“Tyra Banks Is Fat”: Reading (Post-)Racism and (Post-)Feminism in the New Millennium

Ralina L. Joseph

In the new millennium United States, race and gender are popularly understood, from legislation to television, as personal, individual, and mutable traits and not structural, institutional, and historic forces. The incredible popularity of African-American supermodel cum media mogul Tyra Banks reflects, creates, and perpetuates such post-racial and post-feminist ideologies. In this paper I examine the recent infotainment-media scrutiny of Banks's weight gain and her publicity team's carefully scripted "so what!" retort. I thus explore how the figure of Tyra Banks functions as a celebrity-exemplar of the post-feminist/post-racial U.S.

Keywords: African American; Gender; Race; Women of Color; Post-identity; Colorblindness; Post-Race; Post-Feminism

On January 3, 2007, celebrity tabloid websites exploded with gossip about African-American supermodel cum media mogul Tyra Banks's apparently precipitous weight gain. The headline on the first website to break the story (http://www.egotastic.com) read simply, “Tyra Banks is Fat.” Subsequently, tabloid websites gleefully sniped in their titles:

‘Tyra Banks gained some weight. And when I say some, I mean a lot,’ ‘Former model Tyra Banks reminds the world why she is now retired from the runway,’ ‘Dude, did Tyra gain like 50 pounds below the neck?,’ ‘Tyra pork chops,’ and ‘America’s Next Top Waddle.’ (Good Morning America, 2007)

The racialized and gendered nature of Banks’s media coverage is evident in the headlines alone. Furthermore, in at least one of the headlines, a disciplining straight white male gaze is implicit, in the address of “dude.” In a new millennium, post-identity manner, Banks's race and gender appear through coded discussions of the...
black female body generally, and, more specifically, of black female breasts, thighs, and buttocks. The joking, nudgingly misogynistic and racist, and coded post-feminist and post-racial message from these headlines is clear: Banks must be publicly upbraided for failing to maintain her black female body to impossible standards, for not sufficiently disciplining her physicality—a notion that feminist scholars like Sandra Bartky and Sarah Banet-Weiser have borrowed from Michel Foucault’s notion that modern society exerts a painful and punishing control over women’s bodies (Bartky, 1990; Banet-Weiser, 1999; Foucault, 1977). Banks becomes an object of derision because of her bodily failures.

The hyper-focus on her body is, of course, racialized as well as gendered. Banks is reprimanded for her pendulous breasts and behind, for the weight she has gained “below the neck.” Banks enters a new millennium representational landscape overdetermined by race and gender and at the same time in denial of its overdetermined nature. In the initial tabloid scoop on Banks’s weight gain, two accompanying photographs provided visual proof that indeed Banks was belying her supermodel pedigree with the mere fact of an ostensible weight gain. This visual proof is clearly necessary here—we must see these images to believe them. This is particularly true in representations of women of color, as Evelynn Hammonds (1997) argues: “[I]n the US race has always been dependent upon the visual” (p. 108). In the revelatory photos, Banks wears an ill-fitting strapless swimsuit, long straight blonde hair extensions, and an expression of irritation.

The Banks “fat scandal” is emblematic of the manner in which women, and specifically women of color, are consumed and spat out in the popular sphere. Despite the racialized and gendered nature of all aspects of American life, including media coverage, twenty-first-century U.S. culture is replete with the idea that we are beyond, past, or “post-” notions of race-, gender-, and sexuality-based discrimination. This thought stems partially from post-race and post-gender legislation (i.e., anti-affirmative action measures in the form of California’s Proposition 209 and Washington’s Initiative 200, to name just two) and partially from the wider variety of racialized and gendered representations in the media today. Indeed, even a cursory examination of popular culture reveals a fairly diverse universe where, for example, LGBT characters populate Oscar-nominated films, a Latino male, African-American male, and white female candidate vied for the Democratic presidential nomination, and black women are popular televisual subjects and media celebrities.

One such subject, supermodel-turned-media-mogul Tyra Banks, has made a career out of presenting herself, on the one hand, as a “post-identity” everywoman who embodies a universal appeal because of her positioning as a liberal, democratic, colorblind subject, and on the other hand as an African-American supermodel who embodies niche desirability because of her positioning as a racially specific, black female subject. This tricky balance ultimately showcases race and gender as malleable forces, deployed for strategic gain and untouched by structures and institutions of racism and sexism. While this posturing has served her well in garnering commercial success, in this article I examine how Banks’s attempts to go beyond race and gender, or what I read as performing a post-racial, post-feminist ideology, proved to be
impossible in one telling incident, a tabloid-created “scandal” about Banks’s apparent weight gain. To inform my reading of this incident, I review “the post-,” and analyze Banks’s representations on her website, talk show, and reality show, tracing her strategic movement from post- to intersectional and back to post-. For women of color like Banks, while some “hegemonic instability” (Mukherjee, 2006) occurs in her response to the tabloids, postmodern identity play—or, in the language of Banks, shrugging “so what”—remains difficult, if not impossible, because of the structuring forces of race and gender.

Mapping Posts-: Post-Race and Post-Feminism

Before I proceed to the specifics of the case study, I want to illustrate the landscape of post-identity politics and, particularly, post-racial and post-feminist identity positioning. I have chosen the Banks “fat scandal” because it was so popular that it sustained fickle tabloid attention for quite awhile, with Banks’s response to the tabloids becoming, for example, the record-breaking clip on You Tube at the time (Ferguson, 2007). I have also chosen to write on this media event because it is remarkably representative of how women of color public figures are interpellated in racialized and gendered media culture today. Representations of Banks remain a rich site of investigation as, a New York Times Magazine cover story attests, she appears to hold her public in thrall (Hirschberg, 2008). The manner in which the Banks pseudo-scandal unfolded in the media illustrates the illusion that the ostensibly monolithic ideologies of racism and sexism, imagined in a frozen moment of the pre-civil rights and pre-second wave feminist movements, are so defunct that the mere acknowledgment of race or gender leads to the real problem of the twenty-first century: not the color-line, not racism, not sexism, and not abuses of power, but race and gender as mere categories of analysis. This is the defense of the post- ideology of race, or post-race, where it is popularly assumed that the civil rights movement effectively eradicated racism to the extent that not only does racism no longer exist, but race itself no longer matters.

A wide array of scholars have interrogated post-race using a variety of related terms, including “colorblindness,” used by legal scholars like Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres (2002), “colorblind racism,” utilized by sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003), “colormute,” coined by anthropologist Mica Pollock (2005), “racial apathy,” deployed by sociologists Tyrone Forman and Amanda Lewis (2006), and “post civil rights,” applied by journalists, critics, and academics alike. One of the more strident embraces of post-race comes from Paul Gilroy (2000), who challenges the “crisis of raciology,” claiming that holding onto “race thinking,” even, or perhaps especially, by anti-racist activists and critical race scholars, fosters “specious ontologies” and “lazy essentialisms” (p. 53). These are terms chosen by authors to denote or critique some moment after the importance of race. I favor the term “post-race” because it highlights the continued centrality of race in this ideology where race is ostensibly immaterial. I contend that in its very denial of the uses of “race,” post-raciality remains embroiled in precisely what it claims not to be. In other words, “post-race” is
an ideology that cannot escape racialization, complete with controlling images or racialized stereotypes.

The assumption of post-racial ideology that inequality is at an end is also shared by the conjoined post-ideology of feminism, or post-feminism. In post-feminism it is assumed that the second wave feminist movement eradicated sexism to the extent that it no longer exists, and the problem remains focusing on patriarchy and gender discrimination. Media studies scholars from Angela McRobbie (2004, 2008) to Sarah Banet-Weiser (1999, 2007), Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004), Charlotte Brunsdon (2005), and Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (2007) are producing critiques of post-feminism, which is also popularly known as girl-power feminism and anti-feminism. While scholarship critiquing post-feminism often makes the effort to mention race—noting, for example, that post-feminist scholarship largely focuses on white women—there has been less attention paid to women of color and fewer sustained critiques of post-race and post-feminism in tandem, outside of works by scholars like Banet-Weiser and Kimberly Springer (2002, 2007). I am attempting to build on Banet-Weiser’s and Springer’s works, as I scaffold a post-race and post-feminist critique. Such a critique is necessary because discourses of post-race are undeniably gendered, and discourses of post-feminism are undeniably raced.

While I am focusing here on the parallels between the two ideologies of post-feminism and post-race, I want to be clear that there are also a number of differences between these two post-ideologies. One of the biggest differences is that similarities abound between the power-evasive ideas of post-race and post-feminism, not post-race and post-gender, or a Butlerian-inspired effort to deconstruct gender roles, behaviors, performances, and ideals (Butler, 1990, 1993). Post-feminism is reliant upon staid and what are often assumed to be biologically-based performances or hyper-signifiers of heterosexuality, femininity, and maternity, for example, and is also a politicized notion, which one could argue informs everything from attacks on Title IX to rape laws. Similarly, as Roopali Mukherjee argues (2006), post-racial ideology largely informed the campaigns for neo-conservative political measures like California’s 1996 anti-affirmative action measure Proposition 209, California’s 2003 “racial privacy initiative” Proposition 54, and the Supreme Court’s 2007 decision ruling against the use of “racial tiebreakers” in public school student placement (Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1). In other words, in order to garner support for “colorblind” political measures, which scholars like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) illustrate actually produce a truly racist effect, pundits and politicians proselytize about post-race to create the illusion that the contemporary United States is a racially level playing field where race-based measures are not only unnecessary for people of color, but actually disempower whites. 3

The intersectional post-moments of post-race and post-feminism flourish in the realm of popular culture, which, as cultural studies scholars like Stuart Hall (1996b), Angela McRobbie (1999), and George Lipsitz (1990) remind us, is the arena in which we imagine ourselves. It is where the so-called fictions of our identities, like those of race and gender, become facts. Since post-feminism and post-race are constantly shifting, popular culture, with its own constant shifts, is a logical arena in which to
analyze changing power dynamics. Indeed, as Sean Nixon (2000) points out, popular culture “is one central area of this translation and negotiation” of hegemonic ideologies (p. 256). Thus, popular culture both reflects and produces ideologies that translate to racialized and gendered differences in, for example, home ownership, college graduation, life expectancy, hourly wages, and prenatal care. And yet much popular culture, as a type of consumer culture, often ignores these racialized and gendered realities and instead largely serves the ideological function of post-race and post-feminism. Toeing this line comes the Banks weight gain “scandal.”

Bankable Commodity: Flexible Race, Sizable Profits, Tyra, and the Post-
As a result of her reality television show, America’s Next Top Model, 34-year-old African-American supermodel-turned-media-mogul Tyra Banks has shot to multi-national stardom over a relatively short period of time. According to the narrative spun by Banks and her publicity team, she continuously transforms herself from the post-feminized and post-racialized categories of girl next door to supermodel to sex symbol to media mogul: she is both any woman and a one-in-a-million star, someone destined for success because of her phenomenal looks but truly excelling because of her “girl power” attitude. Banks’s slick official website (http://www.tyrabanks.com) is a treasure trove of Banks photographs; these images illustrate her production team’s successful branding of her as all four of these marketable categories.

Banks as the girl next door has a wide, friendly smile, a coy look, and long, carefully windswept hair. These three 1990s-era photographs, which I have identified as quintessentially “girl next door” pictures, all position Banks on the beach. She is a warm, sunny, inviting fantasy in which to engage, just like her backdrops. Banks’s supermodel poses and her haute couture persona, is not at all accessible or friendly, but desirable in its punishing, inaccessible beauty. The sex symbol pictures illustrate two of Banks’s most profitable images, which form the basis of her brand identity. Both of these images mark historic moments in the modeling industry: Banks was the first black woman to be exclusively featured on the cover of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition and the Victoria’s Secret catalogue (Elber, 2006). The photographs of Banks as media mogul feature a coiffed, corporate hairstyle, business suit, and a self-confident half-smile, against the backdrop of news footage and pictured with two unnamed, corporate-looking white men; both the news and the white men function as proof of her success.

On her website the pictures narrate a tale of success performed through various post-racial, post-feminist personae. At any given moment Banks moves recursively between each of these phases, cleverly matching fickle market desires. This is an important aspect of branding and brand culture, as activist-scholar Naomi Klein has illustrated (2000). It is also important to underscore the racially specific nature of Banks’s photographs. As Jane Rhodes notes, building off the works of Stuart Hall, “[B]lackness is not a fixed racial category, but part of a rather fluid and malleable set of representations that change meaning depending on time, place, and context” (2007, p. 5). My analysis of Banks’s carefully controlled, officially sanctioned website
images illustrates the importance of Banks embodying characteristics that all young women can aspire towards and eventually, ostensibly, possess, while still fostering a uniqueness that makes her so “bankable.” Although Banks's body is marked differently in each of these four personae, which is evident, for example, through signifiers of wardrobe, hair, posture, eye contact, and facial expression, her post-feminist, post-racial packaging remains constant, and facilitates her movement through identities.

Just as a chameleonic identity play has proved to be profitable for Banks, a failure to change racialized and gendered personae has been grounds for Banks to upbraid contestants on her popular reality television show, America's Next Top Model. Indeed, Banks is notorious for disciplining women of color contestants on ANTM for non-fluid, non-post-racial, non-post-feminist behavior. This is a show where a brown-skinned African-American woman is maligned for the “ethnic” gap in her teeth and her working class, black southern accent. This is a show where a Latina contestant is told to “work it” as “Cha Cha” or risk elimination. This is a show where a mixed-race Asian-American contestant is eliminated because she fails to perform Asianness in a way the judging panel deems “authentic,” and another Asian-American contestant is reprimanded because she reveals that she has not dated Asian-American men. This is the type of behavior that prompted the on-line cultural commentary magazine slate.com to post an article, “Is Tyra Banks Racist?” where the columnist J.E. Dahl blasts Banks for “trying to eradicate ethnic idiosyncrasies in [ANTM contestants’] personality and appearance . . . [and for thinking] dark skin should be tougher than light” (Dahl, 2006). On ANTM, as in her website pictures, Banks performs a seemingly self-conscious decision to eschew explicit talk of race and gender while inserting codes for “appropriately” racialized and gendered behaviors.

Banks articulates a “post-” philosophy in the advice she gives aspiring models on ANTM: be racially specific enough to connote difference, desire, and exoticism, but enough of a colorblind, blank slate to acquire success in the commercial, white-desirous marketplace; be sexy enough to garner desire and media obsession, but be enough of a role model to earn a wide variety of corporate sponsorships. This post-philosophy has developed from ANTM's first airing in May 2003 and nine seasons to date. On this show young women are transformed by Banks and her fashion team, which largely consists of gay men and people of color, into models in the mold of Banks. They become “girl power” spokesmodels, women who understand the marketability and chameleonic nature of racial performance. The show boasts incredible popularity on the CW network, formed in 2006 as a union of two previous “urban” and “female” niche market stations, UPN and the WB. Across networks Top Model is frequently number one in its timeslot with women 18–34 and often shows up as the number one television show in its timeslot in African-American households (Stack, 2007).

The success of ANTM led to Banks's eponymous talk show, currently in its second season. Under the aegis of her production company, Bankable Productions, Banks has plans for a sitcom, a one-hour reality show featuring the former ANTM contestants back in their normal lives (an “all stars” show), and a live show (Sales, 2007). In
Banks’s own words to talk show host Larry King, “Bankable [Productions] mantra is things fantasy-based and also empowering to women as well as fantasy, too, and entertaining” (King, 2007). Brand Tyra, marked by the fantasies of post-race and post-feminism, sells big: her 2006 income was reportedly $18 million (Sales, 2007). Banks’s production company owns 25% of the lucrative ANTM franchise, which has spawned 19 national versions across Europe and Asia, including shows in France, Israel, Malaysia, the Philippines, Slovakia, Sweden, Thailand, and Turkey. The original ANTM enjoys syndication in 110 countries. On ANTM post-raciality and post-feminism amount to exceedingly savvy marketing techniques.

Banks’s talk show The Tyra Banks Show, also on the CW network, began in the autumn of 2005 and balances race- and gender-themed shows with episodes emphasizing some aspect of Banks’s physicality. For example, in the show’s first episode Banks had a doctor administer a sonogram on her breasts in front of the studio audience in order to prove that they are not silicone-enhanced. Episodes celebrating Banks’s exceptional physique play against “issue episodes” in which the show often clunkily examines various forms of prejudice through episodes like “Will Racial Stereotypes Hold the Next Generation Back?” and “Coming out as Transgender.” The end result of these issue episodes is ultimately Banks shrugging her shoulders and saying “So what?” as she upholds the power of individual choice, meritocracy, and the post-

Banks’s post- philosophy was particularly in effect during the premiere episode of her second season, airing on September 11, 2006, and entitled “Racial Injustice: Who’s Got it Worst.” During a first-person camera address that opens the episode, Banks gazes into the camera and earnestly explains that she intends for this episode to function as a commemoration for the devastation at the Twin Towers five years earlier. The show, which Banks bills as a “social experiment,” attempts to deal with racial prejudice faced by African-American, Muslim-American, Latino, Asian-American, and white women. Inclusion of white women as a racially aggrieved group can be seen as an ultimate post-racial move, as it fends off allegations of “reverse racism” and also plays to sponsors and white audiences. While most of the show features these women exploring their experiences of racism and racialized patriarchy in emotional yet carefully controlled ways, when one of the audience members on the show explodes in frustration, Banks silences her and quells her fury by literally pulling the woman into her breasts and maternally patting and shushing her. Banks’s body, and more specifically her breasts, remain starring characters in her many media appearances. Banks is rarely without a low-cut, décolletage-emphasizing outfit, as her breasts are indeed a major signifier of the Tyra brand. The episode ends with “race experts,” a white male and black female professor from UCLA, leading the studio audience through a “unity” exercise which ends with all women holding hands and chanting. One of the final camera shots features a brown hand and white hand locked in embrace and thrust skyward in a triumphant, post-racial, post-feminist statement. This episode is emblematic of the way the Tyra Banks Show solves problems of racism, patriarchy, and discrimination: magically equalizing all through multicultural celebrations of “women.”
Nonetheless, some might read the ubiquitous visibility and success of Banks in the popular sphere as progress in and of itself. Indeed, not only is she an African-American woman in a position of incredible power, but on both of her television shows she highlights the stories of women of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people, and working class and disabled women. In other words, while Banks’s message is post-, many of her stories feature women struggling with the effect of structural inequalities. Banks herself met the effects of such inequalities during a media attack when the fantasy space of television was unable to provide a shield from racism and misogyny. Thus, the post- that proves so profitable for much of Banks’s career fell out during her tabloid weight-gain “scandal.”

Calling Out Racism and Sexism: Banking Against the Post-

After the release of the “fat scandal” photographs on the internet, gossip magazines featured them also. This included tabloid *Star* magazine’s assessment of Banks as part of its “Weight Winners and Losers” of 2006 segment (“Weight,” 2007). Shown as two halves of a picture, and therefore automatically posited as opposites, these two shots are markedly different in their *mise-en-scène*. In the posed “winner” shot, a publicity still from an episode on the *Tyra Banks Show* called “Panty Party,” a celebration of women’s undergarments, Banks’s open-mouthed, smiling expression, open arms, and lingerie-clad body show her literal embrace of the viewer. In opposition, “loser” Banks is shown turned away from the camera, refusing to connect with the viewer, not selling her image. These tabloid exposé photos of “real” Banks reveal the so-called truth of Banks and posit that the smiling, friendly, post-feminist, post-racial version of Banks that audiences are privy to on television is a lie.

“Weight Winners and Losers” is part of a regular series that *Star* magazine puts out. Banks was one of seven people featured, including another black female star Banks has publicly idolized, fellow “loser” Oprah Winfrey. The numbers, glowing white against Banks’s brown thighs, denote some claim to objectivity. So-called scientific, impartial numbers translate to a truth of “winning” or “losing” in beauty, gender, race, and commercial success. The fact that readers are given no clue as to how the magazine arrived at such numbers is simply ignored.

However, the media blitz did not end with talk about Banks. Instead, Banks and her publicity team sought to control the moment. She seized the opportunity to defend and uphold the beauty of her body and create enough self-generated hype to ensure record-breaking numbers for the eighth-season premiere of *America’s Next Top Model* exactly eight weeks later on February 28, 2007. Banks told the press that instead of ignoring the unwanted weight-focused publicity, hiding out, and going on a crash diet, she wanted to use the opportunity to “speak back” to the world, defending her pictures and creating a “platform” for one of her “issues”—self-esteem. To “set the record straight” Banks appeared on the television talk show circuit where she refocused the event as one of self-esteem, body love, empowerment, and embracing the scale. She used the opportunity to re-frame herself as a positive role model for young women. Moreover, in her response Banks articulated an
intersectional critique by linking issues of gender discrimination to those of race discrimination, as she said on the *Larry King Live* talk show:

> [I]n the modeling world they can tell you to your face, your skin does not look good with my clothes or I don’t want black girls this season or I don’t want you or I want to pay you less. They say those types of things . . . . And it’s not illegal. (King, 2007)

Banks’s description of anti-black racism in the modeling industry is striking because her comments are indeed the very opposite of her pre-weight scandal post- and universal (all women, all races) response. So often Banks talks about expectations for all women, but here she spotlights the accepted racism against, in particular, black models in the industry. Banks places herself as part of a particularistic black female collectivity. In doing so she challenges post-feminism and post-racism in order to launch a race and gender critique.

Furthermore, the tenor of Banks’s *Larry King Live* comment was duplicated on Banks’s daytime talk show, when she devoted an episode to her response to the tabloids. On February 1, 2007, approximately one month after the release of the photos on the internet, the *Tyra Banks Show* aired an episode, “Tyra Confronts Her Fat Tabloid Photos,” devoted to Banks’s addressing the tabloid fury. Banks wears the same swimsuit as the tabloid exposé photographs, but here looks far more svelte. In the climactic scene of the episode, which has been logged on her show’s official website as stock footage, Banks stands next to series of still images of the pictures that caused such uproar. When Banks begins her first-person camera address her voice cracks and her eyes tear up, but as she continues speaking she gains more confidence in her delivery. Showing a self-reflexive understanding of her own corporate branding, she tells the camera that people are used to consuming a version of her body produced by careful poses that are the most flattering, “and everyone seems to be pretty ok with that.” She continues, “For some reason people have a serious problem when I look like” and she proceeds to pose in unflattering ways, sticking out her stomach and patting her thighs and behind. This produces a comedic effect as the audience laughs freely. Banks continues, and her tone shifts to a more serious one to demonstrate that she is no longer trying to produce laughter:

> But luckily I’m strong enough and I have a good support system. I mean I love my mama. She has helped me to be a strong woman so I can overcome these kinds of attacks. But if I had lower self-esteem I would probably be starving myself right now. But that’s exactly what is happening to other women all over this country. So I have something to say. To all of you who have something nasty to say to me or other women who are built like me. Women who sometimes or all the time look like this [at this point she sticks her stomach out and the audience does not laugh now]. Women whose names you know. Women whose names you don’t. Women who’ve been picked on. Women whose husbands put them down. Women at work or girls at school. I have one thing to say to you: kiss my fat ass! (Banks, 2007a)

Banks punctuates this last part by slapping her behind and defiantly throwing her fist in the air. The crowd explodes, jumping to their feet, clapping, and cheering.
The content and tone of Banks’s commentary mark a huge divergence from her typical public address. While Banks will discuss race and gender, such occasions, like the September 11 “Who’s Got it Worst” episode, are highly mediated and appear to be overwhelmingly produced for a post-racial, post-feminist effect. Here she appears unguarded, vulnerable, and defiant. Although Banks does not name the racialized nature of the attack on her, she is not trying to be post-feminist-cute; she is not trying to woo the camera. She is a part of a collectivity, but, unlike in post-feminism, there is no underlying competition. Banks is angry and she is looking out for her sisters. Her “kiss my fat ass” comments can be read, in the words of Brooks (2006) in her investigation of a nineteenth-century, racially ambiguous performer, in “a black feminist theoretical context that allows us to read her as racially using her body as a performative instrument of subjectivity rather than existing merely as an object of spectatorial ravishment and domination” (p. 137). Banks indeed resists such “ravishment and domination” in her talk show response to the tabloids.

Interestingly, Banks’s response illustrates the type of behavior she critiques ATNM contestants for: she is strong, defiant, and emotional—in sum, the image of an “angry black woman,” for which she upbraids her contestants. On ANTM, Banks performs a seemingly self-conscious decision to eschew explicit talk of race and gender while inserting codes for “appropriately” racialized and gendered behaviors. This is the type of racial punishing/post-racial and self-sexualizing/post-feminist ideology I thought I would find with the weight gain scandal. Instead, Banks iterates an anti-racist and feminist message largely absent on commercial television. This is a rare moment in which the post-ideology is ruptured in popular culture and Banks embraces what Sandoval (2000) designates an “oppositional consciousness” marking a moment of the “methodology of the oppressed.” More cynical readers of the event might dismiss Banks's comments as further branding. However, in the aftermath of the tabloid event Banks explicitly analyzes the structural nature of race and gender, something usually absolutely taboo in the public sphere.

Returning to the Post:- The “So What” Movement

Nevertheless, Banks’s fairly radical space of possibility was short-lived as the post-ideologies overwhelmingly dominate popular culture. Soon after this clip came a series of television spots and a People magazine cover story where Banks regulated her formerly defiant self. Although not apologizing for her past declaration, Banks greatly mitigates her anti-racist and feminist statements and illustrates the hegemonic power of the post-. In a series of interviews and talk show commentaries, Banks resitutes her tabloid coverage onto a post-feminist, post-racial terrain where one should simply assert “So what?” to racist, misogynistic attacks. On “Tyra’s PEOPLE Magazine Cover Update,” an episode of her talk show that aired three weeks after Banks’s initial response, she dons not the same swimsuit, as she is clearly done with that, but instead a flattering red bodysuit, which all members of her studio audience also wear. She is shown with her audience, wearing the same outfit but looking so
much better in an iteration of post-feminist competition. Onto all of the bodysuits are affixed white numbers, as all of the audience members are literally wearing their body weight on their chests. Unlike the feature in *Star* where the magazine labeled Banks with their own numbers, here Banks embraces her own chosen numbers. This is post-feminism at its finest—the guise of sisterhood, a performance of homosocial camaraderie with underlying competition and choice.

This time, when Banks makes her first person camera address she is positioned directly in front of the audience instead of against a screen. Her words are positioned as representing not only herself but the women in the studio, and even all women. In a smiling, breezy tone she tells the audience:

> Well this is the movement where I’m giving you all, everybody here in the audience here and everybody watching at home, a self-esteem homework assignment that we can all do together. I want everyone to take a risk and to do something completely outside of your comfort zone and celebrate the fact that you did it. Whether it’s running around your neighborhood in a bikini screaming ‘So what?’ Alright! Or it’s walking through the supermarket and telling everyone in the frozen food section how much you weigh. Or stepping out of the dressing room and into the center of the lingerie department to say, ‘I think my booty looks good in these panties!’ Or allowing your man to take you to an all you can eat buffet and allowing yourself to go back for seconds and maybe even thirds . . . And I’ve got to let everybody know, my little call to action and my homework is being on the stage is all ya’ll seeing my cellulite. I’ve never done this. I have never done this. I know you guys are like, that’s the dimples she’s talking about! You’re all getting a view of it! (Banks, 2007b)

Banks’s statements are punctuated by clear statements of audience approval. The camera frequently pulls away from Banks for quick reaction shots of supportive laughter, whoops of agreement, or adoring looks from the audience members. In short, the audience’s approval is shown to be full and frequent. And yet, Banks’s message itself is also an irresponsible one as it suggests at least one way for women to place themselves in bodily danger: “running around your neighborhood in a bikini screaming ‘So what?’” The tone, the message, and the breezy, cutesy attitude are markedly different from her earlier tabloid address. While Banks’s terminology of a “call to action” sounds politically engaged, it ends up being a post-(per)version of the phrase.

It appears as though some forces have intervened in between these two clips to change Banks’s response from intersectional to post-. Part of the way this happens is through re-framing the issue onto the safer post-racial, post-feminist topic of self-esteem, which is only coded as safer because it is presented as the effect of individual choice. Indeed, self-esteem remains a highly politicized, racialized notion. By reinterpreting the attack as self-esteem-based instead of systemically race and gender hatred-based, Banks asserts that one can simply choose to rise above racism and misogyny.

The numbers on the bodysuits add to the post-performance. The weight numbers on Banks’s chest are applied by one of Banks’s assistants at her request. She chooses to place the numbers onto her body, and more specifically, onto her breasts. Later in the
show Banks chooses to take off the numbers. Her legions of fans in the studio audience are shown following her lead, as they too remove their numbers. Absent from the discussion in the show is any admission of the real dieting to which Banks must have committed—despite assertions to the contrary Banks is markedly smaller from the scandal photos to the “kiss my fat ass” address and then to the “So what?” address. Also absent is a discussion of any possible airbrushing on the ostensibly “real” People magazine cover.

**Ideology and the Post-**

Banks’s media “scandal” is so important because it illustrates the flexible and pervasive ideologies of post-feminism and post-race in United States culture. The media, as a primary agent of ideological production, produces ideologically omnipresent notions of race and gender, which as the Banks’s “fat scandal” illustrates, often amounts to, in the twenty-first-century United States, post-race and post-feminism. Nevertheless, despite the omnipotence of hegemonic ideologies, Stuart Hall argues that ideology is a fluid force that is constantly changing in order to meet the changing forces of hegemony. Because of this constant movement, ideological parameters, at times, appear to be contradictory. In fact, ideologies of post-feminism and post-race seem to hide themselves temporarily in times of crisis. This is precisely what happened in Banks’s initial feminist and anti-racist response.

Of course, there is nothing shocking about popular media expressions of anti-black-, anti-woman-based hatred. Black feminist scholarship from Cooper (1998) to Brooks (2007) illuminates how black women’s bodies are, as a matter of course, hyper-visual and marked as morally, ethically wrong. The marking of black women’s bodies occurs through an often unspoken celebration of their ostensibly opposite, white women’s bodies, illustrating what Crenshaw (1995) calls the “sexual hierarchy” that “holds certain [white] female bodies in higher regard than [black] others” (p. 368).

While the landscape of popular culture largely ignores such truths in lieu of post-ideologies, sometimes some version of the truth is “exposed.” At the same time, resistant possibilities do surface in popular culture, even in commercial popular culture. The pervasive post-logic goes: for the purposes of “democracy” the imagined white “we” have to acknowledge racism and sexism, but also for the purposes of democracy and, more importantly, for progress, “we,” or more accurately people of color, have to move on, which translates as abandoning a critique of structural inequality. Thus, temporary ideological ruptures can, in fact, help shore up hegemonic ideologies, or make post-moments become operative, functional, and even more powerful. The post-returns after the press’s relatively quick acknowledgement of power inequities. Part of the narrative of post- is moving beyond racialized and gendered violations to a point where they no long affect oneself—where “So what?,” as Tyra Banks decries, is the only appropriate response.
Conclusion

This narrative of individual post-racial, post-feminist success is one of rising above racism and sexism to the point where identity categories themselves no longer exist. The media spectacle surrounding Tyra Banks’s weight gain reinscribes the centrality of a connected post-racial/post-feminist ideology by temporarily abandoning the post- in lieu of race/gender critique, only to fall back into a post- moment. Again, why are Banks’s words so important? Why is her shift from the discourse of post- to intersectional critique and back to post- discourse so important? Is there something different that happens when people of color enact various tropes of post-race and women perform post-feminism? While most scholars have focused on white enactment of the rhetoric of colorblindness, no matter who is espousing this ideology it remains an ideology informed and fortified by whiteness. Indeed, famous people of color in the media have also taken up this ideology to an incredibly powerful effect. Their post- assertions are used as the authentic voices, the true proof that racism and patriarchy are dead. So, when conservative pundits like Ward Connerly (2002), Richard Rodriguez (2003), Dinesh D’Souza (1995), or Shelby Steele (1991, 2007) make statements such as the following, which anti-affirmative action proselytizer Connerly made in an 1998 interview, they are taken as concrete evidence of a so-called level playing field:

I think that Joe Sixpack’s and Jane Chablis’s attitudes [about race] have fundamentally changed. There are four people in our society who you can argue are the most popular figures in America. They all happen to be black: Colin Powell, Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby, and Michael Jordan. Whites outnumber blacks by 8 to 1 almost; name me four whites who are equal in respect to those four .... Those four reflect the changing attitudes of white America. (quoted in Lynch, 1998)

According to Connerly, what remains of primary importance is the “attitude” of whites. What is implied here is that “attitude” reflects racialized reality. This, of course, is contrary to much social scientific work, including scholarship by authors like sociologists Tyrone Forman and Amanda Lewis that illustrates the pervasiveness of post-racial “attitude” despite the persistence of racialized inequality (2006). In statements like Connerly’s, what is most important are not markers of poverty or markers of success for people of color, but general public attitudes towards incredibly wealthy and powerful black celebrities.

These statements, like Banks’s, are taken as unequivocal, authentic truth because people of color are uttering them. Their notions of meritocracy, of achieving success purely through hard work, are post-racial, post-feminist fallacies imagined through romanticized notions of the American Dream, which with its utopian promise ignores racial hierarchy, patriarchy, and structural inequality. When these post- ideas of the American Dream are performed by celebrities like Banks, their own bodies of color are used to demonstrate the viability of colorblindness and post-feminism. Banks’s “So what?” ideology both arises out of and recreates popular notions of post-race and post-feminism. “So what?” is used as proof that racism and sexism do not really matter or have any real effects. “So what?” tells us that if African-American
female Tyra Banks can make $18 million in 2006, anyone can, and, more specifically, black and brown people who fail to achieve such success are simply not working hard enough. Banks’s own rhetoric, her statements and her silences, helped to garner this idea. What is ignored is the very material nature of the “So what?” ideology and how this materiality is often dismissed when the post- is deployed in the media.

Furthermore, what the ideologies of post-feminism and post-race disregard is that race and gender determine almost all factors informing our lives. In the new millennium United States, nearly 150 years after the end of chattel slavery and more than fifty years after the end of de jure racial segregation, the black–white divide continues to bear both real and symbolic weight. Life expectancy is 72 for blacks versus 78 for whites; African Americans are twice as likely as whites to die from disease, accident, behavior, or homicide; fewer than 50% of black families own homes versus more than 70% of white families; African Americans are denied mortgages and home loans at twice the rate of whites; and a black person’s average jail sentence is six months longer than that of a white person’s for the same crime (Jones, 2007). This divide is gendered as well as racialized: for every dollar earned by white men, white women receive 77 cents, and black women receive 72 (AAUW, 2007). Post-racial and post-feminist ideologies ignore this reality in lieu of egalitarian fantasy.

And yet, in her response to the “fat scandal” Banks temporarily ruptured post-ideologies. Despite the fact that after her “kiss my fat ass” response she returned to a post- message, the rupturing words were released to the public sphere. Banks’s feminist, anti-racist response cannot be taken back despite her later regulation of her comments. Furthermore, while I have done an analysis of Banks’s words I have not had space to examine how her audiences decode these events. Even when Banks is not talking explicitly about racism and sexism, her audience is, her critics are, and, most likely, her production team and her network executives are. What is clear is that after the “fat scandal” Banks has been talking more about race and gender and, according to a February 2008 article in Essence magazine, is on a “new mission to transform Hollywood by putting Black women front and center” (Smith, 2008, p. 132).

The very raced and gendered media spectacle surrounding Banks’s recent weight-gain and her attempted cooptation of the media spectacle opened up a moment where Banks, who has fought hard to mark herself as color-neutral by largely eschewing talk of structural racial discrimination, or racism outside of individual, isolated, and changeable prejudice, spoke publicly in the aftermath about systemic racial discrimination. This introduced a category crisis, in the words of Garber (1992), where dichotomized notions of post-race and post-gender were temporarily shunted aside in lieu of “the third”, “which questions binary thinking” and creates “a space of possibility” (p. 11). Banks produced an intersectional analysis of the event as perhaps still dichotomized, but also as racist and sexist. This represents a space of possibility in commercial popular culture. While Banks may not be an anti-racist, feminist activist in most of her media representations, in a moment of attack her intersectional response is significant. In addition, the strength of the post- ideology is highlighted in the aftermath of the attack when Banks turns to a quintessentially post- response.
In the popular media, as in other expressions of U.S. race and gender ideologies, notions of post-race and post-feminism are entirely reliant upon each other and are indeed operative because of the other. Whether perfectly posed and airbrushed on the cover of People magazine, “natural” on her talk show, semi-scripted on her nighttime program, or exposed in the tabloids, Banks attempts to look and speak the messages that people want to hear: both power and inequality associated with race and gender, if not the categories themselves, are largely inconsequential and ultimately changeable: “So what?” The message remains that race and gender are floating identities untouched by structure and therefore strategically deployed by individuals for gain. However, another message also arises out of Banks’s “fat scandal” and her speaking back moment. While the post-discourses of race and gender might be popularly understood, from legislation to television, as personal, individual, and mutable traits, they also remain solidly structural, institutional, and historic forces.

Notes

[1] This focus on black women “below the neck” can be traced through any number of figures, including Sarah Baartman, the eighteenth-century Khoisan woman better known as the “Hottentot Venus,” whose naked body was displayed in an animal cage when alive and whose genitalia were cast in wax for display after her death. Baartman was subjected to such debasement and violence because she was read as sexually dangerous and thus deserving of imprisonment and exhibition (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999). For hundreds of years black female bodies have been represented as not only sexually available but also complicit in their exploitation. In fact, in order to enjoy popular and commercial success African-American women have sometimes been forced to take such exploitative roles. In an example of a contemporary representation, mixed-race African-American actress Halle Berry took a much lauded Academy Award-winning turn in 2001’s Monster’s Ball when she portrayed Leticia, a woman having an affair with a character played by Billy Bob Thornton, a white male prison guard and executioner of Leticia’s African-American husband. In the film’s climactic sex scene Berry repeatedly screams out to Thornton, who one could argue functions as the very agent of her oppression, “Make me feel good!” Berry’s portrayal of Leticia follows a long line of chattel-slavery-based iterations of the “tragic mulatta” and “jezebel,” controlling images documented by scholars like Deborah Gray White (1999). Berry was awarded the United States cinema industry’s highest honor for this portrayal.

[2] In addition, historian David Hollinger (1995) uses the term “post-ethnic” in a prescriptive, celebratory manner. All of the scholars I have listed and a number of others also simultaneously use “post-civil rights” and the other terms, sometimes interchangeably.

[3] Although post-feminism enjoys more cache as a buzzword, particularly in the media, it appears to be rhetorically conjured more infrequently for support of political measures than post-race. While there is certainly a post-racial, or perhaps more specifically, racially flexible, aesthetic, scholars like Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra illustrate that post-feminism truly revels in its stylistic underpinnings (2007).

[4] Here is a complete list of countries with a national version of Top Model: Australia, Canada, France, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Malaysia, the Netherlands, Norway, the Philippines, Russia, Scandinavia (with contestants from Norway, Denmark, and Sweden), Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey, and the UK (Sales, 2007).

[5] I use the term “white” as opposed to “Anglo-American” or “European-American” to mark a linguistic difference between the groups of color and whites. I wish to underscore the fact white is expression of power and not merely an expression of ethnicity.
My goal to identify ideological rupture in the post- is inspired by Daphne Brooks’s (2006) stated aim to name “the ruptures and blind spots where . . . performers defy the expectations and desires of the audience member/recorder” (p. 10).

The racialized and gendered concept of self-esteem has been operative in such important political moments as the black dolls/white dolls experiment used by psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Phipps Clark (1953). In the Supreme Court Case that ended de jure racial segregation, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954), the Clarks’ research was used to link internalized racism and the psychological harm to black children of segregated schools (Clark, 1953).

In a series of essays Stuart Hall (1996a, 1991) coalesces and expands various theories on ideology, illustrating that ideology marks how we think about, represent, interpret, and make sense of the world. Ideology is an inherently politicized notion; it cannot remain on neutral terrain because as a set of ideas and beliefs it is used as a means to justify conditions of existence. Ideology, functioning as part and parcel of hegemony, is thus how a group in power maintains maximum control with minimum conflict. Hall (1981) argues that ideologies do not remain as isolated, separate concepts but instead function as a varied “chain of meanings” that dictate virtually all thought and action (p. 89). In other words, while we believe ourselves to produce truth, we really just produce ideologies, or, as Hall states, we “formulate intentions within ideology” (p. 90).

Indeed, this is not an isolated reaction. A cursory examination of the spring 2007 Don Imus scandal, when Imus referred to the Rutgers University women’s basketball players as “nappy headed hos,” illustrates a rupture in post- notions usually so prevalent in popular culture (Steinberg & McBride, 2007). In the aftermath of Imus’s racist, misogynistic, and homophobic comments, race, gender, and sexuality were “exposed” for the U.S. public as undeniably central and explicit in the events themselves and their media coverage, and these two—the “truth” of the event and its media coverage—prove impossible to pry apart. For all of the ideas that circulate to illustrate the still racist and still sexist nature of U.S. society, other equally powerful voices counteract these ideas by saying: Imus is simply exercising his first amendment rights, he is only one voice, one individual, (an assumed white) “we” do not feel like that; or, in an articulation of the post-racial sentiment underscoring these statements, white people would not even know how to be racist, homophobic, or sexist without the African-American art form of hip hop. In other words, Imus expressed an isolated, personal opinion and did not issue an attack reflecting structural, institutional, and historic violations of black women’s bodies.

At a public lecture at the University of Washington on April 17, 2007, Angela Davis described Condaleeza Rice’s narrativization of her own life story as doing a similar thing—articulating racism and sexism in order to arrive at a post- where she can claim “So what?” It’s the post-racialized and post-feminized story encoded in the American Dream.

References


