia appears bitter whereas Nancy is presented as the idealised, willful subject.

However, Nancy is not the conventional, ideal mother. In the early episodes Nancy is presented as trying to do her best when faced with a difficult financial burden while dealing with the grief of widowhood. As the seasons progress, and she liberates herself from the constraints of the suburbs, her mothering skills are brought into question. Her symbolic burning of her house at the end of Season Three, (as a fire encroaches on the gated community), enables her to depart from the traditional 'suburban' sphere of motherhood. In subsequent seasons there is constant movement and travel in which the children are uprooted from a traditional home life. Treated like weeds, they are removed from their original, domestic environment to emerge stronger and tougher in new territory.

Bishop and Hall in their book *Mommy Angst: Motherhood in American Popular Culture* discuss the myth that "Good mothers embrace domesticity" in which "conforming to gender roles is central to the media construction of the good mother" (2009, 10). Nancy does not epitomise the happy homemaker. She is not interested in domestic labours. She has had a maid. She is not domesticated in the sense of doing the dishes, cooking for her children or monitoring their television watching. In this way, Nancy transgresses traditional roles of motherhood and takes on a more traditional male role in the family as shown in the Golden era of television in which husbands and fathers spent little time in caring for the home and the children, but whose value and worth was as the 'bread winner', who contributes financially to the family.

In the later seasons of *Weeds* with the birth of another son (from a drug cartel boss who is also a politician), Nancy is not depicted as the devoted primary caregiver. She needs help. Her brother-in-law assists with taking care of the family. Though, her brother-in-law is not the biological father of the infant, he is listed on the birth certificate as the father and takes on the maternal role of nurturer. She calls on her former maid and, subsequently, Nancy's younger teenage son, Shane, takes responsibility in terms of caring and providing for the infant. Jon Stratton in his work on neoliberalism and the family based on another commercially successful television show, the *Big Bang Theory*, asserts with "the logic of the neoliberal system is that for success, children are better off without their mothers, or with mothers who hold themselves remote...and where the

father, or father substitute, teaches social skills" (2016, 184). In *Weeds* the males in the family are seen in traditional female roles. Nancy as a mother does not conform to conservative gender stereotypes. "Nancy constructs an identity that aligns with neither hegemonic masculine nor traditional feminine gender norms" (Long 2008,116). Nevertheless, she is fiercely protective of the infant and will do whatever it takes to create a stable home for the child, even if this means returning to the suburban middle-class lifestyle, from which she escaped at the end of Season Three.

Norms for maternal behaviour are prescribed in the media through the binaries of the 'good' and 'bad' mother.

The good mother, the noble mother-saint, makes her family her highest priority, continually sacrifices her own interests for the good of her family and conforms to expected gender roles of femininity. The bad mother...is depicted as self-centred, neglectful, preoccupied with career, or lacking in traditional femininity. (Kinnick 2009, 9)

Nancy shuttles between these two moral poles. By selling marijuana she tries to maintain her family lifestyle and this could be seen as her priority, especially in the first few seasons of *Weeds*. However, she also appears self-centred, highly sexualised and incredibly driven in her new career as a drug dealer, to the neglect of her children and their interests. *Weeds* can be read in relation to understandings of postfeminism, which posit the "career of the postfeminist subject as the focal point of meaning, narrative and identity" (Dejmanee 2016, 121). There is a striving for success and in neoliberal terms this success is at any cost, and as witnessed in *Weeds* it is Nancy's relationship with her children that suffers.

Nancy's lifestyle choices are presented as not providing a safe environment for her children. She is not the perfect mother, which enables many in the show's audience to relate to her, and this is evidenced in the show's commercial success. More, Nancy is not the standard mother of family sit-coms in which the mother's life revolves around the welfare of the children. Nancy is not the self-sacrificing mother. As a neoliberal, postfeminist subject:

Individuated in the extreme, this subject is feminist in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women. This same subject is, however, simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic

forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care, which is increasingly predicated on crafting a felicitous work–family balance based on a cost-benefit calculus. (Rottenberg 2014, 420)

Drug dealing was initially a temporary fix to solve her immediate financial concerns, and she attempted to separate this from her role as mother. For example, in Season One in the episode 'Dead in the Nethers', she declares "I'm not a dealer; I'm a mother who happens to distribute illegal products." In Season Two, when her younger son finally learns what his mother does for a living, he asks her what he should tell people when they ask what she does. Nancy replies that he should "tell them I'm your mom". This statement positions her role as a mother as pivotal and her dalliance in the drug trade merely a means to support her family. But, as Long explains, by the third season Nancy 'owns' her drug identity: "In the episode, "Protection," she proclaims her status as a drug dealer for the first time without qualifying the statement with an appeal to her motherhood or its accompanying financial responsibilities" (2008, 118). Nancy's self-employment choice soon evolves into a family business because of which both her sons become involved in the dangerous and deadly drug scene.

Nancy alternates between being the self-centred woman and the mother wolf who fiercely protects her children. Rozsika Parker (2005, 1) explains that "maternal ambivalence is the experience shared variously by all mothers in which loving and hating feelings for their children exist side by side". Nancy exemplifies this maternal ambivalence which is often not normalised in mainstream media. Mary Louise Parker, who plays Nancy, has said that she was attracted to the character because "she was a flawed mother and that's something in our culture that is taboo." Nancy is a mother who puts her children in danger, rather than putting them first. In popular culture these actions demonise Nancy as a 'bad' mother. This presumed lack of empathy or affection for her children may also position her as an active subject within neoliberalism, which centres upon the needs of the individual, rather than the family or society (Stratton 2016, 184).

In the media the binaries of 'good' and 'bad' mother seem to prevail, especially in the depiction of the single mother (Hall and Bishop, 2009). An early 21st Century example of the 'good' mother is in long-running TV show *The Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007) which presents an idealised mother-daughter relationship between the characters Lorelai and Rory. While a

single mother, Lorelai models a style of single motherhood which is positive and nurturing (Calvin 2008, 97). In contrast, *Weeds* fans and critics may be drawn to Nancy's outrageous portrayal of single motherhood. Indeed, while really bad mothers are often ill-fated and/or meet an untimely demise (Walters and Harrison 2014, 41), for Nancy

even when the youngest is depicted as clearly troubled and neglected (and then shot) and the eldest (who is, after all, still a teen) becomes a drug-dealing layabout, Nancy retains her charm and—unlike the bad mothers of years past—remains fundamentally unpunished. (Walters and Harrison 2014, 41)

Nonetheless, numerous articles and blog sites label Nancy as possibly TV's 'worst' mum. Gina Belefonte from the *New York Times* describes Nancy as a "portrayal of motherhood failed... she is slowly blind-sided by the will to provide materially for her children [so] that her moral compass blurs to the point of invisibility" (2008). While Greg comments "Nancy Botwin is one of the most disturbing characters in popular culture. She is a borderline personality on steroids. She makes my skin crawl. She makes it impossible for me to continue to watch" (2011). A comment on the website *Unknown Critics* conveys the same sentiment: 'Nancy Botwin (of Showtime's *Weeds*) is a terrible mother' emphasizing the elements of gangs, trafficking and 'neglecting her kids' (Nadia 2010). Long insightfully highlights that such views, "reek of sexism; male [drug] dealing protagonists rarely if ever encounter such criticisms" (2008, 130). Moreover, they are racially and class infused: white middle-class women are not the usual stereotype of a drug dealer and the outrage expressed at Nancy being a drug dealing single mother, is not shared in viewer's comments towards the women of colour in *Weeds*.

In his analysis of *Weeds* Forster asserts that "if a suburban middle-class white woman wants to succeed as a criminal, she had better enlist the help of blacks who have the experience and knowhow" (2013, 62). Nancy's first marijuana supplier is Heylia James, another single mother running a family drug business. The two mothers provide an interesting binary between class and race with Nancy's white, middle class suburban background juxtaposed with James' African-American family who live in small house in the inner city.

Most of the scenes between the two women are situated in the Heylias kitchen, a traditional domestic space and one in which, recipes and ideas may be passed between generations. Indeed, Montanez Smukler (2008,

15) asserts that:

Nancy and Heylia's relationship ... is as teacher and student, and also that of two businesswomen making money off of each other. Power forms a slippery slope between the experienced black dealer and the novice white buyer.

Inverting the race and class structure, Heylia mentors Nancy, providing domestic advice such as the importance of the family dinner as a bonding ritual for the family unit. Despite class and ethnic differences, both women's matriarchal roles are central within their respective families and they share the common experience of being single mothers trying to do the best for their families, albeit through the illegal drug trade. Both women are engaged in an American neoliberal ideology, of seeking achievement through carefully calculated business ventures.

The stereotype of mothers that many in the U.S. would recognize is one where the mothers are "perfectly loving, kind, patient, and giving" (Ganong and Coleman 1995, 496). This myth of motherhood in North America is further extended to encompass a specific type of mother, the "most appropriate' mothers," as being "heterosexual, stay-at-home mothers in first marriage, nuclear families" (Ganong and Coleman 1995, 496). As a widow, Nancy has the potential to appear as a sympathetic character of the single mother in a similar vein to the matriarch in *The Partridge Family* (1970-1974). *The Partridge Family*, a sitcom about a widowed mother and her five children who embark on a family rock-music career, conveys an upbeat, wholesome view of family life. In contrast *Weeds*, offered as a black comedy, presents a much more cynical and raw perspective in which the family's survival is founded on Nancy's exploits.

In *Weeds*, Nancy's single status is not by choice but grim circumstance. In the series she is married four times. These marriages are not solely based on the idea of romance rather it is about how she can benefit from the various unions. For example, she married her first husband so that she could have a father for her unborn child. The man she chose to marry was a much better provider than the man she had an affair with. In neoliberal terms her choice in husbands is a cost-benefit analysis. Rather, than living with a partner, Nancy's marriages act as a reminder of her middle-class status in which marriage is a sign of respectability. Nevertheless, during the second and third marriages she attempts to escape the traditional constraints of matrimony and patriarchal authority, and inadvertently, after brief marriages, her husbands all meet untimely

deaths. By Season Eight she is widowed for the fourth time.

Throughout the series Nancy's single-mother persona is foregrounded. It is important to note that "the single mother has generally been viewed by the general public as being the worst form of motherhood available for women and for her children" and "single motherhood is deeply stigmatised in the United States" (Nagy 2009, 10). This is despite the fact that according to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2011 20 million children under the age of 18 lived in a single parent household. Nearly all of them, roughly 17.5 million children, live with and are cared for by a single mother (Ward 2012). It is interesting to note that there has been a rise in the number of U.S. television shows in the last twenty years that feature single mothers. A recent example of this is in the highly acclaimed sitcom series *Mom* (2013-), which commenced after the end of *Weeds*. *Mom* presents two generations of working class single mothers who are recovering addicts. This representation of the "single mom is palatable because she constantly demonstrates her self-sufficiency, distancing herself from the welfare mom" (Juffer 2006, 57). There is striving for self-improvement, a self-responsibility which is indicative of the neoliberal subject. Nancy is a prime example of this.

Weeds also espouses "Lifestyle feminism, which is characterized by independent, assertive women who find self-actualization through work outside the home, often in male-dominated professions" (Cuklanz and Moorti 2007, 305). Lotz elaborates on this:

Beginning in the 1970s, lifestyle feminism was exemplified in situation comedies such as *Mary Tyler Moore*, *One Day at a Time*, *Maude*, and *Kate and Allie*; these thematized individual white women's liberation from the nuclear family. These shows were premised on a feminist criticism of the patriarchal family structure, but the reliance on "stories infused with consciousness-raising perspectives and life-style politics" focused on individual freedom rather than assessing power and class relations. (2001, 107)

Weeds focuses on individual freedom. Nevertheless the show is postfeminist in that the protagonist is far more calculating, ambitious and self-serving whilst being overtly sexual, far more than the woman from lifestyle feminism in television comedies.

What is notable about *Weeds* is that it does expose power and class relations. Working-class characters, many of whom are immigrants trying to make a living, are featured. In Season Six, Nancy decides to begin a

new life devoid of drug dealing and she gets a job as a hotel maid. Her family take on new identities and change their names from the Botwins to the Newmans. This marks a change and contrast to the affluent lifestyle she had in the suburbs as a homemaker, and the perilous life she had when involved with drugs and gangsters. In spite of this change, she is enticed back into the drug trade when she sees the opportunity to start a new business, and to earn much more money. Her entrepreneurial instincts take over and she returns to the dangerous life of a drug dealer.

With each episode and season *Weeds* traffics into new territory. It becomes heterogeneous in location and narrative with the Botwins' spectacular encounters through the drug trade with African Americans, Mexicans and Arabs who at times foreground clichéd stereotypes, such as drug lords and gangsters, while also destabilising binaries of race, class and gender. *Weeds* spreads across the United States, with the family moving to various locations, but as Dusty Lavouie argues, it "often plays with our expectations in unexpected ways" (2011, 918). This is certainly also evident in the way motherhood is portrayed.

The family is deeply affected by Nancy's involvement with the drug business. One example is when her son Shane murders a woman to protect his mother. Nancy urgently packs up and moves the family and her new baby to escape the law and her recent Mexican drug lord husband. She packs her many shoes and personal items but her children are told to get in the car without their personal belongings despite their protests. The significance and priority that Nancy gives to her possessions over her children's belongings suggests the highly individualised consumerist postfeminist subject. Nancy is self-centred and appears to have a lack of affect. This is exemplified in her focus on her packing her many high heel shoes, which for McRobbie is a 'choosing' of femininity, that constitutes a feminine masquerade (2007, 723). The feminine masquerade, according to McRobbie is a "quasi-feminist staking out of a distance in the act of taking on the garb of femininity", which reinstates the heterosexual matrix and patriarchal order (2009, 64). Nevertheless, Nancy's feminine identity, as signified in the high heel shoes, serves as a way to inhabit sexual difference, whilst it also can be read as a tool for strength, a 'powerful imaginative resource', a way of escape from everyday pressures (Baker 2016, 3). In this example, Nancy's focus on her shoes is a way to escape from an untenable situation. In the later seasons of *Weeds* Nancy is presented as a selfish mother with a disinterest in nurturing her two older sons' interests or education. Moreover, her life of living on the edge as a gangster drug dealer takes

precedence and she uses her feminine wiles and sexuality when dealing with conflict.

A MILF

Wendy Hollway in, *From motherhood to maternal subjectivity* (2001, 8) reminds us that “mothers who are mothers are not only mothers.” Nancy as a mother and a single woman is presented as a sexualized being. Her sexual agency is predominant throughout the series. For example she enjoys casual sex as well as S/M practices. Alice Bullard states:

Look at the seemingly empowered character, Nancy Botwin, in Show Time’s popular series, *Weeds*. She likes a bit of rough sex, some slapping around, with hands or belts, only gets her hotter. She likes the bruises. (2012, 14)

Nancy indeed flirts with danger. In the drug trade, and in her sexual practices and partners, she seems to push boundaries on conservative gender norms of femininity and maternal representations. Throughout the series Nancy has sexual encounters with various men and a woman. Her early sexual history includes a relationship with a teacher when she was in high school. In the series her oldest son discovers that his natural father was another of his mother’s teenage flings and not the man that raised him. Nancy is not presented as the chaste and pure mother. She has a history, a sexual appetite and desires. Unlike traditional female characters in sitcom dramas, she doesn’t spend her time yearning for meaningful relationships. McRobbie’s notion of the phallic girl, as highlighted earlier, seems to encapsulate Nancy’s character. She can be read as in concert “with a definition of sex as light-hearted pleasure, recreational activity, hedonism, sport, reward and stature” (2009, 83). Furthermore, when confronted with difficult situations Nancy attempts to trade her feminine sexuality for her own advantage.

Nancy engages in sexual freedom and embraces her sexuality through her choice of clothes. Short skirts, halter-neck tops and figure-defining clothing are part of her regular wardrobe. Tattoos also adorn her body. These connote an expression of self-identity and are a distinctive sign of her individuality. In the context of the conservative gated community that Nancy originally emerged from where middle-class mores would have made tattoos anathema her tattoos allude to her adoption of risqué behaviour. Aged in her 40s, Nancy’s dress is not presented as that of the

standard 'respectable' white middle class, middle-aged mother from the suburbs.

There are many examples of Nancy 'sexualising' her clothing. One from Season Seven is when a prison reform group gives Nancy clothes for a job interview. She is depicted modifying the attire to express her overt sexuality. Moreover, the tendency for showing off flesh is a more common feature of youth fashion with its emphasis on sexuality. This may reflect "the 'girlification' of adult women" which as Rosalind Gill highlights "is the flip side of a media culture that promotes female children as its most desirable sexual icons" (2007, 151).

Nancy's dress and her behaviour at times seem more adolescent and impetuous than the dress and behavior expected of a middle-age mother. For example, throughout *Weeds*, Nancy is often sipping, and sometimes slurping, iced coffee from a straw. These actions reinforce the image of Nancy's girlishness. Motherhood and the conservative norms surrounding it seem to be shackles for Nancy. She seems compelled to revert to the rebellious teenage behaviour of her youth. She appears to want to return to a single life without the burden of children, though, of course, this for Nancy can never be achieved.

As previously highlighted, Nancy uses her sexuality as a tool to manipulate situations. Her sexuality is further shown in the accompanying promotional material for the series, which places emphasis on traditional feminine deportment, such as the tilted body posture and long flowing hair. Nancy is presented as the phallic girl, as an overtly sexualized female engaging in a masculine sphere of pursuits. McRobbie adds that "such female phallicism is in fact a provocation to feminism, a triumphant gesture on the part of resurgent patriarchy" (2009, p. 85). Nancy plays in the patriarchal game, but through the use of tactics, and her willfulness she appears in control. Nancy's influence is seen through her sexuality and this is further reinforced in her interaction with powerful male characters.

In series two, episode eight Nancy is referred to by the rapper Snoop Dog, who is a client of her associate, as a "mother I'd like to fuck" or in colloquial terms a MILF. In the music lyrics that Snoop Dog subsequently raps about her and her weed supply, he states "give it to me quick, give it to me fast. I want to tap you on your white ass". Nancy's MILF status is an expression of a sexually desirable woman while also signalling her mother status. She embraces this term for a sexualized mother, and her

weed product is aptly named MILF. Notably, Lara Bradshaw has commented that:

The MILF figure within the Showtime universe represents a conflicting relationship to female empowerment and child-rearing responsibilities that engages with a larger postfeminist trope of women failing to achieve perfect motherhood. (2013, 173)

As I discussed earlier, Nancy is certainly not depicted as the 'perfect mother'. Her femininity, sexuality and willfulness challenge this trope.

As a mother Nancy presents the colloquial 'yummy mummy' description which has "saturated popular culture and is represented across television programmes" (Allen and Osgood 2009, 6). Moreover, 'Yummy mummies' is a "capitalised and commodified maternal femininity under neoliberalism" (Orgad and De Benedictis 2015, 419). Allen and Osgood assert:

In the figure of the Yummy Mummy, a very specific configuration of motherhood (occupied by white, heterosexual, middle-class professional women) is being celebrated as a desirable identity; one that embodies female choice, autonomy, consumerism and aesthetic perfection whilst denying a space for drudgery or confinement to the home. (2009, 6)

This description fits Nancy's character. In *Weeds*, we have followed her self-fashioning as she has liberated herself from the domestic sphere. Nancy is seen self-fashioning her self "according to the tenets of self-made gangster identity—becoming more agentive, forceful, and reflexive in her dealing praxis" (Long 2008, 116). As a postfeminist neoliberal subject she is empowered and is striving for financial success.

Conclusion

The substance of *Weeds* centres on our expectations of motherhood. Nancy pushes the boundaries of acceptable behaviour for the maternal on television by demonstrating a maternal ambivalence which also seems to have set a paradigm for more complex mother characters on other Showtime series that are female centered. For example, in the series *The United States of Tara* (2009-2011) which commenced two years after *Weeds*, the mother played by Toni Collette has been written about in a remarkably similar fashion to Nancy. Though, in the case of Tara, her performance can be attributed to her disassociated identity disorder, she

is described as a “dynamic character who’s flawed beyond measure... Tara’s a classic bad mother, not the best wife and she’s completely focused on putting herself first” (McGurk 2010). Indeed, perhaps, it could be said that Nancy’s behaviour is that of a woman and mother dealing with the trauma of loss and grief. Nevertheless, as Bonnie Dow (1996) suggests in her book, *Prime Time Feminism*, television is a negotiation between hegemonic and counter-discourses. The maternal representations conveyed on television, she argues, are a product of the political and ideological culture of a particular historical moment. As such, *Weeds* conveys a revisioning shifting construction of the Western mother now portrayed through neoliberalism.

Nancy’s character is entrepreneurial. She will do whatever it takes to succeed in the drug trade. Nancy is the postfeminist neoliberal subject who is “required to be reflexive and to make” her “own way in life, no matter what conditions or forces might constrain” her (Harris and Dobson 2015, 148-149). Although she is given the opportunity throughout the eight seasons of the show to work in regular jobs, Nancy refuses to stay in the position of a subordinate. Through trafficking in weed she attempts to gain autonomy and self-empowerment. She is the phallic girl “who gives the impression of having won equality with men by becoming like her male counterparts...but there is no critique of masculine hegemony” (McRobbie 2009, p 83). *Weeds* presents a neoliberal world in which a woman can achieve success by embracing masculine, capitalist, individualistic endeavours whilst still adhering to girlish and sexually overt practices.

In the final season, Nancy’s has shares in a corporate drug business which is worth millions of dollars. Marijuana is legal and is sold nationwide in the equivalent of Starbuck cafes. This is far removed from Nancy’s humble suburban lifestyle of selling drugs, “while lounging in the sun at her son’s soccer game” (Ganz 2014, 25). Her dangerous illicit drug journey evolved into a legitimate business with the realms of corporate America. This whole scenario is a white, neoliberal fantasy. Nancy’s success is a prime example of neoliberalism aiding capitalist advancement (Harvey 2005). *Weeds* offers the illusion that with a postfeminist and neoliberalist agenda she achieves the epitome of a single mother who has it all.

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