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“Saving the World Before Bedtime”: *The Powerpuff Girls*, Citizenship, and the Little Girl Superhero

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While representations of adult female action heroes in comics, film, and television are common, young girl superheroes have been generally absent from print and screen fiction.¹ Writers and animators have focused primarily on the maturing bodies of adolescent girls who are discovering their superpowers and their sexualities.² However, in the genre of children’s animated series, girls have recently taken on the central and active roles usually reserved for boys. The most popular and culturally pervasive of these new girl superheroes are the Powerpuff Girls.³ This Cartoon Network series depicts Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup protecting their city while attending kindergarten, playing dress-up, and having slumber parties—“saving the world before bedtime,” as their slogan goes. In *The Powerpuff Girls*, little girls take center stage as action heroes exactly because they are both little girls and superheroes, and, just as adult female action figures challenge gender stereotypes, the Powerpuffs revise definitions of girlhood within mainstream American popular culture.⁴ Significantly, the challenges faced by these superheroic animated girls frame current competing and often contradictory discourses about twentieth-century American girlhood in popular culture, revealing the transformational and yet deeply conservative character of American ideals of feminine strength, sexuality, and agency.

The nature of the Powerpuffs Girls’ challenge to notions of femininity must be understood in terms of the specific ways in which these little girls are disenfranchised as girls rather than women. These young superheroes function as role models for girls in much the same manner of female comic book superheroes, and, much like adult female action heroes, the girls both inhabit and challenge stereotypical notions of gender. *The Powerpuff Girls* encourages identification with not just one but three different types of girls. Craig McCracken, creator

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of the show, comments on this phenomenon: “I get a lot of girls saying that they look up to them . . . There are girls who say, ‘My best friend’s a Buttercup, but I’m a Bubbles.’ They identify with the different personalities” (Loos 25). Although they are superheroes, they inhabit a fairly conventional style of girlhood with their cute dresses and Mary Jane-style shoes, all-girl slumber parties, and pastel-colored bedroom. Also like real-life children, they are subjected to the authority of adults, as they are required to do chores, go to school, and abide by a bedtime. Since the Powerpuff Girls are both little girls and superheroes, the show must to account for how subordinate little girls can occupy a position of extreme power within the State.

In focusing on three little girl superheroes, *The Powerpuff Girls* works within and against broader constructions of the superhero in American comics and animation, marking a definite departure from both 1980s girl-oriented cartoons that featured plots largely centered on teaching girls stereotypically feminine behaviors and boy-oriented action cartoons with token female characters. Cartoons first began targeting girls as audience in the 1980s as the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) deregulation of children’s television enabled toy companies to have a closer relationship with children’s programming (Kline 151). In order to tap into largely ignored girl audiences, toy companies and animation studios soon developed several girl-oriented toy lines and cartoon series, including *Strawberry Shortcake*, *The Care Bears*, *My Little Pony*, *Rainbow Bright*, *Jem and the Holograms*, and *She-Ra: Princess of Power*.⁵ These shows differed from boy-targeted shows by encouraging nurturing behaviors and social interaction over brute violence, with the heroines often causing the villain to realize the error of her or his ways rather than engaging in combat. Though these differences seem to simply teach girls how to be rather stereotypical girls, each show also portrays what Ellen Seiter terms “a loyal community of females” and a single token male who all support the primary heroine (183). Indeed, it is this focus on girls and their communities that made these cartoons so compelling for so many girls.

In the early 1990s children’s television on the main networks shifted from animation to live-action shows, like *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* and *Saved by the Bell*, and animation became increasingly marketed to adults with shows like the *Simpsons*, *Ren and Stimpy*, and MTV’s *Liquid Television*, which included animated shorts such as *Aeon Flux*. On the expanding cable networks, children’s animation found its official home on Ted Turner’s Cartoon Network (CN) in 1992. CN’s first breakout hit and the first cartoon to feature little girls as superheroes on their own show, *The Powerpuff Girls* ran from 1995 until 2006. The series is now in daily reruns on Cartoon Network and still has a strong presence in DVDs and other merchandise. Superhero girls have now become a regular feature on the network in shows like *Atomic Betty* and *The Life and Times of Juniper Lee*. Through such animated series, *The Powerpuff Girls* has greatly influenced children’s television as well as American girl culture in general.

With their strong sense of sisterhood and cooperation, these girl-power poster children have the potential to do radical cultural work because of the creative fissions produced by their actions as superheroes. Rather than simply reproducing the disempowering girl power of the Spice Girls, for example, whose images suggested that “the only way for girls to achieve power is by using one’s sexuality and looks,” the Powerpuff Girls occupy a space more closely related to the “contested terrain” of Riot Grrl third-wave feminism because they reclaim and reinvent girlhood by insisting on the simultaneity of femininity and power (Riordan 290, 280). They are indeed cute little girls and do all the things that little girls are “supposed” to do, but they also repeatedly demonstrate more physical and mental strength than all of the men and almost all of the women on the show. They must negotiate between their opposing identities as little girls and superheroes, and they do so fairly well—most of the time at least. But it is in these difficult moments that they most clearly gesture toward the contested and transformative space of feminist agency.

These little girl superheroes make available a new version of cool for girls by being simultaneously cute as little girls and cool as physically violent superheroes. As Gary Cross notes in his study of cuteness and coolness in late-twentieth-century American children’s culture: “girl’s cool was still largely defined as subdued sexuality, fashionable display, and unabashed consumerism [in the form of Barbie]. For boys, the cool was purified, violence shorn of the dross of reality, emotion, and moral message” (158). The coolness of the Powerpuff Girls explicitly attempts to avoid Barbie’s sexuality, with their prepubescent bodies, in favor of a boyish cool based on extreme strength and violence. Merging girlish cuteness and this boyish cool, the girls retain what Cross describes as the angelic coquettishness of girlish cuteness even as they enjoy the physicality of their visibly violent battles with villains (44). Though their violence does have a certain moral purpose as they keep order in Townsville, this purpose is constantly undercut by the extremity of that violence, as well as the often ridiculous nature of the villains they fight.

As superheroes the Powerpuff Girls ensure the continued survival of the city Townsville, an urban space that attempts to retain its un-urban small town atmosphere. The city would be merely a pile of rubble without the girls, as shown in the episode “Speed Demon,” where the girls travel at the speed of light into the future and discover that Townsville has been destroyed because they were not there to save the day as usual as they sped through time. The problem here is not that the city requires heroes but rather that these heroes are little girls, and, as such, should be the ones being protected by the State. Indeed, they act like what Lauren Berlant describes as diva and infantile citizens; the girls are able to use their superpowers, the powers given to them by Chemical X, to rewrite, even for a moment, definitions of American girlhood and the heroic as mutually exclusive even as they must always remain inside those definitions (223). Berlant defines “diva citizenship” as a moment in which a previously abject citizen “stages a dramatic coup in the public sphere in which

she does not have privilege” and temporarily makes her radical critique central to the dominant discourse, thereby disrupting its fictional universality (223). Through her naïveté, the infantile citizen makes visible the State’s inability to live up to its ethical principles.⁶ By completely believing in the spirit rather than the practice of the law, the infantile citizen challenges the law to live up to the morality of its principles rather than accepting the usual contradiction between legal principle and practice. These types of citizenship have the power to challenge the State from within, even as they are always being recuperated by the State. Moreover, since these citizens are always within the law to which they refuse to submit, they draw attention to the radical potential of citizenship in general. What makes the Powerpuff Girls such key cultural figures is that they require a willingness to see the effects of their two paradoxical identities—the little girl and the superhero—as they simultaneously maintain the law and are irreducibly lawless.

The girls become diva and infantile citizens in the odd and interesting moments when the friction between their powerlessness as little girls and all-powerfulness as superheroes cannot be completely accounted for in the episode. This is not to say that the girls do not have privilege as white, suburban, middle-class superheroes but rather that they act as diva and infantile citizens when they must negotiate between their relatively unprivileged and hyper-privileged identities. They are radical diva citizens because at the very moment they disrupt the law they are also the most recuperated within that law. As Berlant explains:

Diva Citizenship does not change the world. It is a moment of emergence that marks unrealized potential for subaltern political activity . . . she renarrates the dominant history as one that the abjected people have once lived in *sotto voce*, but no more . . . [she calls] on people to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship to which they casually consent. (223)

As diva citizens, the Powerpuff Girls can momentarily revise, redefine, and re-evaluate the discursive constructions of both girlhood and heroism. This radical revision is always temporary because it is already co-opted by the State in which it takes place. Still, that moment—that flash—unsettles the fictional unity and smoothness of the seemingly stable cultural definitions of girlhood and heroism.

The Powerpuff Girls makes possible such flashes of diva citizenship by super-empowering its three little girls through Professor Utonium’s generative process, which allows for the chaos of the unexpected and creative. Within the fictional world of the show, Professor Utonium creates the girls by mixing ingredients in his lab at the beginning of each episode of *The Powerpuff Girls*, thus ultimately keeping authority in adult male hands and undermining the authority of the Powerpuff Girls as superheroes.⁷ The opening sequence begins by listing the ingredients used to make the Powerpuff Girls.⁸ The narrator’s voice is deep and foreboding as he lists them: “Sugar . . . Spice . . . and Everything Nice—These

were the ingredients chosen to make the perfect little girls” (“The Powerpuff Girls” [main theme]).

Obviously male and imposing, this scientist figure follows in the steps of Doctor Victor Frankenstein in trying to create human life through science. Suggesting some sort of God-like scientist and confirming the opening sequence’s feel of a dangerous scientific experiment, we see his white tie and gloves and his sharp-angled black body outlined against backgrounds that correspond to each of the girls’ particular personalities. The Professor represents masculine scientific knowledge and its problematic attempts to free the State from its dependence on women for reproduction. Yet, unlike the traditional mad scientist, Professor Utonium is making little girls. He seeks to become a father who molds his girl creations and encourages them to grow rather than creating the usual male adult, as exemplified in his paternal caregiving throughout the series. The profile outline of him shown with the “everything nice” ingredient belies any sort of serious scientific mastery in that we see his happy smile and hear the laughter of little girls as he adds the last nursery-rhyme proscribed element. The joyousness of this moment suggests that the Professor embraces a science that is not solely interested in quantitative data but rather is keenly interested in qualitative data that resists any quantification. It is this openness to a “messy” sort of science that positions Professor Utonium as the absent-minded professor whose nonlogical, nonprogrammable thinking creates the most innovative inventions.

Professor Utonium’s name and the squareness of his face and body make him seem like a throwback from the now laughable progress-in-science short films from the 1950s, which *Powerpuff Girls* episodes comically reinforce. The core idea of these films is that the serious scientist explains how the science of the future is going to dramatically change our lives through inventions that have never actually happened, like flying cars and anthropomorphic robots. The show plays with this association by having the Professor’s inventions unintentionally being successful beyond all expectation. The association of his name with the highly dangerous atomic element Plutonium also hints at the instability of his identity and his science. With any scientific experiment, accidents do always seem to happen, but when powerful elements like Plutonium are involved, those accidents have the potential to change the nature of life in the inventions that come out of this process. Professor Utonium’s experiment to create the perfect little girls yields results that exceed his understanding and as well as definitions of girlhood.

Since the Professor’s goal in this experiment is to create the perfect little girls, the definition of girlhood itself is in the process of being constructed in his experiment. Even as the opening sequence defines what little girls are made of, it does not precisely define the perfect little girl, though that image does haunt the show. The image on the screen as the narrator announces “[t]hese were the ingredients chosen to make the perfect little girls” is the Professor’s cauldron-like mixing bowl filled with sugar, spice, and everything nice. This

image differs from McCracken's first *Powerpuff Girls* cartoon, which he completed as his second-year project at the California Institute of the Arts. In that cartoon, entitled "The Whoopass Girls in Whoopass Stew," the image connected with this phrase is a platinum blond little girl with very large hair sitting atop a rainbow clothed in dress in the same style as all of the *Powerpuff Girls*' dresses, almost batting her eyes at the viewer. In the series itself, however, this *Rainbow Bright–My Little Pony*-esque girl is no longer in the opening sequence. In discussing the absence of this image from the Cartoon Network series, McCracken makes it clear that he is purposefully questioning what a girl can be rather than establishing what all girls must be: "That's the perfect little girl. I cut that shot from the original because I didn't want to represent what a perfect little girl was" (Commentary on "Whoopass"). The omission of the shot serves to create the right conditions for girls who do not conform to the usual idea of the perfect little girl. Still, the trace of this perfect little girl remains a key element in the show in its continual attention to what defines girls as girls, which necessarily and inevitably recalls this absent yet ghostly image.

To make their revision of the perfect little girl ideal possible, the *Powerpuff Girls* require more than just the stereotypically gendered nursery rhyme ingredients of sugar, spice, and everything nice in their primordial ooze. Because these few beginning moments of the show are the space in which the girls' natures are established as well as their place within the show's fictional nation-state, it is here that they must become superheroes whose abilities enable them to exceed the law they maintain. The narrative of the girls' creation continues after the first three components have been added: "But Professor Utonium accidentally added an extra ingredient to the concoction —Chemical X [loud explosion]. Thus the *Powerpuff Girls* were born" ("The *Powerpuff Girls*" [main theme]). In this fortunate accident, the Professor inadvertently adds a black liquid from a large beaker labeled "Chemical X" and is pushed violently against the wall as the Chemical X combines with the other ingredients and creates a very loud explosion. He slowly opens his eyes at first, but then opens them wide and smiles in happy surprise as he sees the *Powerpuff Girls* hovering, fully-clothed, above the cauldron and glowing with the energy that Chemical X has given them. As the screen focuses on the *Powerpuff Girls*, the narrator proclaims their birth in exalted and almost Biblical language: "Thus the *Powerpuff Girls* were born" ("The *Powerpuff Girls*" [main theme]).

In the process of the *Powerpuff Girls*' creation, Chemical X works to unsettle the stability of their identities as little girls. It creates the possibility of the girls' diva citizenship by empowering in the extreme those who are the most abject even as, or rather precisely because, its exact nature remains always inaccessible. In mathematical terms, "X" is always used to denote an unknown variable. Algebraic formulas and equations use "X" to enable the unthinkable to be thought so that it can be studied or solved. Importantly, this unknown that endows the *Powerpuff Girls* with their superpowers is fundamentally about triumphant strength. This hard-to-define additive was not originally named

Chemical X, though its first name still maintains its unknowable nature. The original Powerpuff Girls cartoon, “The Whoopass Girls in Whoopass Stew,” does not contain any mention of Chemical X. Instead, the girls were made of sugar, spice, everything nice, and a can of whoopass. Much like Chemical X, a can of whoopass is not an actual, definable thing; instead, it usually refers to some amount of violence about to be visited upon someone. Yet, the expression does not specify physical violence but rather an ability to triumph over one’s opponent. Thus, the meaning implied by Chemical X’s first name is actually folded into its function in the Cartoon Network series. The properties of Chemical X give the girls the mental and physical power to be Townsville’s superhero protectors. The energy to overcome the limits of one’s opponents, of one’s body, and of one’s position under the law lies within Chemical X. While we cannot define its nature, we can speak about the pattern produced by its effects.

No clues about Chemical X’s makeup are ever given, but its general function is made quite clear. Both the reactions of the Powerpuff Girls and their main arch-villain, Mojo Jojo, demonstrate that Chemical X hyper-enhances the part of an individual that signifies her or his abject status. The simian Mojo Jojo is Professor Utonium’s former lab monkey, on whom the Professor accidentally spilled Chemical X while creating the Powerpuff Girls. The simian Mojo Jojo was Professor Utonium’s lab monkey, on whom the Professor accidently spilled Chemical X while creating the Powerpuff Girls. Likewise, without Chemical X the little girls’ lack of physical strength would have made them easy targets for the villains and monsters of Townsville. When exposed to Chemical X, however, Mojo Jojo becomes an evil super-genius, and the girls become superheroes. The substance is clearly labeled each time it appears in the show, but all that is ever revealed are the chemical’s name and its transformative properties. Chemical X has a physical representation—it does in fact fill the beaker that the Professor breaks—and the transformations of the Powerpuff Girls and Mojo Jojo do create a pattern of empowering effects, but even physical representation and pattern do not make Chemical X definable because the show never actually reveals what it is. The mystery of Chemical X makes possible the girls’ diva citizenship because it enables them to unexpectedly exceed the conventional limits of their identities as little girls by being little girl superheroes. Moreover, the necessity of such a powerful element as Chemical X for the girls to be superheroes suggests the strength of the American construction of girl in that their very natures as girls must be altered for them to claim superheroism.

Just as Chemical X alters the definition of girlhood within the show, so, too, does it revise, however ambivalently, Japanese anime’s almost constant position of the young female body as a fetish object for male visual pleasure. As the girls emerge from their cauldron, one immediately notices the style of animation used to depict their bodies. The Powerpuff Girls have large, slightly oval-shaped heads that are as big as the rest of their bodies and entirely obscure their necks and shoulders. Their large, wide-open eyes match each girl’s dress in color and dominate their faces. Therefore, the girls physically embody, or

rather exaggerate, the wide-eyed innocent little girl. She takes in everything and thus must be protected so that she does not see too much or take in the wrong sort of experiences. Importantly, Chemical X and its lawlessness affects even this most contained feature. In *Billboard Magazine*, Moira McCormick contrasts the girls' appearance with their abilities: "The three anime-faced moppets' huge eyes and doll-like appearance make them seem thoroughly innocent and adorable—and they are—but they also kick serious butt" (95). As McCormick notes here, the Powerpuff Girls' large eyes are a common feature in anime—Japanese animation that is very popular in the United States. Discussing this characteristic of anime, Antonia Levi explains that "eyes are used to convey a character's feelings. Sensitive characters have larger eyes than insensitive ones" (118). The Powerpuff Girls revise and work within this meaning because their eyes are not just indications of their status as innocent little girls—they are also weapons. As part of their superpowers, the girls also have the ability to shoot laser beams from their eyes, and Buttercup has X-ray vision, as shown in the episode "Birthday Bash." In another episode, "Boogie Frights," Bubbles, the most innocent girl of the three, uses her laser vision to destroy the big, bad man who uses her fear of the dark to relegate her to the position of the scared little girl. Even as their eyes seem to be simply fetishistic exaggerations of little girl innocence, this physical feature also unsettles that notion by enabling these little girls to defeat even the most patronizingly frightening of villains of childhood, the Boogie Man.

The way in which the girls are drawn also reworks the emphasis usually placed on sexualized feminine bodies in cartoons and demonstrates a constant attention to the technology of the medium. In alluding to Japanese anime, *The Powerpuff Girls* reminds viewers of its own stylistic and technological savviness by working off of anime's reputation for modern style and technology. This style can be seen in Cartoon Network's Toonami Midnight Run lineup, which showcases anime cartoons and also periodically featured *The Powerpuff Girls*, the only one of CN's daytime cartoons to be featured in this schedule of programming. Although the show does mobilize these features of anime, it also simultaneously mounts a direct critique of anime's depiction of women, though it cannot completely avoid dealing with the residue of this exploitative feminine sexuality, as I will discuss below in connection to the "Rowdyruff Boys" episode. In uncensored versions of cartoons like *Sailor Moon*, anime often focuses on the nude schoolgirl-aged female body as an object of desire for the adolescent male gaze, and its style enlarges girls' breasts, elongates their legs, and trims their waists. In contrast, McCracken has drawn the Powerpuff Girls in such a way that they can be girls without being sexual objects for male fantasies.

Rather than being unnaturally developed for their young age (usually assumed to be around five or six years old, based on their enrollment in Pokey Oaks kindergarten), the girls are drawn with bodies typical of their age group and look similar to the other children depicted in the cartoon. Their bodies largely consist of androgynous straight lines but are marked as girls' bodies

through their ever-present color-coordinated dresses, white tights, and black Mary Janes. Their dresses give them a full range of motion and those Mary Janes are regularly used to kick monsters back to Monster Island. Hence, while they are always girls, the Powerpuff Girls ostensibly can be girls and superheroes without always being made into sexual objects for the male gaze. However, the trace of anime's oversexed schoolgirls cannot be denied even in such innocuously drawn characters. Revealing the presence of this influence, Cartoon Network has recently introduced a new line of Powerpuff Girls merchandise called "Dream in Style" that portrays the girls as much more feminine and sexual. Here, the girls are drawn in muted shades, have much more developed adolescent bodies, and seductively look out at the viewer from underneath half-closed eyelids. Even more telling, perhaps, the Powerpuff Girls morphed into conventional anime girls in the new Japanese version of the show, *Demashita! PowerPuff Girls Z*. While they exist within the show as "normal" little girls, the male-orientated sexuality of women superheroes, as well as girl anime characters, remains present even in its absence.

The effects of Chemical X most spectacularly take the form of the girls themselves. Critically, their excessive natures as little girls come as they overly conform to their personality types and are at their most "perfect." The girls' seemingly contradictory positions—as protectors of the law as superheroes and disruptors of the law as super-empowered little girls—work together to position them as diva citizens in that they suggest new definitions of girl and superhero through the show's ambivalent and contradictory moments while simultaneously being contained by those definitions they seek to challenge. The opening sequence ends with the narrator announcing the girls' mission as they fly into the air with their own personal variations on the theme music and then summarily throttle all of the show's villains, emerging with sweet smiles atop of a large pile of adversaries: "Using their ultra-superpowers, Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup have dedicated their lives to fighting crime and the forces of evil" ("The Powerpuff Girls" [main theme]). Through their disruptions of the law that they maintain, each Powerpuff works within the pattern of her personality to disturb the ability of that discourse to account for her. As Berlant describes the process, "Flashing up and startling the public, she [the diva citizen] puts the dominant story into suspended animation; as though recording an estranging voice-over to a film we have all already seen" (223). Placing themselves within a dominant fixed discourse, these diva citizens can then revise and rework the cultural meaning of that discourse. This diva complementarity of the lawful and lawless is very much at work in the construction of their emblematic personalities.⁹

The girls' personalities as a group work to sustain the law even as their individual excesses are radically lawless. Each Powerpuff has a clear personality that is revealed through her signature colors, hairstyle, ingredient, expressions, and theme music instrument; noticeably, each girl also takes that stabilized persona to extremes and exceeds the rules of her character. By maintaining the State as

a group and undermining its fixed laws individually, the Powerpuff Girls act as diva citizens because they trouble the dominant constructions of girl and superhero from within. Blossom, who the ending song of the show names as the “commander, and the leader,” has red irises, dress, hair, and hair bow. The instrument that plays her theme music is a strong and brassy horn section, and her ingredient, marked by the pink background behind the Professor as he adds it, is everything nice (“The Powerpuff Girls” [end theme]). Blossom often gets intense about her leadership duties as marked by her knitted eyebrows, and, as the leader of the group, she is the stereotypical bossy and goody-goody sister. Of the three, she acts within the law the most and considers it vitally important that the girls always play by the rules, though her very lawfulness leads to lawlessness.

Demonstrating the lawlessness inherent in taking the law to extremes, even Blossom has her moment of lawlessness brought on by her need to please her ultimate authority figure, Professor Utonium, and maintain her position as the leader of the girls. In “A Very Special Blossom,” she frames Mojo Jojo for stealing a set of golf clubs so she can give them to the Professor for Father’s Day. In addition, though she seems to be the most in charge and independent of the girls, she is actually just as dependent as her sisters because she must have the obedience of her two sisters in order to be a leader. Therefore, while she may try to give her sisters a smug lecture on why they should not escape from jail when they are framed for various crimes by cross-dressing criminals in “Powerpuff Bluff,” she quickly joins in the prison break once she realizes that are not going to listen to her: “Regardless of our duties to save the world, we would be further harming our falsely soiled reputations . . . [Bubbles and Buttercup break out and fly away] Hey! Wait for me!” Blossom depends upon her sisters for her identity as the leader and upon the Professor to confirm her position as the “good sister.” When either of those identities is threatened, she enacts them to such a level so as to break the law with which she so closely identifies. As the “good girl” of the group, her diva-citizen lawbreaking is especially critical because it reveals the contradictions inherent in those laws. Indeed, both acts highlight the flaws of the show’s patriarchal figures: her theft of the golf clubs reveals the Professor’s desire for a commodity fetish that represents upper-middle-class male privilege, and her realization that she and her sisters must catch the cross-dressing villains reaffirms the ineffectiveness of Townsville’s mayor and police force. The Powerpuff who always follows the rules ends up making clear the dysfunctional nature of those rules and the patriarchs who make them.

Bubbles, the middle sister, is the blond-haired, blue-eyed, and blue-dressed innocent of the group. Her voice is high pitched, and her theme music is played by a child’s xylophone as she joins Blossom in the opening sequence. Although all of the girls are “born” at the same time, they are always announced in the same order. Bubbles is therefore positioned as the middle child, and, typical of middle children, she often makes peace between the excessively law-abiding

Blossom and law-breaking Buttercup. The ending theme song names her as the “joy and the laughter,” and her ingredient is sugar. Indicating her childlike joy, Bubbles’ face almost always wears a smile and her eyebrows almost never scrunch together, unlike her sisters’. Out of the three, Bubbles seems to conform the most to the perfect little girl stereotype.

Suggesting the radical nature of such innocence, however, she commits the most lawless acts of them all. In “Bubblevicious,” Bubbles goes “hard core” and defeats Mojo Jojo single-handedly after being patronized by her sisters and the Professor about her lack of physical toughness in battle. She also demonstrates her “hard core” side in “Los Dos Mojos,” in which she hits her head and then takes on Mojo Jojo’s identity to the extent of wreaking a great deal of havoc on Townsville. Still, her most lawless adventure occurs not when she obviously disobeys the law but when she follows it too well. In “Helter Shelter,” the Professor instructs Bubbles to send all of her “rescued” pets home, including a baby whale that she picks up on a routine patrol of the coast. He tells a very sad Bubbles that “if you really love them, you must set them free, so they can return to *their* family that loves *them*” (“Helter Shelter”). The pig-tailed Powerpuff listens very carefully to the Professor’s advice and returns the whale to its parents, but she then recalls his exact words and sets all the Townsville Zoo animals free, causing chaos and mayhem in the city and making good on the allusion in the episode’s title to the Beatles song “Helter Skelter.”

Bubbles’s extreme upholding of the Professor’s ethical lesson enables her to radicalize the law by following its moral spirit rather than practical concessions. She thus acts out the destabilizing potential of what Berlant terms the infantile citizen, to which she conforms the most out of the three girls. As Berlant argues, “the infantile citizen’s stubborn naïveté gives her/ him enormous power to unsettle, expose, and reframe the machinery of national life” (29). By entirely believing the rules of her father, Bubbles reveals the extent to which the society of Townsville does not follow its own supposed belief system. She carries this moral so far as to protest the right of humans to control animals and use them for pleasure and study; she becomes an eco-warrior. In her innocence, Bubbles can radicalize the formalized law by exceeding the bounds of its compromising and contradictory limitations that are constructed as morally just.

The third of the sisters, Buttercup, is the “toughest fighter” according to the end theme and is the least feminine of the girls (“The Powerpuff Girls” [end theme]). Buttercup’s color is green and her ingredient is appropriately spice. In the opening theme, a loud rock guitar marks her appearance. Ever the rebellious one, Buttercup often rejects the validity of rules and often must be made to see the error of her ways. Like her sisters, however, Buttercup is at her most disruptive when she is supposedly being recuperated by the law. In “Down ‘n’ Dirty,” Buttercup refuses to take a bath after fighting a series of particularly nasty monsters because, as she tells her happily bathing sisters, “Don’t you know that only big fat sissies take baths?” Buttercup does ultimately take a bath, but only because the monsters cannot stand her stench and will not fight her. While she

does indeed give in to the rules of proper hygiene and take the much-dreaded bath, she does so not to be a beautiful little girl but rather to keep on fighting. She has not altered her preference for violent battle over personal grooming but instead grudgingly follows the rules in order to continue her superhero duties. Buttercup is willing to follow the forms of being a girl but refuses to do so in spirit, thus throwing into question the naturalness of those rules.

The episode in which Buttercup most resists the conventions of “normal” heterosexual girlhood is “The Rowdyruff Boys,” which was banned by YTV in Canada. In this episode, Mojo Jojo creates three corresponding boys, with the sewage in a prison toilet standing for Chemical X, to defeat the Powerpuff Girls.¹⁰ Although one would expect the girls and boys to be evenly matched, the boys turn out to be much stronger than the girls in their vicious battles against each other. Since the boys are too strong for them, the girls are at a loss as to what to do until Ms. Sara Bellum,¹¹ the faceless brain behind the mayor, gives them some womanly advice:

Ms. Bellum: Girls—you have what boys fear most. Instead of fighting, try being nice.

Girls: Huh?

Ms. Bellum: You know—*nice*. (*Bubbles giggles.*)

Blossom: I get it!

Buttercup: Ewww, gross. (“The Rowdyruff Boys”)

“Nice,” it turns out, means putting on makeup and kissing the boys. The girls do just that, and the boys disintegrate into their boy ingredients. In this moment, the girls have been both sexualized and positioned quite fixedly as little girls rather than strong superheroes. Rather than competing against their male counterparts as equal superheroes and villains, they have been relegated to the subordinate position of feminine sexual objects. Their sexuality is their only real, fear-inspiring weapon, as Ms. Bellum disturbingly tells the girls.

Importantly, Buttercup offers a counter-narrative to this acceptance of feminine sexuality as the girls’ greatest weapon against their male counterparts. After kissing the boys, Blossom and Bubbles giggle to each other about how they “kinda liked kissing” the boys who were trying to destroy them (“Rowdyruff Boys”). Critically, Buttercup disturbs the cuteness of the scene by exclaiming “Bleah!” and spitting several times when Bubbles asks if she liked it too (“Rowdyruff Boys”). Although she did kiss a boy as Ms. Bellum advised, Buttercup refuses to enjoy the experience. She calls attention to the viewer’s uneasiness by loudly showing her own dislike of the show’s resolution—it is extremely strange that the girls are not equal matches for the boys and must resort to “feminine wiles” in order to save the day once again. In doing so, Buttercup further troubles her own gender and is positioned as the possible lesbian of the group. Her adamant dislike of the rules that she must follow in order to be a proper little girl superhero invites the viewer to question the necessity of those rules and the patriarchal State that enforces them.

This invitation to the viewer to question an episode's ending becomes even more important in the context of "Equal Fights." In this very troubling episode, the girls battle a feminist arch-villain, *Femme Fatale*, who convinces them not to try and catch her because men dominate the ranks of both villains and superheroes. At first, the girls insist that there are many female superheroes, but they agree with *Femme Fatale* after they can only name *Wonder Woman* as a woman who is a heroine in her own right.¹² Subsequently, *Femme Fatale* is able to continue her crime spree of stealing Susan B. Anthony dollars without any interference from the girls until Ms. Bellum, the mayor's assistant, and Ms. Keene, the girls' kindergarten teacher, show the girls how *Femme Fatale* has harmed the women of Townsville and, more importantly, how the girls were wrong in thinking that Townsville itself had any sort of problem with sexism. Then, supposedly following the spirit of Susan B. Anthony's insistence on going to jail like men when she illegally voted as a woman, the girls take the dollar-coin-stealing *Femme Fatale* to jail. The episode ends with *Femme Fatale* whining because she looks fat in her prison uniform of black and white stripes.

This episode directly undermines any attempt to position the *Powerpuff Girls* as entirely radical figures. Additionally, it indicates the extent to which any critique they may offer is always in danger of being recuperated because they are, in the end, tools of the State. In this episode, they are mouthpieces for a pseudo-feminism that undercuts any feminist challenge to patriarchal authority by asserting that sexism no longer exists and everyone is now equal. However, the episode's own silence on the existence of other female superheroes prompts a questioning of its message. Ms. Bellum and Ms. Keene are able to address each of the girls' concerns except for their anger at the lack of female superheroes. This question is never even brought up in the big talk that the two women have with girls, even though it is the main reason that the girls let *Femme Fatale* go in the first place. This central, though unanswered, question in the episode prompts viewers to consider on their own why there are so few female superheroes and why the issue simply drops out of the episode altogether. Still, this questioning is only implicitly suggested in the episode's silence. The conservative ideology behind its overt message of already-achieved equality remains primary, and, as such, the episode reveals the limits that remain in place for these little girl superheroes in a mainstream cartoon. The *Powerpuff Girls* may indeed destabilize the patriarchal State in small ways, as I have illustrated above, but they are not permitted to question the foundations of that State. The girls can be individually lawless but must remain collectively lawful as protectors of the State.

As diva citizens, the *Powerpuff Girls* attempt to reconcile their roles as both superheroes and little girls within the State of Townsville. They are the protectors of the law as they simultaneously disturb the order of that law. In doing so, their individual lawlessness offers a key redefinition of the American cultural ideas of girl and superhero as overlapping categories, though that same con-

nection to the State limits the radicalness of their challenge to these cultural definitions. The Powerpuff Girls offer a challenge from within that cannot be ignored or reduced, and, as such, they are always held within the bounds of the State and cannot separate themselves from its continuation. They demonstrate both the transformative potential of the little girl superhero and the ultimately conservative boundaries of that potential. These little girl superheroes offer a compelling, though momentary, counternarrative that spectacularly redefines what it means to be a girl and a heroine in American culture.

Notes

1. Though largely dominated by male characters, mainstream superhero comics have featured a number of strong and capable women characters, such as Wonder Woman and the *X-Men's* Storm, Jean Grey, and Rogue. These powerful women are usually drawn with enlarged breasts and buttocks, elongated legs, and tiny waists—often referred to as the “tits and ass” style—so as to fulfill adolescent male fantasies. But as Sherrie Inness notes, tough female superheroes “can be rooted in stereotyped female roles” and still “simultaneously challenge such images” (6). For example, although Wonder Woman’s female intuition and moral goodness, as symbolized by her golden lariat of truth and obedience, are stereotypically gendered, their superlative nature forces people to tell the absolute truth and give her their complete obedience, and thus redefines womanhood as powerful and strong and positions heroism as the domain of women. “Boxing Gloves and Bustiers’: New Images of Tough Women.” *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 1–17.

2. Recent books on adult female superheroes include *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes* (2004) by Lillian S. Robinson and *Girls Who Bite Back: Witches, Mutants, Slayers, and Freaks* (2004) edited by Emily Pohl-Weary. The only mention of how depictions of girls in television and film are changing along with their adult counterparts is in Sherrie Inness’s introduction to her 1999 edited collection, *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*: “children’s television has joined the tough girl craze with the Powerpuff Girls” (2). In the 1990s alternative women’s comics, such as the comics anthology *Action Girl* and Megan Kelso’s *Girl Hero*, “[reclaimed] the word *girl*” and explored the lives of superhero girl tweens and teenagers with greater depth and complexity (Robbins 121). In mainstream American culture, however, the adult female superhero retains the conventional sexualized identity, even if she sometimes has become a part of a woman-positive alternative movement.

3. Though the term *girl* has come to mean both female children and adults, I am referring to females from ages two to fifteen when I use the word throughout the article. Examples of other girl-oriented cartoons include the likes of *Strawberry Shortcake*, *My Little Pony*, and *Care Bears*. Interestingly, these cartoons are now enjoying renewed popularity as part of the nostalgic revival of 1980s culture. Token female characters in boy-oriented cartoons include Cheetara from *ThunderCats*, Scarlet from *G.I. Joe*, the Princess from *Voltron*, and Teela from *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*.

4. Sherrie Inness states in her book *Tough Girls*, “The female hero can rescript stereotypes about what it means to be a woman. Just by *being* she suggests that the male stranglehold

on the heroic can be subverted. The woman hero serves as a bold new role model for women and girls” (143). As I shall argue, however, Inness’s lumping together of women and girls does not address the critical nature of the age difference between the two groups. *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999.

5. Though all of these shows feature female heroes, She-Ra most fully qualifies as a superhero because she actively uses her superpowers to physically and mentally fight the forces of evil in her fictional world. Admittedly, I am here using a largely patriarchal notion of force, but I have done so with the purpose of later exploring how the Powerpuff Girls manage to fit this definition while also conforming to popular constructions of girlhood. As such, I do not have the space to offer a discussion of how these shows redefine heroism, though I would welcome such a discussion. For a wonderful feminist discussion of *Jem and the Holograms* see Lizzie Ehrenhalt’s “Truly Outrageous: Toward a Defense of *Jem and the Holograms*.” in *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* 33 (Fall 2006): 82–87.

6. Describing the infantile citizen in detail, Berlant notes: “The infantile citizen’s ingenuousness frequently seems a bad thing . . . But the infantile citizen’s faith in the nation, which is based on a belief in the State’s commitment to representing the best interests of ordinary people, is also said to be what vitalizes a person’s patriotic and practical attachment to nation and to other citizens” (27–28).

7. In children’s cartoons it seems that girls can have the brawn but rarely the brains. With the recent rise of the nerd as cool, boy geniuses like Nickelodeon’s Jimmy Neutron and Cartoon Network’s Dexter are popular characters, but there are no current corresponding girl geniuses. In children’s cartoons to have extraordinary mental powers is to be male. In the 1980s, Penny of *Inspector Gadget*, which has recently been revived as a live action feature film and animated DVD, was indeed a smart girl, but her uncle received all the credit for her creative detective work. Lisa Simpson of *The Simpsons* also might qualify as one such figure, but she is not the central character of the show and lacks a following among young girls.

8. Besides establishing continuity between the episodes and easily introducing viewers to the show’s premise, the repetition of the beginning also alludes to the fairy tale tradition by mimicking the “Once upon a time” so common in folklore stories.

9. Here, I incorporate the work of Arkady Plotnitsky on the simultaneous lawfulness and lawlessness of quantum mechanics so as to highlight how the girls refuse to be fixed as disenfranchised citizens within the State even as they maintain that State as superheroes. They are individually lawless even as they collectively maintain the law. The girls “deconstitute this pattern [the separation of the lawful and lawless] . . . and complementarily engage both the perspectives—that of the lawful collectivities and that of the lawless, singular individuality” (76).

10. Buttercup’s counterpart is named Butch, further hinting at Buttercup’s own gender troubling.

11. Ms. Bellum’s face is famously never shown on the show. Instead, all that we ever see of her character is her shapely legs, large breasts, and big curly red hair. As almost every episode demonstrates, it is she and not the mayor who actually keeps Townsville running. The Cartoon Network Powerpuff Girls website has this to say about her character: “Sara Bellum is more than just a pretty face—in fact, nobody’s ever seen

her face. She takes her job as The Mayor's assistant very seriously and proves to be the real brains of the operation. But even with her keen intellect and imposing height, Ms. Bellum never lets herself overshadow The Mayor." "Characters: Sara Bellum." *Cartoon Network: The Powerpuff Girls*. 15 December 2007. <http://www.cartoonnetwork.com/tv_shows/ppg/index.html>.

12. Cartoon Network has encouraged this connection between the Powerpuff Girls and Wonder Woman in a promotional spot with the girls and the Superfriends, in which the girls rescue Wonder Woman and Aqua Man from the Legion of Doom. Tellingly, the promo ends with all of the men, including the defeated Legion of Doom, laughing knowingly over Bubbles's comment to Wonder Woman about their abilities as superheroes: "Some day we hope to be as developed as you." This promo is available online via Toonami Digital Arsenal's Downloads page for the Powerpuff Girls: <<http://www.toonamiarsenal.com/>>.

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