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Pocket Queens: Women, Poker, Memoir and Perifeminist Strategies

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Abstract: Approaches from the humanities that understand poker as a culture (rather than as a gambling pathology or an isolated gaming activity) can help to highlight the voices and stories of women and connect them to feminist and gender research. Stories by individual women who may or may not be feminists can be most usefully described as “perifeminist,” a description of the strategies to cope with sexism that do not necessarily involve either confrontation or negation. Understanding women’s poker stories within this framework can bring depth and breadth to the representation of female poker players in popular journalism, which generally characterizes female players as objects or accessories for male players. In this article, I analyze the gender politics of memoirs by Annie Duke and Victoria Coren, prominent female players whose texts are widely read, because these memoirs are a good place to look for perifeminist strategies and a sense of what being part of poker culture involves for women. Looking for and noticing the stories of female players and contextualizing them as part of the everyday experiences of gender politics can do much to make the lives of poker playing women more visible, and worthy of critical attention.

Keywords: Poker, women, feminism, gambling, humanities

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Introduction

The little research there is on female poker players perhaps unsurprisingly concludes that poker has long been regarded as a man’s game and a site for the exercise of masculinity in various forms (Abarbanel & Bernhard, 2012; Morton, 2003; Palomäki et al., 2016; Van Ingen, 2008; Wolkomir, 2012). It is not surprising either to learn from the research that female poker players are a minority in brick and mortar rooms in North America: the percentage of women in the World Series of Poker Main Event, the best-known tournament in the world, was just 3.5% in 2012. In online gambling, female gamblers comprise 54% of the total number of gamblers, but only 26% play online poker (Abarbanel & Bernhard, 2012). Female players who do survive and thrive in the world of poker, whether they are tournament stars or everyday cash game players, are therefore unusual. But where are their stories in the research? Why does a significant portion of research on female poker players understand them as problem gamblers? Where are other kinds of stories by and about female poker players in the research? In this essay, I offer several answers to these questions which involve seeing both questions as connected. The research which seeks to connect female poker playing to

problem gambling discourse does not look at autobiographical work by players. In so doing, such researchers miss an opportunity to see what players think about poker as a game and as a culture. Therefore, I recommend that paying more attention to the voices of female players, particularly in the autobiographical stories they have to tell about themselves in published memoirs, self-help guides, and interviews, will result in better academic research on poker.

Approaches from the humanities that understand poker as a *culture* rather than as a gambling pathology or an isolated gaming activity can work to highlight the voices and stories of women and connect them to feminist and gender research. In particular, feminist work in life writing studies, the term for the study of nonfictional personal narratives such as biography, autobiography and diaries (Chansky, 2016), has an important role to play in two ways. For decades, feminist life writing criticism has highlighted the stories of women whose points of view have been marginalized because of their gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age and ability, pointing out that it is important to pay attention to stories by people who sometimes literally have had to write their lives into being in order to be heard. In this line of thinking,

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autobiographies of women should be read as testimonies both to lived experiences of gender inequality and to the connections between gender issues and other forms of injustice (Gilmore, 1994; Jensen & Jolly, 2014; Smith, 1987; Smith & Watson, 2010; Whitlock, 2000).

Some feminist life writing criticism also focuses on autobiographies by women or biographies about them as involving the work of public identity, where female writers can bear witness to their experiences of gender inequality, but can occupy relatively privileged social positions too, and draw relatively conservative conclusions about the position of women in any given society. Popular and populist autobiographies and biographies of women who have achieved public success in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as sports (Chare, 2017; Rak, 2021), human rights (Kurz, 2015; Whitlock, 2007), politics (Bosch, 2009; Smith & Watson, 2001), and entertainment (Larkin, 2007; Lee, 2020) do two interrelated operations. They often track the relentless work of sexism in the lives of women who seek the public sphere and economic independence, and they also rely on the tropes and narrative conventions of individual narratives of success to explain how their goals were achieved. In so doing, the latter types of narratives raise questions about whose stories circulate and under what circumstances they become recognizable in mainstream discourses (Gilmore, 2003, 2017).

Because the latter narratives tend to focus on the importance of individual achievement with reference to liberal models of subjectivity and freedom, they also benefit from context provided by other types of life writing and life narrative in other types of media that circulate within the same discourses of liberalism, such as the genre of self-help (Blum, 2018; Whitney, 2005). In the case of poker, the autobiographies of Victoria Coren and Annie Duke fall into the latter category, because they are stories of sexism in poker circles where the “solution” to injustice is a reliance on relatively traditional individual values of hard work and compromise. As is the case with other studies of life writing by women that participates in liberal ideologies of self-making, self-help guides by women about the game also help to explain how accounts of female players who are not overtly feminist nevertheless have much to tell us about the gender politics of poker itself.

Feminist approaches to life writing by female poker stars, therefore, pay attention to the work of gender within autobiography, and treat the style and form of autobiography as evidence of post-feminist approaches to women’s rights, as neoliberal and consumer discourses appear to support the idea that women can succeed, but only within a narrow capitalist framework (McRobbie, 2009). As an addition to the analyses of autobiography that link it as a form either to testimony or to liberalism, I wish to add a third way to see life writing by female players. I suggest that it could be useful to understand women currently writing about

poker as “perifeminist,” a description of the strategies to cope with sexism that do not necessarily involve either confrontation or negation. Understanding the position of women in poker culture, and autobiographies by female players, within this framework can bring depth and breadth to the prevailing image of female poker players in popular journalism, which generally characterizes female players as objects or accessories for male players, as “poker babes,” or as substandard players (Corday, 2007). Looking for and noticing the stories of female players, and contextualizing them as part of the everyday experiences of gender politics can do much to make the lives of poker playing women more visible, and subject to serious academic critique. But before we can begin to look at female players themselves, it is necessary to think about the current state of gender studies in research about poker as a game and a culture.

Voicelessness and Pathology

The study of gender and poker is in its infancy. As I mentioned, there is a handful of qualitative studies which use ethnography or interviewing to make reference to the experiences of female players. But even there, data about female players is used to support conclusions about gender and playing style, the presence of sexism in the game, or the use of deception in play (Abarbanel & Bernhard, 2012; Palomäki et al., 2016; Van Ingen, 2008; Wolkomir, 2012). Such work represents a positive step because female players and their concerns at least appear in the research. These studies do not, however, refer to interviews with female players or autobiography and biography by or about female players in the game, and so they miss a vital archive of the way female players decide to tell their stories themselves. Moreover, they do not tend to focus on the larger culture of poker and its representation of women.

In the fields of social psychology and clinical epidemiology, there is a more troubling trend. Female players are pathologized in these fields as just another form of problem gambler. This type of approach has the potential to deprive female players of agency because, as Cathy Van Ingen points out, there is “an uncomfortable separation between social theory and gambling research” which has the effect of foregrounding addiction and individual behaviour, and moving social factors into the background (Van Ingen, 2008, p. 4). What Fiona Nicoll calls the trope of the problem gambler is rarely based on the experiences or the voices of players in casino environments, and there is more than a little moral high-ground assumed by some researchers about those they research, because presumably they are not the “problem” they think or write about (Nicoll, 2019). In a recent blog post supporting the need for critical gambling studies in social theory, James Cosgrave points out the problems with the focus on individual as problem in problem gambling research, observing that “problem gambling

research is not gambling studies. It is rather an extension or application of addiction research to gambling" (Cosgrave, 2020). But he goes on to say in the same post that simply focusing on the "social" work of gambling as a culture without thinking about gamblers themselves may also make the gambler as an agent disappear.

There is, then, more than one way in which the voices of female poker players may be lost. Here is an example of how this can happen: in a 2020 study by A. Morvannu et. al. published in *The Journal of Gambling Issues*, the authors write that "poker players are at high risk of experiencing gambling problems. Despite the feminization of gambling, little is known about the problems associated with poker playing among women" (Morvannou et al., 2020, p. 18). This study proceeds from two assumptions: first, that "feminization" is connected to an uptick in female participation in gambling, and second, that female poker players are worthy of study because they are problem gamblers. It connects the playing of poker to gambling, which in this area of gambling studies takes problem gambling as its only focus (Crisp et al., 2004; Karter, 2013; LaPlante et al., 2006). It is important, of course, to study problem gambling and I do not mean to say that there are no problem gamblers who play poker. But women who play poker are only seen here when they are a "problem" for research. What women have to say about themselves and about poker can disappear into researcher motivations and become subsumed by what researchers want to know, particularly if poker is understood as merely a gambling addiction.

Michel Foucault pointed out a similar attraction to pathology as a field-generating activity in the study of deviance and sexuality in the nineteenth century. Psychiatry and medicine developed as sciences by overcoming the initial revulsion of early researchers regarding sex as something that could be researched at all. "How could a discourse based on reason speak of that?" Foucault asks rhetorically, connecting "disgust" at sex to the need some researchers saw for medicalizing the study of sex in the nineteenth century (Foucault, 1978, p. 24). The key for Foucault is the turn from sex to discourse and, in the process, efforts by experts to set their revulsion aside for the sake of a scientific study of sex, which is what made it possible to study it. He says of this strategy:

What is essential [in this professional desire to overcome revulsion] is not in all these scruples, in the "moralism" they betray, or in the hypocrisy one can suspect them of, but in the recognized necessity of overcoming this hesitation. One had to speak of sex; one had to speak publicly and in a manner that was not

determined by the division between licit and illicit . . . one had to speak of it as of a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed. (Foucault, 1978, p. 24)

Proceeding with research from the figure of the problem gambler, and then creating an understanding of gender which simply says *female* poker players are problem players too, is a way to consolidate a research field and manage its subjects as problems for the field. One must speak of *that*, which is poker, and of *them*, women who play, as the illicit, while the researchers create the idea of the licit, in the name of the management of pathology.

Why Study Women's Poker Stories? The Case for Memoir

The study of poker, therefore, is not well served by being just another site for research into problem gambling. The few studies there are of female players which I mentioned in the introduction to this paper tend to rely on methods to study female players in ways that do not source the stories women have told about their own motivations for playing. Within studies of problem gambling specifically, the voices of women—when they do appear—tend to take the form of tales of abjection, addiction and shame, as they do in other studies of problem gambling, including studies of poker (Karter 2019, p. 48).² The effect is to flatten the experience of female players, despite the valuable insights in such research about the struggles of female players with sexism and other problems within poker culture. What can be done about this? Poker research is already moving into the areas of sociology and anthropology. But it could focus too on the stories of female players and think about the cultural meaning of the game as it is played in casinos, homes and online if poker is assumed to have cultures and histories. In that light, methods from the humanities about stories and representation could have much to add to the field of critical gambling studies, because poker is a game *of and for representation* in first-person accounts. Memoirs by women who play poker can help to highlight who players are, and what their everyday lives as players are like when they are not being studied by experts. To this end, the work of Jean Williams on pioneering female bridge player Rixi Markus and her bridge partner Fritz Gordon, which relies extensively on Markus' memoirs, is an instructive model because of its intersectional analysis and awareness of cultural context for Markus' life and for the world of competitive bridge after World War II (Williams, 2010).

Using research from the field of life writing— the study of biography, autobiography and other forms of personal nonfiction—means that methods and theory

is a thriving industry of research on problem gambling in general, which sometimes includes poker. See Nicoll (2019) especially pp. 40-49 in chapter 1, for a thorough review and critique of the research assumptions regarding problem gambling.

² See Karter (2019, p. 48) for a mainstream version of her 2013 book on women and gambling addiction *Women and Problem Gambling*, where she quotes from interviews to show female problem gamblers as abject. In addition to the studies by Morvannu et. al. (2020), Crisp et. al. (2013) and LaPlante et. al. (2006) that I mentioned above, there

from the humanities and the social sciences can be used in order to respond to Fiona Nicoll's pithy observation that "researchers need to expand their methods beyond the survey and the laboratory to spend more time playing and talking with gamblers" (Nicoll, 2019, p. 247). In this, life writing scholarship on poker can join feminist work on sport and social history to explain why women's participation in poker, like participation in other games such as darts and snooker or sports such as football, "has been and continues to be nonlinear and uneven" (Osborne & Skillen, 2020, p. 425). Paying attention to the stories female poker players have to tell within autobiography could shed light on the gender, class, and race politics of poker itself, and can help researchers respect poker as *cultural work* analogous to the cultural work of other sports, rather than regard it as the backdrop for another study of pathology.

Life writing therefore has the potential to complicate the picture of female players and their attempts to work through everyday sexism and other forms of discrimination in an environment where it might seem that the odds are stacked against them. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have pointed out, autobiographical stories serve many cultural functions, including the work of testimony, the work of narrative in creating the writing subject as they assemble and rework the stories of their lives, and the ethics of telling life stories that would otherwise be forgotten or discounted. Such stories are creative, and yet based on truth claims. They compel their readerships and inspire them, as they instruct and entertain, sometimes all at once (Smith & Watson, 2010, pp. 31–63). In the wake of the memoir boom in the 1990s when in the wake of the success of Frank McCourt's 1989 memoir *Angela's Ashes*, memoir became a best-selling and widely circulating genre in the United States and Britain, memoir in particular has been shown to be more than merely captive to market forces, particularly when the authors are female and/or members of other equity-seeking groups. The memoir genre has the ability to describe the action of social forces on individuals as the individuals themselves write themselves into public identity and critique, making the form potentially open to the exercise of agency and testimony (Couser, 2012; Jensen & Jolly, 2014; Rak, 2013; Whitlock, 2007). The study of life writing itself, within autoethnography and more broadly in cultural studies, has become an important way to understand how experience, in the words of Joan Scott, is both an interpretation and in need of an interpretation, particularly in accounts of experience written by actors themselves (Scott, 1991, p. 797).

The complexity of the representation of experience and the mediation of experience in the genre of memoir underscores the importance of hearing and respecting minority voices in gambling and paying attention to what they have to say about who they are and why they play, as well as what they disavow or *don't* say. To this end, I examine two memoirs by prominent female

players of the game that have received critical attention and are known widely in the world of poker: Annie Duke's memoir—co-authored with David Diamond—*Annie Duke: How I Raised, Folded, Bluffed, Flirted, Cursed, and Won Millions* (2005) and Victoria Coren's *For Richer, For Poorer: Confessions of a Player* (2009). These memoirs – by middle-class or elite white women who became well-known tournament players – offer a range of perspectives about the contemporary history of the game from the 1990s to the present. Poker research can use stories of this nature to explain how the culture of poker works, from the perspectives of players. If poker has a culture, what is poker like for women who play? The stories women themselves decide to tell are a good place to start.

The Culture of Poker and Perifeminist Styles

It is commonplace to observe that poker is technically gender-blind because men have no inherent advantage in the game (Abarbanel & Bernhard, 2012; Jadavi, 2020; Wolkomir, 2012). It is for this reason that there has been considerable backlash against the creation of the Ladies event in the World Series of Poker tournament system. The backlash includes a recent controversy about men who have played in the event, including Shaun Deeb in 2010, who mocked the tournament by dressing in drag and using a tampon as a card marker (Beauregard, 2019; Jadavi, 2020; Kanigher, 2010). Annie Duke defended Deeb and criticized the Ladies Event. Well-known poker pro Daniel Negreanu defended the Ladies Event and criticized Deeb and Duke in response, particularly Duke because of her claim at the time that she was the best female player in the world (*Daniel Negreanu Goes off on Annie Duke*, n.d.; *Daniel Negreanu Savages Shaun Deeb Then Turns On Annie Duke After She Comes To His Defense*, n.d.; *News*, n.d.; Negreanu, 2010). Since then, some male journalists and players have joined Negreanu in pointing out misogyny in poker and have urged other male players to support the presence of women in the game (Badger, n.d.; Bateman, 2019; *Don't Understand Sexism or Misogyny in Poker?*, 2015). In Maria Konnikova's *The Biggest Bluff*, poker legend Erick Siedel observes that poker "is a particularly harsh environment for women. It's almost impossible to be a female poker player and not get online harassment" (Konnikova, 2020, p. 96).

As the controversy involving the WSOP Ladies event demonstrates, poker is not a level playing field and it never has been. But much of the mainstream writing about poker draws essentialist conclusions about why this might be the case, when the question is considered at all. James McManus, for example, thinks that women "evolved" into less competitive creatures than men, and that male testosterone explains why they are more aggressive than women when they play, assumptions that reduce aptitude for the game to biological determinism and do not take social factors connected to gender into account (McManus, 2009, p. 404). McManus' history of poker, *Cowboys Full*, has in its title

the assumption that the hand called full house (three of a kind and two of a kind) featuring three kings with another pair has a cultural meaning too: some of poker's roots lie in a folk version of the game's development in the American west, and the long association of western machismo with the game. Poker is literally "full" of cowboys who played, or current players who like to imagine that they are cowboys. Cowboys, of course, are always male, almost always white, and they exhibit a rugged frontier masculinity, at least in the popular imagery about them.

To be a cowboy is to be a powerful kind of white man, more powerful than other men, and more powerful than women. The card hierarchies in poker concerning royalty bear this out: Pocket Kings or KK, the second-best starting hand in the game Texas Hold 'Em, is ranked higher than Pocket Queens, or QQ, a clear statement that in representation as in life, powerful, mature men are worth more than women (or Jacks, who are only princes). McManus believes that such card values are "in our marrow" because he sees the game as innately sexual, another instance of McManus' reduction of the game of poker to biological imperatives. This, for McManus, is why women are able to use their sexual mores to win hands by flirting, why poker advertising often features scantily-clad images of women who are ornaments, not players and why hands like 6-9 or AK have bawdy nicknames. Poker, he muses, could be a lot like porn, which is why so many men play the game (McManus, 2009, p. 407).

On a superficial level, McManus' observations are sexist and smack of biological reduction, but they do get at how intensely sexist poker can be in its culture. McManus is not the only commentator who has observed that women can use their feminine wiles to their advantage at the tables. Surrounded by signs of masculine dominance such as televised 24-hour sports, floor shows featuring exotic dancers and advertising showing "babes" of poker flanking new World Poker Tour champions (Van Ingen, 2008), it is little wonder that female players themselves are often assumed by male players to lack agency and, as objects of the male gaze, not be capable of acting as poker subjects. Poker is framed as a masculine game, even though there is nothing masculine in poker game play (Wolkomir, 2012). But masculinity appears in discussions of style, which often depends on stereotypes about male aggression and stereotypes about women as sexually-available, timid, or incapable (Badger, 2021). Much of the literature about and by women in poker professes an awareness of stereotypes such as these, but does not confront them.

Rather, how-to guides for women often advocate using stereotypes to their advantage at the table. For example, the how-to guide *The Badass Girl's Guide to Poker* includes advice about how to play as a "dumb blonde" because "men think we're stupid and honest. The question is, How can you use this bias to your advantage and win more money" (Bochan, 2005, p. 89).

Another how-to guide by an avowed feminist and pioneering American female professional player, Cat Hulbert, discusses how to beat "Daddykins," the kind of male player who assumes that female players want or need his protection and instruction. The best way to do that, Hulbert says, is for women to play dumb and be as flattering as possible when at the table with this type of player (Hulbert, 2005, p. 87). Sexism is a given, Hulbert says, but it "works to your advantage" at the tables if female players learn how it works (Hulbert, 2005, p. 84). Hulbert even recommends sitting down at a chatty sexist or racist game, because at least some of those social players will be easy to beat. There is no point, she advises, in arguing with racists or fundamentalists. Rather, she recommends understanding how to defeat them and then taking their money (Hulbert, 2005, pp. 76-79).

Research on women in poker bears out this common view that it is better to understand sexism than change it in a poker game. A study of bluffing and gender politics showed, predictably, that men who play online poker bluff women more than other men because they believe that women are easily fooled and scared of aggression (Palomäki et al., 2016). In the face of aggressive strategies that are often interpreted as gendered by those who have to deal with them, the response can be to counter aggression with deception. In one study of women and the gendered talk at poker tables, interviewees commented on their use of deception, or playing dumb, as a strategy in an intimidating game environment where women are assumed to be weak players that, at least for one commentator, results in conservative political strategies during the game (Wolkomir, 2012). The implication is that women can use others' misperceptions of them as weak to their advantage, rather than contest the culture of sexism in poker. "That's the problem with a lot of men," poker pro Cyalona Gowan said in a 2004 interview, "they underestimate us" (Gowen & Vine, 2004, p. 64). Gowan goes on to say that women can use these negative biases to their advantage, and can pretend to be less skilled than they actually are. Maria Konnikova observes "when women act in a more feminine, less confrontational way, we aren't being shy or stupid. We're being smart...we are socialized into our passivity" (Konnikova, 2020, p. 100).

Sidestepping Sexism in Poker: Perifeminist Strategies

What does this approach mean for women? Many women who play poker regularly have learned to do so not by emulating how men play, but by developing their own style based on the culture of poker, a culture that includes sexism in addition to other forms of inequality. I call such a strategy "perifeminist" rather than postfeminist, in that it accepts sexism as real and not, as is usually assumed in a postfeminist framework, already over or irrelevant (Hill, 2016; McRobbie, 2004). Drawing on Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick's

concept of the periperformative as an utterance that operates in the “neighborhood” of the performative which displaces but does not negate the original utterance (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 68), I suggest that perifeminism can be a potential way to understand how some women see the problem of sexism but displace it strategically rather than confronting it as a way to deal with an immediate problem. Perifeminist approaches in poker therefore acknowledge that poker is a game without a level playing-field because of the masculinist and misogynist structure of poker culture, but they see the remedy as something other than withdrawal from the culture or fighting sexism directly.

In this light, the fight to have Ladies-Only tournaments could be seen as a perifeminist strategy because the aim is to create an environment where women can play together differently for at least one tournament, without having to contend with sexism (Abarbanel & Bernhard, 2012; Beauregard, 2019). The idea is to have a safe space, rather than challenge gender hierarchies, which for some players means that they play aggressively in mixed tournaments, but are more social in Ladies events (Abarbanel & Bernhard, 2012; Beauregard, 2019). Another perifeminist strategy is less collective and more neoliberal, because it stresses that the individual management of sexist situations is the guarantee for success (McRobbie, 2020). The latter position understands male chauvinism and misogyny as weaknesses to be exploited rather than social wrongs to be righted; this is the position of professional players and coaches Cat Hulbert, and the anonymous author of *The Badass Guide*. What each approach has in common is the recognition of poker’s culture as marked by inequality. But perifeminism, rather than feminism, resists dominant discourses as a tactic and does not confront sexism head-on. Annie Duke, Victoria Coren and Maria Konnikova all grapple with the challenges and rewards of using perifeminist strategies during the course of their poker careers, and in their memoirs they draw different conclusions regarding the existence of sexism in poker.

Annie Duke and the Myth of the Level Playing Field

Annie Duke is routinely named as one of the best female players of the game because of her \$4.27 million winnings and her excellent finishes at the World Series of Poker, including a 2004 WSOP first-place finish in Omaha Eight or Better and the WSOP Tournament of Champions (*The Top 20 Female Poker Players of All Time | The Top Women in Poker*, 2018). She became one of the best-known stars of poker in the wake of the poker boom of 2005, appearing often on televised poker shows and late-night talk shows. She is also controversial: Joan Rivers was able to unnerve her during the finals of *Celebrity Apprentice* by accusing her, and poker in general, of shady associations, causing Duke to complain of unfair treatment and personal attacks (Cypra, 2009). She retired from poker after a scandal in 2010 when an online poker site she backed,

Ultimate Bet, was closed due to a cheating scandal (*Ultimate Bet and Absolute Poker Scandal*, 2018). Duke is the sister of poker star Howard Lederer, and so when Lederer was involved in the Full Tilt Poker scandal (*What Happened to Howard Lederer?*, n.d.), Duke was regarded suspiciously because of her close ties to her brother (*What Happened to Annie Duke?*, n.d.). Today, Duke fundraises for charities and works as a decision-making consultant for businesses. She is also the author of the 2020 business book, *How to Decide (Annie Duke - Professional Poker Player and Philanthropist)*, n.d.).

Duke’s memoir, written with David Diamond, was published as her career was beginning to gather momentum in 2005, and it was a way for Duke to promote her work and image to a wider audience, a common tactic when a memoir is used as part of a promotional strategy (Rak, 2010). As a celebrity memoir, *Annie Duke* combines several autobiographical strategies in order to tell its story. It uses the format of the *Bildungsroman*, or the coming-of-age story, to describe how Duke went from an elite life as the daughter of a popular linguist and private school teacher, to student life at Columbia University, to a life on the road playing at run-down casinos. The rest of the book is dedicated to Duke’s rise to fame as a player in the World Series of Poker. The memoir details her road to success in spite of family strife, her struggles with a panic disorder, her decision to abandon her PhD in Psychology, and her struggle to raise a family despite the demands of professional poker life.

Duke’s account of her own successes can be interpreted within a postfeminist framework as being marked by perifeminist strategies. She describes herself as a “working mom” with four children who has to balance her private and public lives (2005, pp. 4, 16–18), including postpartum depression. Her upbringing, however, was elite. She enters the world of poker with the help of her brother Howard, a celebrity poker pro who has the money to support her financially (Duke & Diamond, 2005, p. 116). Duke’s elite background meant that she was shielded from some aspects of sexism in much of her earlier life. The support and advice she received about poker from her brother also may be why she understands how the sexism of the poker world works but does not let it affect her, describing how when she started to play at a venue called the Crystal Lounge, older male players tried to seduce her or saw her as “practically an alien” because she was Ivy League-educated, an Easterner, female and Jewish (Duke & Diamond, 2005, pp. 120–130). She describes this as “okay” because she was obnoxious in response, a strategy that she knows is unusual for women. She also observes that the men were more aggressive towards her in games because they did not want to let a woman beat them. Duke exploited the bias in order to win, observes “it was great” and concludes the following:

If I learned anything about poker in my baptism at the Crystal Lounge, it’s that women, for the

most part, have a distinct advantage over men at the table...it has to do with the mere fact that men sometimes get unhinged in our presence. (Duke & Diamond, 2005, p. 133)

Her advice for dealing with both types of male players is either to “flirt right back” at the men who try to flirt, or antagonize “the angry chauvinist” (Duke & Diamond, 2005, p. 134). She advises women: “don’t fight such behavior. Use it for the clear edge—and profit—it offers. It worked for me” (Duke & Diamond, 2005, p. 134).

Duke learns to play with men who are hostile, and understands this to be profitable. This is periferminism in action, due to Duke’s recognition of sexism, and her desire to exploit it as a bias rather than confront it or work to reduce it. Periferminism also means that Duke does not experience solidarity with other women in poker, and has no structural analysis of women’s presence in the game. This is why Duke supported Sean Deeb’s critique of the WSOP Ladies Event, and why in 2004 she elected to play the Omaha event (which she won) and not the Ladies Event: “this is where the money is,” she tells reporters who ask why she is in the Omaha game (Duke & Diamond, 2005, pp. 29–30). But when her brother Howard congratulates her for making the final table, he provides another reason: “I think you just made a mockery of the Ladies event,” he tells her (Duke & Diamond, 2005, p. 90). In other words, Duke has shown that she can win in a male-dominated field. The cultural reasons why women might play the Ladies event are not part of her thinking. Howard Lederer’s comment also shows that the Ladies event is not, at least to him, necessary if a woman can win a “real” event at the WSOP. The playing field, his comment implies, is already level.

Victoria Coren: Gentrification of Poker

Victoria Coren’s *For Richer, For Poorer* focuses on British poker before and after the 2005 poker boom, recounting her stories of the game from her experience in home games or underground rooms, to casinos, to televised poker and the advent of poker celebrity and corporate sponsorship. The memoir offers a wry take on the subculture of the UK scene as it moves from the margins to the mainstream, including the formation of the Hendon Mob before it was a database listing tournaments and player rankings (*Hendon Mob Poker Database*, n.d.) and Coren’s own rise to prominence as a player in televised poker tournaments. Part of the book details how she wins a major tournament event, hand by hand, to give non-players a sense of what playing poker is like. Unlike Duke, Coren wisecracks about her ability as a player and as a journalist, and does not ever call herself the best in the world. What she does instead, as the title of her memoir’s humorous reference to marriage and debt suggests, is detail her devotion to the game and love for its players. Within her celebration of what she calls the loneliness and community of poker, she traces her maturation as a player, which

results in her tournament successes. Coren (today Victoria Coren Mitchell) was the first woman to win a main event on the European Poker Tour (in 2006), the first to win two EPT events and become a winner on the poker television circuit. She worked as a journalist as televised poker became popular, and was able to parlay her success on the *Late Night Poker* program into a career as a television presenter and journalist in the United Kingdom. She retired from professional play in 2012 (Coren Michell, 2019).

Like Duke, Coren is middle-class, and from a Jewish family that values elite education. Like Duke, she was rebellious and adventurous. She studied English at Oxford, although she says that she actually wanted to be a stand-up comedian and only went to please her father. But in her memoir Coren also acknowledges that Oxford prepared her for the world of poker, because her chosen major was competitive and male-dominated, just like poker. She enjoys “standing [her] ground with the alpha males, not showing fear, trying to make them laugh, noticing their own vulnerabilities, aiming always to win respect” (Coren, 2009, p. 23). Eventually, she moves from playing poker with her brother’s friends to playing at the Vic, the Victoria casino in London. At the Vic, she encounters the poker subculture, and after a few false starts where she is intimidated by “the cliquy gaggle of old men,” eventually gets over her fear in a humorous set of vignettes that all begin “I drive to the Vic,” and either end with her running away or playing roulette, before she becomes a regular and befriends the players there (Coren, 2009, pp. 31–33).

Since she began to play seriously before 2005, the watershed year when poker became popular on television and online, Coren notes in her memoir that she was often the only woman at the poker table. She used some of the same tactics Duke advocates, including flirtation—although she is criticized in the media for doing this at an Australian tournament and decides to be more careful in the future. She dates male players, which fuels her fascination with the game and the eccentricity of its players. Coren is more aware of the problem of sexism than Duke is, and she is shocked and angered (but says nothing) when she interviews champion Huck Seed and he tells her that men are better players than women because of “evolution” (Coren, 2009, pp. 36–37). Like Duke or Cat Hulbert, she keeps quiet about feminism when she meets the Devilfish, a legendary player who makes a sexist remark, observing “there is a time and a place for feminist statements, and midnight in the kitch of a television studio with a poker champion is neither” (Coren, 2009, p. 66). Coren’s experience of the poker world is about male-dominated community, and so her approach to the game is more periferminist than feminist.

Despite her attachment to the male-dominated world of poker, Coren does experience a change in her understanding of poker’s culture as she develops as a player. She acknowledges that poker “is a world with sick corners and bleak edges. Bad things happen in

poker," which is a reference to its competitiveness, its danger and sometimes, criminality (Coren, 2009, p. 123). Gradually, her romantic fascination with the underworld of poker begins to change, particularly after she and other players are fooled into participating in a televised exposé of the game.

But Coren has relatively little to say about the sexist side of poker in its underworld phase, possibly because she is protected by her friends at the Vic. What she begins to notice instead is that the romantic side of poker's seediness is disappearing as poker becomes "a respectable sport," something she decries:

of course the game is cleaner now, and neater and sweeter and far more respectable, but ghosts can't vanish overnight. And I was drawn to poker by this sordid romance, the dark history, the whispering corners...it doesn't work that way anymore. (Coren, 2009, p. 276)

Coren's view of the WSOP Ladies event, the same event that Annie Duke refuses to endorse or play in, is the only place where the "dark" side of poker, and its subsequent gentrification and transition to a sport, has a gendered inflection. When she goes to Vegas with the members of the Hendon Mob to play at the World Series of Poker, Coren encounters American poker in the wake of television, which she experiences as the shock of national difference (Americans are friendlier and less gritty), class difference (poker is now a sport and players make a living from it as if it were a sport) and gender difference (women are in the game, and they are friendlier). Coren is ambivalent about the texture of her encounters with this culture of poker. The Ladies event at the WSOP focuses her ambivalence and recoups it for a periferminist approach, because of Coren's relatively conservative attitude to women's only events, at least at first.

Coren initially regards the Ladies event with contempt as "a novelty event, held every Mother's Day to entertain the girlfriends, wives and mothers of the real players" (Coren, 2009, p. 126), echoing Howard Lederer's words about the Ladies event as a lesser event, and the players of the Ladies event as somehow less than real players because they do not, as she does, play as a minority. As she observes and then plays the tournament, however, she begins to consider what the Ladies tournament means for the culture of poker. At first, she is bewildered. "It's like science fiction," she thinks, when she sees poker great Sue Isaacs dedicate her book to other women. "My poker friends are all called Dave," she writes (Coren, 2009, p. 134). She decides that she likes the serious players in the tournament, probably because she sees herself in them: "any woman who plays regular live poker, in this overwhelmingly male environment, is odds-on to be a little quirky, a little rebellious, unafraid of looking competitive" (Coren, 2009, p. 138). In her memoir Coren

reflects on her experience in the Ladies Event, and on whether women can play as well as men, concluding that they can, both physically and psychologically. But Coren observes too that "women just don't seem to be drawn to poker in any significant numbers," and concludes that this must be because men are able to care more about a mere game than women do. In other words, she sees that poker does have a culture and values that are based on gender difference (Coren, 2009, p. 135). In the end, she decides that the Ladies event is not real poker, which has the effect of dismissing the reasons for the Ladies event as a safe space for women in the game: "I don't think I will play the Ladies' Event again," Coren writes:

A special women's competition sends out the wrong message, as if we're admitting we need some kind of help. I want to get better at poker and take my chances in an open field. Of course I want to win a tournament one day, but I don't want it to be a handicapped event. I want to win a real one (Coren, 2009, p. 138).

Coren's ability to play in the hypermasculinist poker environment means that she does not seek to change its bias against women, or explore the possibility of a different kind of poker culture, and so she condemns the Ladies event as false and frames the open field poker as real. She remains ambivalent, observing that the different atmosphere was fun. But she is not sure what she thinks of even this, marking her relationship to the game as periferminist rather than feminist, and connecting general cultural and national differences to gender difference:

If this really were an upside-down world where all the gamblers were women, poker would be a much friendlier game. But I am not sure I want it to be. The games in Vegas are all friendlier than I'm used to, and it makes me a little uncomfortable....after five days of people beaming warmly while they take my chips, I am yearning to get back to the damp, sarcastic cynical city of London. (Coren, 2009, pp. 138-139)

Conclusion

Duke and Coren's memoirs are the best-known by women in the game, but the fame of their authors has a lesson for us in what they are *not* about. Duke and Coren became players before the 2005 watershed year when the invention of poker television, the advent of internet poker and the success of Chris MoneyMaker at the Main Event of the WSOP made poker popular. Both became famous before the American crackdown in 2011 which made it illegal in the United States to play online poker for money and abruptly changed the mushrooming popularity of poker among younger players. And both were successful at the precise moment when the World

Series of Poker and its popularity on television propelled the game of Texas Hold 'Em, and big money tournaments in North America, Europe and Australia into the spotlight (Stevens, n.d.). Their position as good female players when that transition occurred meant that they reaped the benefits of a poker career when it became a televised sport. As Coren says, televised poker needed female players to be in the games, and that is how she and other players in her generation became better known (Coren 2005, p. 55). But their training in the aggressively hypermasculinist world of casino poker meant that in their memoirs, sexism in poker is not a major problem for the game, and misogyny is a hazard to be negotiated rather than confronted. In this sense Duke and Coren's experiences mirror those of female players encountered in the social science research: they contend with sexism in the game, but they understand sexism as a problem to be negotiated rather than as a barrier to participation. What Coren's and Duke's memoirs can do, however, is reveal in detail what the culture of poker was about during a time of intense transition, and they can help us to see how feminist ideas do and do not appear fully in their own ways of negotiating poker culture.

In this paper, I argue for taking such approaches to feminism seriously because they have much to tell us about the role of feminism in the lives of women who deal with sexism all the time, but who are not activists or intellectuals in a strict sense. Feminism in the stories of each author becomes periferminism, a set of strategies that operate with an awareness of inequality, but which arrive at non-activist ways of dealing with poker's culture. It is no accident that Duke and Coren are both white, straight and come from privileged backgrounds, although they leave behind the more genteel aspects of their upbringing in order to be successful poker players, and they can conceive of a memoir which will be read because of their celebrity. Both authors know how to negotiate the demands of the mediatization of poker as a result, while staying true to what they see as poker's values and its traditional culture, but they are not representative of all women in the game, particularly as the poker boom fades from memory. But in casinos and on computers everywhere, women still do play the game. Who are they? What are their stories? How will they rewrite the history of poker? The thousands of women who are not famous tournament players, who will never be on television, who are not white, straight or cis-gendered, who raise, call and fold far from the World Series of Poker and the lights of Monte Carlo, Macau or Las Vegas, they all have their own stories to tell. Researchers owe it to those women, and to the game of poker itself, to seek those stories out.

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