

# Unremarking on Whiteness: The Midcentury Feminism of Erma Bombeck's Humor and Rhetoric

**Abstract:** Analysis of the rhetorical strategies and arguments of humor writer Erma Bombeck through the lens of whiteness provides a snapshot into conditions for creating popular and public feminist arguments to moderate audiences in the mid-20th century. Bombeck's arguments unremark on race, class, and sexuality, evincing two legacies of early feminist ideologies including silence/silencing of the concerns of women of color, poor women, and queer women, as well as the evolution of women's self-determination to a neoliberal focus on individual self-improvement.

**keywords:** feminism, humor writing, whiteness, white feminism, Erma Bombeck

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*"Did you ever see the women on soap operas iron? They're just normal, American housewives. But do you ever see them in front of an ironing board? No! They're out having abortions, committing murder, Blackmailing their boss, undergoing surgery, having fun! If you weren't chained to this ironing board, you could too be out doing all sorts of exciting things."*

**Erma Bombeck**, *I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression*, 1974

Erma Bombeck was a prolific white American humor writer and morning television personality whose writing as a columnist and book author between 1952 and 1996 offered pointed critiques of midcentury social expectations of women and the male chauvinist structures in which they lived. Bombeck began writing a column entitled "Operation Dustrag" for women in the *Dayton Journal-Herald* in 1952. She became a syndicated columnist in over 500 newspapers and wrote 12 books, all of which offer witty and sarcastic commentary on the life of the midcentury middle-class American housewife. As the cultural revolution of the '60s progressed, changing the state of the nuclear family and traditional gender roles, Bombeck also became a public figure of the women's rights movement and served on Jimmy Carter's Presidential Advisory Committee for Women in 1978 to campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment. She famously "got Missouri for the ERA," which she joked ought to be put on her headstone (Hutner Colwell 75).

Bombeck's writing is an apt set of texts for excavating whiteness in midcentury feminist arguments in the U.S. In this article, I conduct a textual excavation by analyzing rhetorical strategies and arguments within three of Bombeck's best-selling books. The analysis is situated in two scholarly conversations: first, the long history of whiteness in American feminism, of which I share rhetorical examples offered in recent feminist historical scholarship; and second, observations of whiteness as rhetorical strategies in the past 20+ years of antiracist rhetorical studies.

On the one hand, Bombeck's writing in general advances basic feminist claims about the humanity of women and their rights to determine their own lives. Some instances of her absurdist humor evidence how her platform reached a segment of conservative or moderate women to convince them of their (and others') potential and rights. On the other hand, her portrayal of the family, home, community, and daily quagmires of housewives mostly "unremarks" upon race, class, or sexuality. By "unremarks," I mean that a gap of sorts exists in her writing, the result of which renders her protagonists and their characteristics as assumed to be but not explicitly as white, straight

and middle-class. This “unremarking” produces a singular understanding of the “American woman” and the possibilities and limits facing all women in the midcentury.

To support these claims, after a review of literature on white feminism and whiteness in rhetoric, I analyze several of Bombeck’s essays, which often take the form of shorter vignettes within longer chapters, published in the books *At Wit’s End* (1965), *I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression* (1970), and *If Life is a Bowl of Cherries, What am I Doing in the Pits?* (1971). The purpose of excavating whiteness is to acknowledge the “neutral” role that white as a race plays in texts and its related effects, such as uncritically shaping and furthering white-centric dominant representations, cultural scripts, and understandings of reality. My analysis suggests that Bombeck’s work can be seen as an artifact both of the evolution and the entrenchment of whiteness in American feminist thought. I find that these works’ rhetorical effects reflect and perpetuate long-standing first-wave ideologies, including silence and individualism, into popular midcentury American feminist writing and thought.

### Historical Rhetorics of/as White Feminism

White feminism has origins in the positions and arguments of early suffragists including Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Alice Paul. According to the work of Louise Michele Newman as well as Koa Beck, these leaders employed rhetorics of superiority, of colonizing, and of conquering to prioritize the concerns of white, middle-class, educated women. Their concern primarily centered on political equality and equal rights with men, to the exclusion of different concerns shared by poor, queer, and women of color. In fact, the top priority for these early white feminists was the vote, and their rhetorics minimized other topics of concern through both explicit racist superiority arguments and a more neutral-seeming avoidance of the “race question” (Newman 13). Clara Peta Blencowe argues that these rhetorical moves left Black, poor, and queer women out of the dominant ideology of first-wave feminism, creating a legacy of silence about and silencing of women of color that persisted uncritically through the 20th century and today (22).

According to Newman, white feminists in Reconstruction-era America no longer considered themselves connected in victimhood with Black men, who gained the right to vote with the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1869 (12). The women now found themselves trailing behind both Black and immigrant men in terms of civil rights. Newman highlights Stanton’s explicitly racist and classist claims about Black and immigrant men:

Where antebellum suffrage ideology often emphasized a common victimhood, post bellum suffrage ideology stressed white women’s racial-cultural superiority to newly enfranchised male constituencies – not just Black men, but also naturalized immigrant men. ‘Think of Patrick and Sambo and Hans and Yung Tung,’ Stanton proclaimed in 1869, ‘who do not know the difference between a monarchy and a republic, who can not [sic] read the Declaration of Independence or Webster’s spelling-book. (12)

This passage exemplifies what Newman identifies as an “imperialist rhetoric,” one that feminists employed to position themselves as superior and worthier of voting rights than people of color (12).

This same argument is reflected in an 1893 resolution of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) under Susan B. Anthony as president. According to Beck, “the resolution dismissed the rights of immigrant men and women, poor, uneducated white Americans, as well as Black Americans on the basis of ‘illiteracy’” (26). A portion of text of the resolution reads:

There are more women who can read and write than the whole number of illiterate male voters, more white women who can read and write than all negro voters; more American women who can read and write than all foreign voters; so that the enfranchisement of such women would settle the vexed questions of rule by illiteracy, whether home-grown or foreign-born production. (27)

These superiority arguments are aimed mostly at enfranchised men, and when it came to white feminists' positions on the political enfranchisement of women of color, queer women, or poor women, suffragists employed a tactic of avoidance and silence/ing that has reverberated over time. Newman notes that between 1870 and 1920, white women found common ground and even "moments of interracial cooperation" based on a Christian influence of compassion of the type that drove some abolitionist activism (13). Still, she notes that "many white leaders dismissed the concerns of Black women – such as miscegenation, interracial rape, lynching, and their admittance to the all-women cars on the Pullman trains [...] irrelevant to the woman movement's foremost goal of 'political equality of women'" (Newman 13). This is just one example of avoiding and/or silence/ing. Beck offers another more public one: while the official position of the NAWSA was not to segregate, a story about the 1913 Washington Woman Suffrage Procession shows the weakness of that position. Beck cites letters to the editor of *The Women's Journal* in 1913 and letters from female students from Howard University to organizer Alice Paul asking if Black women were welcome at the parade, something that had not been outwardly stated either way (26).

In addition, historian Ama Ansah notes: "During rehearsal, parade organizers released an official order to segregate, with Black marchers being sent to the back of the parade" (n.p.). During the event itself, Ida B. Wells is reported to have stayed back for a time, only to emerge in the front in time to have her photo taken for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Beck 27). She did not stay at the front, however, and despite her act of resistance, the parade exemplifies the "silence" that Beck and others characterize as the dominant position of white feminists (26).

A few years later, as the founder of the National Women's Party (NWP) in 1916, Alice Paul stayed silent on (and therefore silenced) the needs of Black, poor, and queer women with her exclusive focus on legislative gains through an equal rights amendment to the constitution. Beck writes, "Paul would go on to maintain her racism and classism in her next political endeavor when she founded the NWP in 1916 [...] her insistence on sexism only [as the party's focus] would be an essential and enduring divide between white feminists and literally everyone else: queer, non-white, and working-class feminists" (29). The amendment would enable white women to advance in educational and capitalistic pursuits, but it would ignore the reality of others' lives.

Newman and Beck characterize these rhetorical moves as a strategy of imperialism, dehumanization, and conquering designed to move elite white women ahead and ignore the "daily lives of working-class and poor women – women who cleaned homes, cared for children, and picked cotton" (Beck 39). Beck argues that the rhetoric and organization of early white feminists not only left Black and poor women behind but also, in achieving a legislative victory like the 19th Amendment, "[blamed] other women for not achieving the possibilities that had been secured for white straight women" (29).

Newman similarly explains: "White women's use of discourse to empower themselves as central players in civilization-work during the late nineteenth century helped consolidate an imperialist rhetoric that delegitimized dissent from nonwhite and non-Christian women" (15). Even "common commitments" such as temperance and suffrage between white and Black women activists "were not sufficient to override the social and political divisions between Black and white women that derived from the material differences in their lives and that were exacerbated by nineteenth century discourses" (Newman 16). The white focus on equality between the sexes to the exclusion of other concerns became, according to Beck, "a defining characteristic of white feminist mobilization in every successive wave, and foundational to how they would continue to both fight for and envision gender equality" (29). It is this defining characteristic that I observe continues to animate second-wave feminist thought into the twentieth century through Bombeck's examples. Tracing this trajectory into the twentieth century, Clare Peta Blencowe suggests that feminists like Margaret Sanger turned to the modern scientific discourse of the twentieth century to advance women's causes as an update to the earlier imperialist rhetorics. Of course, we are now well-aware of the connection between scientific discourses and the violence of eugenics by whites in power. After and because of the Holocaust, Blencowe argues, a shift in thinking away from biological

categories of humanity generally and into social construction and identity politics changed feminist thought in the second wave, but did not leave behind the silencing of the first wave (8).

Beck also traces the shift in white feminists' focus in the 1970s away from biology to identity politics and self-liberation, encompassed in works by Erica Jong and Germaine Greer. Attention on the self and one's own experience was a powerful way to bring change to the collective, Beck argues; for instance, in publishing individual stories about having abortions in *Ms. Magazine*, feminists were able to embolden each other to come forward on behalf of reproductive rights legislation (60). Analysis of the self and one's own positionality as a woman in the limited roles afforded to women such as wife and mother allowed women "to explore what that existence could be" – including enjoying sex, being other-than-heterosexual, not a mother, and a professional (Beck 60).

However, there are downsides to this shift that again center white women: first, Blencowe argues that in the second half of the twentieth century, second-wave feminists struggled for clarity around the competing notions of sex (biology) and gender (social construction). For one, part of the second-wave women's movement was interested in better education about and heightened respect for women's bodies. Yet, Blencowe notes that since "education" had been a pernicious cover for eugenicists, twentieth century feminists downplayed the historically racist biological notions of women like Stanger (8). That downplaying resulted in a situation in which later generations (like me and perhaps you) simply didn't know eugenics played a role in the foundational beliefs of, to take an example of a revered early feminist, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (14).

Finally, Beck notes that in the over-attention to the self in feminism, the ideal of moving forward as a collective movement interested in changing social and political structures to better reflect women's interest faded. In its place stood a focus on individual self-empowerment, which evolved (or devolved) into self-interest and helped to spark the self-improvement industry, a tens of billions of dollars industry that focuses almost exclusively on convincing women of their needs to change in many ways – physically, spiritually, as a partner, as a parent, as a productive worker. In this way, any dreams of women's liberation that would tackle societal inequities and injustices for all women comes to be overshadowed by capitalistic consumption and success for those who have luxury time and funds to commit to this focus. This is reminiscent of the capitalistic and individual power gains Alice Paul was mostly interested in (Beck 62). Here again we see the first wave informing the second wave in an insidious way that speaks to whiteness and privilege.

Taken together, the legacy of silence and the evolution toward individualism leads us to the midcentury conditions in which Bombeck wrote. In order to notice unremarkings of whiteness, the next brief section discusses whiteness in rhetorical studies with several examples of how scholars have interrogated texts of various kinds in the manner proposed here.

## Locating Whiteness in Rhetorical Studies

Definitions of whiteness proffered in rhetorical studies for many years have dovetailed with the interpretations of feminist historical rhetorics covered above as erasure of other than white realities through discourse. In *Rhetorics of Whiteness*, Tammie M. Kennedy et al. write:

Whiteness is defined as a term functioning as a trope with associated discourses and cultural scripts that socialize people into ways of seeing, thinking, and performing whiteness and nonwhiteness [...] in ways that inform not only a single person's identity but also identities of cultural groups, cultural sites, and cultural objects, such as texts and technologies. (5)

Providing further nuance to the ways that whiteness operates in texts, Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek's "discourse of whiteness," entails six rhetorical strategies at work: whiteness as majority, whiteness as the absence of markers of "otherness," conflation of whiteness with color, with national identity, with ethnicity and with nationality (218). These are the ways that whiteness is constructed as normal and invisible, the frame in which the world is always, naturally seen. Rarely are these strategies explicit.

Accordingly, Krista Ratcliffe's 2000 suggestion in "Eavesdropping as Rhetorical Tactic" for interrogating implicit strategies that construct whiteness in dominant historical narratives and the history of the field of rhetoric is through rhetorical analysis. She asserts that the trope of whiteness, or the invisibility of whiteness as a racial identity in tellings of history in particular, can become an oppressive force that shapes dominant historical narratives of the future (96). To address this problem, Ratcliffe seeks to interrogate dominant narratives within academic and popular discourse, "eavesdropping on history," and exposing the trope of whiteness (101).

In a similar spirit of uncovering tropes of whiteness, Matthew Jackson finds a trope of whiteness in everyday discourse and in the dis-identification with dominant stances of neutrality on the part of whites. He writes: "Part of the problem of whiteness, then, is that it is too easy for whites to assume a position of supposed racial neutrality; we assume that if we are not doing anything overtly racist, then race is a non-issue for us (602). Jackson advocates for speaking up and calling attention to the supposed neutrality or the embedded tropes of whiteness in such areas as, for instance, news reports about Muslim men who are terrorists. He writes:

Rhetorically speaking, the hegemonic power of whiteness is wrapped up in the power to set the terms of the discourse, to determine the taken for granted rules of society, what counts as a source of grievance in society, and who gets to make a difference. This is often made manifest in whites' silent agreement not to talk about racism (with its underlying social, ontological, and epistemological premises and assumptions). (626)

And, although it has been misunderstood and politicized beyond the realm of interrogating whiteness in specific discursive arenas, the work on critical race narratives by Carl Gutierrez-Jones in legal studies exposes patterns of Black exclusion in the records of witness testimony. He asserts that white-centric narratives, or "strategic narrative reconstruction that excludes all but the [white] defendants' perspectives," historically trump other kinds of evidence at trial (5). A main example is drawn from the Rodney King trial in which the four white police officers' testimony led to their initial acquittal despite evidence against them such as King's extensive injuries and video footage. Gutierrez-Jones calls for the use of critical race narratives by legal professionals that expose when and how racial assumptions shape accepted testimony, rulings, and legal precedents.

Inspired by these observations and methods for questioning whiteness, I offer the term "unremarking," which refers to what texts and discourses are not saying about race, class, and privilege and what the rhetorical effects of these are. Whether one is discussing historical events, current events, legal matters, or even feminist humor writing, the absence of considering and/or remarking on more than white, "neutral" subjectivities, as these scholars and I also argue, too easily conveys a dominant point of view and understanding of reality informed by white supremacy, which is often taken as neutral and has the luxury of appearing apolitical.

The term "unremarking" is not a popular coinage, but at least one recent study in mass communication by Nikki Stevens et al., has used "unremarked" as a way to discuss whiteness as the luxury of appearing apolitical in the history of database optimization (114). In their work, they identify that the language used in foundational studies of their field reflects an uncritical, white-centric stance that resulted in allowing whiteness to operate not only as a neutral, but as the ideal. They write: "some of the most prominent works of the database revolution took up 'whiteness' as a kind of unremarked optimum— that is, as the prototype or ideal around which database optimization efforts were (implicitly or explicitly) organized" (114). This resulted in database optimization working as a tool for the continued oppression of people of color, disguised as a neutral technological advance.

Extending this usage, I use unremarking as a way to identify what goes unsaid about race, class, sexuality, and other subjectivities, all important in a contemporary intersectional feminism. In Bombeck's work, I link what is unremarked upon to the aforementioned legacies of first-into-second-wave feminism: a simultaneous silence/silencing of other-than-white, middle-class realities and a reduction of social action to individual gumption.

## Erma Bombeck's Humor and Rhetoric

Bombeck's books are collections of short essays and vignettes. In a typical vignette, two rhetorical patterns stand out: her use of details and dialogue. Bombeck relies heavily on details of family life, such as kids' sports equipment taking over one's house, or each person's behavior – husband, teenager, etc. – on a family road trip, to portray such events as overwhelming but inevitable for women to undertake with or without patience or grace. In addition, she uses snappy and specific dialogue between characters without much exposition, which keeps the pace of reading brisk, and creates a demand on the reader to "get it" quickly.

Largely, Bombeck's reading is fun and witty, her overall project being to elevate the experiences of her readers/housewives by denigrating both the unfair expectations placed on women and her protagonists' ability or interest in performing housework and motherhood well in the first place. The preponderance of Bombeck's work pokes fun at homelife to critique the expectations of and attitudes toward women in the midcentury. Moving from the 1950s to the later '60s and early '70s, Bombeck extends her criticism of the conditions in which women are expected to care about and achieve perfection in the realm of housework to include commentary on political issues of the second wave, including equal rights and birth control. The three books containing the essays I've chosen to analyze were published during this period and contain political critiques: *At Wit's End* (1967), *If Life is a Bowl of Cherries, What am I Doing in the Pits?* (1971), and *I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression* (1974).

To offer some transparency on my choices, Bombeck's writing is quite dear to me. I encountered most of her books as a teenager via tattered paperbacks. She was one of the first nonfiction writers whose purpose I understood, and her writing seemed feminist because it was by a woman, for and about women – even if by the 1990s, when I was a teen with an employed single mother, the 1950s housewife was only a caricature to me. Now, in a time during which I and more white feminists need to analyze for whiteness, I undertook a re-read of Bombeck's work during the pandemic. These passages stand out in Bombeck's catalog because of their political nature, and thanks to scaffolding provided by the scholarship cited above, I could notice and articulate how the works unremark.

### Unremarking #1: A Singular Representation

First, Bombeck's body of work is predicated on an understanding of the housewife as the caricature easily imagined today, a Donna Reed if you will: straight, white, married, stay-at-home, home-owning mother and housewife. There are some variations on this representation in terms of age of the mother, ages of the children, or stage of one's marriage, but the premise is stable throughout her vignettes and books. In Bombeck's characteristic manner, this representation is presented via an intricately detailed story. Consider this comparison to men's work in a dinner party vignette:

The fact that housewives are a misunderstood group was evident recently at a cocktail party. A living room psychologist was analyzing women who move furniture every time they clean the house. "Basically," he announced, "they are women who hate men. They cannot bear the thought of a man entering his home and walking across the floor without cracking his femur bone in three places. Rearranging the furniture is a little more subtle than putting a cobra in a basket by the bed" [...] Everyone laughed, but it occurred to me that men don't really know boredom as women do. If we had offices with secretaries with appointment books you could do our week with one original and six carbons. Same old egg on the plate, same old dustballs, same old rumpiled beds, same old one-of-a-color-socks in the wash" (*Post-Natal Depression*, 152).

There are a few facets of the housewife's life to unpack in this vignette, all which must be taken as givens in order for the joke to land: the woman is married to a man and lives a life in which dinner parties are routine – imagine that caricature in her pearls holding a martini. The fact that the man at the party is analyzing the behavior of housewives as men-hating is unfair of course, as he construes them to be the strident feminists of his disdain. This is a joke on the middle-class white man, who is so oblivious to the plight of women that he thinks *housewives* are the problem and that feminists are a problem in the first place.

Additionally, the protagonist of the story also realizes that the man doesn't understand why a woman would move furniture around so much (a number of reasons, though Bombeck hints at boredom), which also resists the idea that women's actions center on men. Bombeck is astute to present this double critique of the male chauvinist point of view. However, we see unremarking in two ways: if housewives are not truly a threat to men, but some women are – which women? An unremarking perhaps of more strident, public feminists of any race who are not married, do not live in the suburbs, are not middle-class. What is unsaid about the women whose focus is not changing furniture to annoy men? And, when the protagonist admits that the motivation to move her furniture is boredom – a sad comment on the roteness and under-stimulating conditions that gender roles forced upon many middle-class women – one must also point out the assumed class privilege and level of comfort undergirding the protagonists' complaints.

## Unremarking #2: Obfuscating the Stakes

As the cultural revolution progressed, Bombeck's commentary touches on the changing state of the nuclear family, shifts in traditional gender roles, and politically charged topics like equal rights and birth control. Bombeck advances clearly feminist claims through humor, which must be appreciated for its creativity and absurdity: for instance, she frames her pro-birth control argument within a conversation with a pigeon. However, the rhetorical effects of her approach at times obfuscate the stakes of women's rights for those who have more to lose than middle-class white women.

For instance, in *I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression* (1974), Bombeck advocates for equal rights in a mock speech that is both exasperated at the notion of needing to legislate equality and relies on gender stereotypes that women must work through pain, while men are wimps. She writes:

When women's lib comes out for Equal Colds, I will join it. [...] just once I would like to have my cold given the same respect as a man's cold [...] You've heard it sisters, now what are we going to do about it? I propose we initiate federal legislation to make women's colds legal in all of the fifty states to be protected under a new law called: Bombeck's Equal Cold Opportunity Bill. The bill would provide that women would receive more than fifteen minutes to get over a twenty-four hour virus. Under Equal Opportunity, her cold would be granted the right to stay in bed and would be exempt from car pools, kitchen duty, laundry, bowling, and visiting the sick. Any husband who degrades and taunts his wife's cold with such remarks as "maybe it was the pot roast," or "you're just bored" or "if it hangs on till spring, you'd better see a doctor" or "get on your feet, you're scaring the children" will be liable to a fine.  
(Bombeck "I Lost Everything," 138)

The reader is obviously meant to support the protagonist because she is sick and in need of sympathy; however, the mocking of the Equal Rights bill (the ERA having been passed by Congress in 1972 but ultimately stalled) meets Bombeck's audience wherever they fall on the political spectrum. A conservative could cluck their tongue in scorn if they oppose the ERA or think Bombeck is a radical for backing the bill, and a liberal could shake their head at the unfairness of needing such a bill or the fact that it stalled. In playing to both sides, the joke unremarks on class and power, meaning that it can allow an interpretation by the reader that her life won't change too much

without the ERA – what is not said is that she would need to be a comfortable, middle-class woman for that to be the case. From a 2022 vantage point, we know that plenty of Americans still feel this way. The cold scenario is clever but a little unclear in its politics.

Absurdity is a Bombeckian trait. Consider her argument in favor of the Pill in *At Wit's End* (1965) in which she pretends to interview a pigeon, convinced that the birds are “blocking the break-through of the Pill to American women” because the nation’s efforts to control the birds’ over-population is distracting from the needs of women (128):

I talked recently with a spokesman -- the only bird who knew pigeon English -- about the talked-about Pill. ‘Well, if people don’t want us around, why don’t they say so?’ he cooed. ‘I’m sick of this shilly-shallying [...] Oh, I suppose we do produce at a rather astounding rate. But there’s nothing else to do up here all day long but fly over parked cars and mess around the statues in the parks.’ I asked him how the women of this country should go about getting The Pill. ‘All I can offer is some advice on how we got to be a menace. We just made our numbers felt in the downtown area.’ (129)

In this passage, the pigeons are experiencing the conversation about birth control from the opposite point of view of women -- they want to procreate without impediment, while the powers-that-be try to reduce their numbers. On the other hand, twentieth century American women want to impede their procreation, and they can’t get the attention or solution they want. The suggestion at the end of the passage -- making your numbers felt -- speaks to the need for collective social action. Readers might agree with me that this argument in support of birth control is weirdly funny but subtle to the point of unremarking on the stakes of reproductive freedom for women beyond that white, middle-class housewife caricature. It allows a range of readers with a range of political ideologies to again nod, chuckle, or roll their eyes at several facets of the issue. To me, the treatment here belies whiteness and privilege as a neutral position from which one can observe, rather than be affected by, the issue at hand.

### Unremarking #3: Individualism

Bombeck is quite consistent in the use of a specific and unique ethos of a loser for her first-person protagonists. The loser protagonist is always wrong, doesn’t look good, doesn’t take care of herself, and is terrible at her house chores. The loser is an outsider to an imagined group of more poised suburban mothers. Bombeck offers this imperfect foil for the reader to laugh at and compare herself against. This is an endearing feature that, when interrogated, places the locus of creating change on individual self-improvement rather than structural change, a distraction of focus in feminist activism that the scholars cited above argue persists today.

Two vignettes from *At Wit's End* exemplify this ethos. The first example touches on feelings of inadequacy regarding intelligence or lack of educational opportunities for the protagonist:

Even my own children know I’m a no-talent. There was a time when I could tell them anything and they would believe me. I had all the answers [...] Then one day recently my [teenaged] daughter asked, ‘Do you know the capital of Mozambique?’ ‘No, but hum a few bars and I’ll fake it,’ I grinned. ‘Mother,’ she announced flatly, ‘you don’t know anything!’ (41)

The loser ethos is a way to remark on the conditions of women’s days spent at home with limited intellectual engagement and feelings of being taken for granted. Bombeck also paints the loser as someone who often tries to improve herself through diet, exercise, hobbies, or other self-help advice. Consider an example of improving one’s self esteem: the loser enters the salon and tells the stylist she’s been a little depressed since her baby was born. When asked how old the baby is, the protagonist answers “thirty-four” (39). At the end of the vignette, the woman feels great about her new hairstyle, and the stylist calls her a sex symbol. The victory doesn’t last long, however: “I felt like a new woman as I walked across the plush carpet, my shoulders squared, my head held high. I could feel every pair of eyes in the room following me. ‘Pardon me, honey,’ said [the stylist],



‘you’re dragging a piece of bathroom tissue on your heel.’” (40). Of course, the loser has gotten the attempt at self-improvement wrong as well.

These portrayals of characters who are not successful but who might be if they tried harder to improve themselves dovetails with one of the key legacies of white feminism stated in the introduction: self-help. In particular, the notion that women’s change efforts can or should be directed one’s self and maybe less on social movements or for the good of others is on display in *Life is a Bowl of Cherries*, in which Bombeck heads more explicitly in this direction. A more earnest essay, “My Turn,” is less jokey and exhorts women to improve, grow, or change. In it, Bombeck lists famous women who didn’t achieve success until their later years, such as actress Ruth Gordon winning an Oscar when she was 72, or Senator Margaret Chase Smith winning her election at age 51. She writes:

For years, you’ve watched everyone else do it [such as husbands and children getting their educations and changing careers]. And you envied them and said, ‘May be next year I’ll go back to school.’ And the years went by and this morning you looked into the mirror and said, ‘You blew it. You’re too old to pick it up and start a new career.’ [...] Or you can be like the woman I knew who sat at her kitchen window year after year and watched everyone else do it. Then one day she said, ‘I do not feel fulfilled cleaning chrome faucets with a toothbrush. It’s my turn.’ I was 37 years old at the time.” (*Cherries*, 241-3)

This is an encouraging message but one that elides the consciousness-raising of the midcentury with self-improvement, part of a neoliberal evolution that Blencowe and Beck note of white feminism that has its roots in the early suffragettes’ notion of middle-class success in capitalist terms. The assumptions embedded in self-improvement messages rest on a bootstraps mentality, which offers a limited vision of possible liberated futures other than reaching goals of appearance, intelligence, poise, and personal accomplishment. The onus is on the individual to self-improve, rather than collective action to improve conditions for all women.

Taken together, Bombeck’s second-wave political essays may not be explicitly racist or exclude women other than white women on purpose, but they do evince silence/unremarking on race, class, sexuality, and other subjectivities, as well as reflect long-standing first-wave feminist rhetorics of whiteness with a focus on the (white, privileged) self.

## Conclusion

Bombeck was a popular humor writer and television personality who, on the one hand, used her national platform to (gently) persuade a politically-center, assumedly white audience to accept basic feminist precepts that women’s lives should be improved. Considering where Bombeck’s arguments stop short is productive for the twenty-first century antiracist feminists, since many of us and the women who raised and supported us personally and professionally were likely steeped in something similar to a Bombeckian feminist framework. Erma Bombeck held 30 million readers and the Good Morning America audience in sway from 1952 until her death in 1996. Among those numbers are our grandmothers, aunts, and retired female professors, and maybe their mothers and aunts.

As I have argued previously in this journal, the rhetoric of political, proto-feminist, and feminist women in the mid-to-late twentieth century needs more attention. Megan J. Busch’s recent excellent case study attests that the task is worth undertaking. In her analysis of white second-wave feminist activist Zelda Nordlinger, Busch acknowledges the rhetorical failures of white feminists of the 1960s and ‘70s in terms of listening to and including Black and poor women, including Nordlinger’s inappropriate comparisons of sexism to slavery and segregation that were tone-deaf to racialized women’s experiences (n.p.). Busch notes that Nordlinger’s rhetoric and ethos evolved

over time, offering “an example of the growth and the complexity of crafting a feminist ethos before the term intersectionality had a pervasive impact on feminist thought” (n.p.). As I have noted, Bombeck’s point of view evolved over time as well, and she became more stridently politically feminist in the 1970s, although still couched in first-wave legacies, like Nordlinger and other feminists of the time (and now).

When we do turn our attention to midcentury feminist rhetorics, it is also important to resist liberal bias, as Faith Kurtya has smartly noted:

Research on women’s rhetorics has tended to center on women whose beliefs align with contemporary liberal feminist politics—usually historical figures such as suffragettes, female preachers, and union organizers—and eliding the rhetoric of conservative women [and] responsible feminist rhetoricians in the present and future political climate [need] to be able to see conservative women in their contradictions and complexities. (n.p.)

Where Kurtya detects a methodological bias in selecting whose rhetorics to study, I additionally suggest that there is an analytical bias toward finding historical and liberal women’s rhetoric empowering in nearly all cases. I have attempted to pump the brakes on reading Bombeck’s feminism as clearly empowering or not uncomplicated by reading closely its strategies and arguments through the lens of whiteness as it discussed and defined in histories of feminism and rhetorical studies. As Busch notes, critiques of our feminist histories and rhetorics will take sustained inquiry into the archives, into the received accounts, and, I suggest, even into the very popular, seemingly well-known tattered paperbacks – to trace, locate, question, and complicate where whiteness goes unremarked.

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