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BLOGGING THROUGH MOTHERHOOD: FREE LABOR, FEMININITY, AND THE  
(RE)PRODUCTION OF MATERNITY

by

KARA VAN CLEAF

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2014

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the  
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Abstract

BLOGGING THROUGH MOTHERHOOD: FREE LABOR, FEMININITY, AND THE  
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Adviser: Patricia T. Clough

Drawing from a thematic analysis of 47 North American mommy blogs over a 2-year period, I situate the genre in critical discussions of feminism, media, and labor, exploring both the technological and cultural shifts that turn mothers into cultural producers and that turn the experience of motherhood into a commodity. I situate the content of such blogs, or what gets said therein, within theories of media, gender, and labor. Examining the blogs within and against such academic discussions allows me to develop an intersectional analysis of feminism, media, and labor studies.

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Finally, this project is dedicated to my father and my first professor, David Van Cleaf. Starting with our cut throat games of Candyland, to our daily drives to elementary school where he got me thinking about inequality, education, and gender, to his dedicated volunteering at my elementary, middle, and high schools, to our contentious editing sessions, he taught me how to think critically and how to, quietly, never give up.

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, David William Van Cleaf.

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Appendix A

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

CIRCA 2010

The idea for this project came out of a conversation with a computer programmer about the “copy left” movement and the importance of open source software. I had just had my second child and everything the programmer said about “crowd sourcing” glitches and sharing code reminded me of the online parent groups in which I had been immersed since the birth of my first child. Through email listservs, wikis, and blogs new parents were sharing fears, successes, and tips with groups of people, often comprised in large part of anonymous strangers. Far away from my family, I turned to the daily emails from local neighborhood parents on the Park Slope Parents listserv<sup>1</sup> for information and advice about all things parenting. Like open source coding, here was an example of parenting as shared practice, evolving out of trial and error and sleepless nights.

Over time, I developed a curatorial sense of online parenting sources and began to recognize layered “gestural economies”—Lauren Berlant’s (2011:5) term for “norms of self-management that differ according to what kinds of confidence people have enjoyed about the entitlements of their social location.” In discussing motherhood, mothers often betray, not unwillingly, their associations with, or attitudes toward different gestural economies—

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<sup>1</sup> Park Slope Parents has 4995 members at the time of writing, April 14, 2014

<http://www.parkslopeparents.com/>.

attachment parenting, breastfeeding, co-sleeping, the crying-it-out crowd etc. These economies of mothering expressed through digital platforms, a large portion of which takes place on “mommy blogs,” are capitalized as they refine and disperse data, fantasy, and affect.

Motherhood is open source too.

That motherhood is cultural is not news. Ruth Schwartz Cowan (1983), in her study of the technologies of the American home from the Industrial Revolution through the 1980s, shows that the work of family—cooking, housework, and caring for children and each other—is as much a part of an era’s technology system as the manufacture, production, and distribution of goods. She argues, “the history of housework cannot properly be understood without the history of the implements with which it is done” (1983:11). While Cowan focuses on the industrial era, her insight applies equally to the digital economy and the digital home. We spend more and more time in front of monitors of some form—both at work and in the home, and even traveling between the two. The collapse of work and home is just one way our psyche, bodies, affects, emotions, and fantasies get put to work through digital technologies.

The concept of gestural economies helps unravel the somewhat ironic return of domestic arts found throughout the mommy blog genre. The number of scenes of domestic simplicity online has exploded as more and more of life occurs in front of a screen. Emily Matchar (2013) writes that women and men today fantasize about turning away from careers (especially middle-class jobs) and the trappings of dual-earner income culture to return to the lost domestic arts, do-it-yourself (DIY) culture that was the (often imagined) norm for their great-grandmothers. Recently, DIY got the blog. Matchar (2013:56) suggests that the aesthetic return to domesticity would not exist without the Internet partly because blogs recognize and disseminate an

“emotional value to housework,” which, as feminists and sociologists have pointed out is devalued, unrecognized work in capitalist economies.

Gestural economies operate at the class level, of course, but also operate beyond it. Interestingly, through blogging scenes of DIY domesticity, mothers scramble the usual sociological categories of race, class, and sexuality. Instead, radical feminists and conservative Christians may share interests in knitting, pickling, or baby-wearing, and participate through a blog. By and large, however, the mommy blog genre conveys a white, middle class, college educated, and heterosexual identity.

Mommy blogs initially drew me in as a researcher because they occupy an ever-expanding space of the Internet (Technorati 2010). The labor behind these blogs is impressive. The well-written and thoughtful posts are intimate, original, and compelling. The best of them can make you feel a part of something, “in on it.” They appeal to my feminist politics and love of comic relief from the modern-day rituals of motherhood. As I became more familiar with certain bloggers, true to the methods of participant observation, I followed their recipes, listened to music they liked, found children’s books they recommended, tried out their parenting tactics, and followed all their links to outside websites.

## THE TECHNOLOGICAL EXPANSION OF MOTHERHOOD

My online experience as a new mom was no different in many respects than the nearly 3.9 million North American mothers who pay attention to mommy blogs (Laird, 2012). Digital media has taken over traditional broadcast media such as television and, as Jesse Daniels (2013 personal communication) finds, women have given up the latter for the former. The blogging of motherhood takes shape through millions of women sharing moments, moods, and methods. This

turn to an open, networked, more participatory digital media is the focus of this dissertation as it highlights the exchanges between economies of technology with affective economies of motherhood. The blogs provide an “archive of feelings” (Cvetokovich 2003) or a record of the realities and fantasies of these mothers—who are overwhelmingly middle-class, affluent, and usually college-educated—today. My research here situates these blogged stories and fantasies into an economic, cultural, and political context. Thus, in addition to a digital ethnography, this project is also a textual analysis and literary study of the mommy blog genre.

From the exchanges technology affords between affect, emotion, and fantasy, mommy blogs create a “temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now” (Berlant 2011:4). The emergence of temporal genres depends on a need to work through what is “sensed and under constant revision” (Berlant 2011:4), where what is sensed (and not always felt) is affect. Out of this constant sensing, the present expands and, to borrow Patricia Clough’s (2012:32) term, “trembles.” For Clough (2007), however, affect remains out of time because it occurs before and beyond the traumatic structuring of subjectivity. She considers affect to be potential that, called forth or not, occurs as much between bodies as within Oedipalized subjects. On the surface, a mommy blogger occupies a relatively stable subject position, a social identity. Nonetheless, the circulation of posts, moods, images, and senses online exemplifies how affect flows and “trembles” by virtue of it being “under constant revision”(Berlant 2011:4). Such ceaseless revision is aided and amplified by its “assembl[age] with technologies of time memory,” in other words, the blog (Clough 2009). Motherhood trembles on and through the blogs and remains affective, partly, because this unending trembling never fully channels into a distinct politics, for a distinct group of subjects. Instead, our networks find their way into our more isolated

moments: in front of the bathroom mirror, while the baby naps, after a fight with a partner. Through clicking, following links, tweeting, and liking, the blogs give us a “trembling” place to be while we nurse the baby, again, at five AM. Capital purposely intensifies this trembling by directly investing in it: The blogging platforms and real-time tickers of social media extend the now, keeping us in a state of constant sensing.

The expansion and insertion of technology into our daily rhythms is an instrument effect—it expands the circulation of affect, creating a trembling “temporal scramble” that can only be endlessly sensed and can never solidify (Clough 2012a:32). We register this expansion subjectively through what Berlant (2011:4) refers to as the “impasse,” which, she articulates, “is a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the worlds are at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hyper vigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things.” Mommy bloggers say the same about motherhood, albeit in less academic terms.

The experience of motherhood itself exemplifies Berlant’s “impasse” in many ways: the physical time of pregnancy, childbirth, and post-partum life challenges norms of Western, modern embodiment. Mothers’ sense of time is altered by sleeping on baby time; lacking maternity leave, new moms must straddle two time zones—workday and babytime; mothers experience a loss of identity, bodily integrity, and status; and, finally, the personal and intimate revolution of a baby brings a new focus and reality. Motherhood, blogged, documents this time warp, leaving digital traces and stories of the “wandering absorptive awareness” and “hypervigilance” of this new reality. Mothers often blog this impasse, expanding and exposing it, which, in turn, makes it tremble throughout digital platforms. This trembling occurs through both the production and consumption—the labor—of the millions of Internet users.

As mommy blogs document their felt presents and describe their temporal zones, the uneven effects of decades of neoliberal policies (cuts to social programs, wage stagnation, debt as a means of survival) on motherhood, women, and the family surface. The impasse itself, according to Berlant (2011:11), results from this neoliberal restructuring since “the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life—at work, in intimacy, politically—are crumbling at a threatening pace” causing the fantasy of “the good life” to “become more fantasmatic, with less and less relation to how people can live.” This “attrition of a fantasy” of the good life is the backdrop to the explosion of the mommy blog phenomena.

For example, in her 2000 summary of the preceding decade’s theoretical and empirical scholarship on motherhood, Terry Arendell found some by-now common themes: second-shift strain, stresses related to poverty, gender role inequalities, unattainable ideals of intensive mothering, and the joys of having and caring for children. Victoria Pitts-Taylor and Talia Schaffer (2009:9) corroborate Arendell’s findings a decade later, writing, “despite three waves of feminist activism, it may be that mothering is as fraught as ever.” In 2007, 68 percent of married women with children up to 17 years old worked outside the home, and mothers earned only 60 cents to the male dollar (Crittenden 2010). This has led Ann Crittenden (2010) to assert that our society imposes a “mommy tax”: an absence or paucity of social safety supports, the inability of mothers who stay home to earn social security benefits, the challenge of returning to careers after stepping out, the disproportionate percentage of women in part-time positions, a shortage of quality childcare for all economic classes, and the lack of any paid maternity or care-giver leave (see also Bardasi and Gorlick 2008). Further, the biggest predictor for poverty is pregnancy (Arendell 2000; Jesella 2009). To add to these problems, women, despite economic gains for some and increased labor force participation for all, routinely do the majority of household labor

(Baca Zinn et al. 2011). Notwithstanding the increased hours of work outside the home and the bulk of the working hours inside the home, mothers today spend more time with their children.

All of these social and economic risks, as well as the loss of identity, sexuality, and bodily autonomy about which mothers blog, make motherhood a trembling experience. Becoming a mother is a risky endeavor for almost all but the most socially, economically, and racially privileged women. This subjective trembling informs the blogs, which then also digitally vibrate through their ceaseless posting, clicking, sharing, tweeting, and linking. The architecture of the Internet itself is built to tremble, and, at least in mommy blogs, the shaky ground of motherhood trembles through the structures and platforms of World Wide Web.

In my read, bloggers respond to the “attrition of the good life fantasy” and trembling reality of motherhood by slowing down, either through photos or posts, scenes of daily life: a blog entry may show only a chubby toddler hand reaching for an artisanal donut on an old, reclaimed wooden table, or a post about a mother’s disappointment when she missed her child’s first lost tooth. Readers fall into such scenes and either recognize or escape their own realities. Such slow, domestic scenes rarely ask much of readers beyond recognition. Politics would be a jarring intrusion. Thus, I read the genre as a fantasyland and as a space to both work through the ambivalences of mothering in a neoliberal context.

#### SCENES OF THE ORDINARY, OBJECTS OF THE GOOD LIFE

The diminishing space and time available for mothering due to institutional discrimination and neoliberal economic policies, encourages the mommy blogs as spaces to be, and to imagine being, “just a mom.” The gap between lived motherhood and digital motherhood generates never-ending content that is summoned by all corners and platforms on the Internet.

Collectively, the blogs provide an acknowledgement (or a break from the reality) of being “Maxed Out“ (Alcorn 2013) and the continued “attrition of a fantasy” of “the good life” (Berlant 2011:28).

With the attrition of “good life” realities come fantasies of something simpler, evidenced by the explosion of the number of scenes and stories of domestic simplicity online. The appearance of a simplified life is a hot commodity online. For example, in addition to beautiful pictures of her children, home, and wardrobe, blogger James Kiciniski McCoy of *bleu bird blog* epitomizes the fantasy of finding and combining meaningful work and mothering in the following post titled “some thoughts on blogging.” She defends the commercialization of her blog here:

i have found a way to do two things that i love, stay home and raise my four children and to make money doing something that i love. i spend all of my time with them. literally, all of my time. i am a busy person. i don't have a lot of time to blog or to social network. i chose this life, to homeschool, to raise a big family and i absolutely love it. but i have to make a living in order to stay home with them. this is how i support my family. this is my business. (<http://bleubirdblog.com/?s=some+thoughts+on+blogging>, December 20, 2012)

McCoy’s blog is intoxicatingly beautiful—photographs dominate, and the scenes of her daily life are relaxed, simple, and uncomplicated. Everything looks lovingly lived-in. She photographs fresh food, made-from-scratch cakes, vintage clothing, well-worn furniture, interesting cocktails, and scenes of social gatherings filled with what appear to be beautiful friends. Looking like a fantasyland, her blog counters the mess of real-life motherhood. Of course, the site is heavily monetized and almost all items are hyperlinked to commercial sellers and sites. Matchar situates the longing for a cultural return to domesticity as partly coming from the failure of the economy, especially for women:

Meaningful and lucrative careers, once the brass ring for ambitious young people, are preposterously hard to find these days. And, once found, they tend to come with a whole

slew of thorny issues, many of them affecting women disproportionately—expectations of sixty hour workweeks, lack of maternity leave, massive “mom penalties” on salary. (2013:12)

Glossy blogs such as bluebird that focus on lifestyle (while pushing consumption) and that feature beautiful, simple scenes of the home, or of the blogger herself, bring along “vague fantasies of belonging” (Berlant 2008:277). On McCoy’s post above, readers left 409 comments; two comments particularly capture this fantasy of belonging:

Dear James, I’m a 25 year-old German girl and I’ve been reading your blog for over three years. I come here almost everyday [sic] and I am happy for every post. Over this span of time I’ve developed some kind of trust in you (as much as you can develop trust in a person you’ve never met) and I am always thankful and inspired by the things you suggest to us (may it be sponsored or not) (2012).

Another reader commends McCoy on achieving the dream:

I think it’s fantastic that you have worked so hard on your blog that you are at the stage where you can sustain your family life on this income. Isn’t that what so many bloggers dream of! I don’t think it’s about trying to make everyone happy – you are happy with your choices, and that is all that matters. To be at home with your kids – so many people dream for that freedom, and you are talented and creative enough to be in that position. I love reading your blog posts (sponsored or not)—your personality still shines through, either way (2012).

Finding a so-called balanced life is a central plot found on mommy blogs and includes the following fantasies: flexible work arrangements, meaningful friendships and collaborations, and, the ultimate fantasy, being able to pick the kids up from school instead of having to manage a complicated, expensive system of part-time childcare and activities.

I begin with a review of the previous academic research on mommy blogs and then situate such works within the sociological and cultural studies theories, traditions, and areas used throughout this dissertation. Reading neo-Marxists such as Tiziana Terranova, Mario Lazzarato, Patricia Clough, and Lauren Berlant alongside blogs entitled *Her Bad Mother* and *Girl Gone Child* led me to different conclusions than previous scholars of the mommy blog.

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Previous academic research on mommy blogging takes a celebratory stance toward the phenomena, seeing it as a liberatory, political, and feminist practice. Mommy bloggers, too, claim they are the vanguard in a cultural shift regarding motherhood. Alice Bradley, a well-known and prolific mommy blogger, proclaimed at the Blogher conference in 2005 that “Mommy blogging is a radical act!” Her assertion became the rallying call for many who write, read, and participate in such blogs. Blogging motherhood feels radical because it allows an up-to-the-minute, unmediated, so-called real version--one that finds itself exhausted, underwhelmed, overwhelmed, depressed, ecstatic, and yet overjoyed in what, bloggers articulate, feels like new, uncharted ways. Bradley articulates this complexity here:

We readers and authors of parenting blogs are looking for a representation of authentic experience that we're not getting elsewhere. We sure as hell aren't getting it from the parenting magazines. If you want to find out how to make nutritious muffins that look like kitty cats, you can read those. But a parenting magazine will never help you feel less alone, less stupid, less ridiculous. This is the service I think parenting blogs provide--we share our lopsided, slightly hysterical, often exaggerated but more or less authentic experiences. If one blogger writes about, say, her bad behavior at the doctor's office, then maybe at some point, some freaked-out new mother is going to read that and feel a little better--less stupid, less ridiculous--about her own breakdown at the pediatrician's (cited in Camahort 2006).

These bloggers present a version of motherhood that deviates from the older accounts found in broadcast media (such as parenting magazines, movies, television), wherein mothering is made out to be instinctual, fulfilling, and natural, accounts that normalize a narrow range of experiences. The differences between these versions reflect, in part, who produces motherhood, an elite media industry or a massive population of mothers. Blogs, produced en masse, are networked, user- (consumer-) made, and distributed from peer to peer.

When mothers produce motherhood online, as they do in networked, digital media, they place “a high value on speaking unflattering, or difficult, or taboo truths” along with valuing

emotional support and reciprocity (Morrison 2013:4). Lori Kido-Lopez notes the difference: “Mommy bloggers are developing their own voice for discussing motherhood, and it is distinctly different from the radiant image of the good mother that has dominated our media, with its impossible demands and assumptions about women” (2009:734). This “radiant image of the good mother” is wildly divergent from motherhood as it occurs in real life because real motherhood confers a “second class status” to even the most privileged of women (Pitts-Taylor and Schaffer 2009: 9). For all the air and page space spent by the broadcast media on the so-called mommy wars or the opt-out revolution, “[p]olicy issues related to child care, familial leave, and maternal and children’s health remain unresolved” (Pitts-Taylor and Schaffer 2009:9).

Mommy bloggers, despite their set-the-record-straight zeitgeist rarely take on such structural inequalities; they inevitably return to the idea (as does broadcast media) that mothering is profound and that both valences of it (under/overwhelming) are completely unknowable until one actually is raising a child. Bloggers fill in the glorious and gory details between these valences without challenging the final scene of motherhood: real love. As Bradley suggests, the service provided by mommy bloggers is their contribution to a “rapid inflation” of the “normative” experiences of motherhood (Clough 2007:20). This dissertation considers how--even at the moment more women are producing, distributing, and revising narrow media representations of motherhood, and even as the details described therein are changing dramatically--the story always ends, to quote Lauren Berlant, with the well-versed instruction to “go home” (2008:203).

Looking at what mommy blogs say—the tropes, parameters, and rhetorical devices of the genre—researchers rightly conclude that radical shifts in the experience of motherhood are happening, both online and off. Substantiating Bradley’s proclamation, Lopez argues that

blogging “is truly a radical act with the potential to change the discourse surrounding motherhood” (2009:731). May Friedman (2013:27) suggests that these blogs do no less than “shift understandings of maternal subjectivity” through the collective presence of such “innovative” and public “maternal life writing.”

Academics mull over the political implications of blogging because such a “collective response” by so many disparate mothers is, indeed, revolutionary (Friedman 2013:27). Pitts-Taylor and Schaffer note that today’s “generation of women have found themselves radicalized by having children” (2009:12). The ultimate hope of mommy blog scholars is that as mothers’ experiences and stories circulate, bloggers will inevitably highlight shared structural inequalities and spark political movements. Lopez captures this wish: “In time the conversation about motherhood may expand beyond the limits of tightly knit mommy blogging communities. Moreover, the explicit political issues that mothers face, such as discrimination in the workplace or the inadequacy of childcare, may begin to be addressed now that the community is beginning to grow and organize themselves around their collective issues” (2009:744). As I detail in Chapter two, Lopez also does not consider the discrimination women and mothers face online.

Aimée Morrison’s academic work and personal involvement with her own mommy blog prompted her to see most of these blogs as “operating outside the strictures of mass market cultural production” (2011:51). Because of this outside location, she contends, these blogs “obviate the irresolvable tension between the authentic social change often desired by members of women’s culture and the fundamental conservatism and inequality of the capitalist modes of production that focalize this culture” (2011:51). Morrison’s understanding of blogs as outside of capital comes from the intimate, emotional, non-exploitative, and (often) unremunerated

friendships touted throughout the mommy blogs. Katie Allison Granju, a prolific blogger, captures the intimate bond that centers the mommy blog world in the following explanation:

I see other mommybloggers . . . as part of my tribe, my community, my support system. These women are my friends and my inspiration every single day. The independent mommyblogosphere is a living example of how a “rising tide lifts all boats. (“How Much Do Top “Mommy Bloggers” Earn from their Blogs, and is it Enough?” March 31, 2011, <http://www.babble.com/mom/how-much-do-top-mommybloggers-earn-from-their-blogs-and-is-it-enough/>).

A network of mothers freely crafting their own media appears to operate outside of the conservative corporate behemoths of the broadcast culture industry. Kylie Jarrett situates the feeling of exteriority found in such intimate settings within a Marxist logic: “At the phenomenological level, such work is not experienced as being within the service of economic capital because this value system is not that of fiscal gain. These are the gifts that are not captured directly or entirely by the economic production system” (2013:9). Jarrett notes, however, that the gifts of emotional labor play a crucial “role in maintaining or sustaining the capitalist order” (2013:9). Motherhood, of course, serves as the paradigmatic example of labor outside of the wage economy. By reproducing and socializing future workers for free and out of love, motherhood remains outside or adjacent to the paid economy. Mommy bloggers repeat this pattern--they work within and for capital, producing content, creating networks, and socializing mothers and, for all but a select few, never see wages for their labor.

While Morrison correctly calls attention to the reorganization of networked production, she misses how, through digital technology, capital is present, again, in the most intimate and seemingly nontechnological corners--the mother and child dyad--of life today. The fantasy that blogging motherhood is outside of the market (like the fantasy that mothering is outside of the market) obfuscates the labor behind capital production and accumulation. Scholarship on

affective, digital labor remedies this blind spot. In fact, in the case of mommy blogs, it is precisely because of their felt intimacy, the shared production between blogger and readers, and the radically honest (re)telling of motherhood, that they generate so much value (often conceptualized as attention, website traffic, or influence in marketing products) (Terranova 2012). The gendered ways in which these blogs perform motherhood, and the ways in which these bloggers express care for their readers, capture large audiences through the generation of “felt communities, where users become aware of the ways their actions find an echo and define a new attentional context” (Langlois and Elmer 2013:14).

As I detail next, blogging creates an “intimate public” that extends mediated versions of “women’s culture,” as theorized by Berlant (2011). The aesthetic and gendered communicative scene found on mommy blogs, this specific digital “intimate public,” has a history in American capitalist culture starting with and, *crucially*, starting mass media culture, according to Berlant (2008). “Women’s culture” refers to a purposely vague grouping of people “marked by femininity” who “are in need of a conversation that feels intimate, revelatory, and a relief” (Berlant 2011:ix). Berlant theorizes both women’s culture and intimate publics through modern, broadcast media. Her theory holds up to the digital.

## WOMEN’S CULTURE 2.0

Through the market intensification of blogging platforms, more mothers are able to produce the genre of women’s culture. The focal point of this genre is to manage femininity by “enact[ing] a fantasy that my life is not just mine, but an experience understood by other women, even when it is not shared by many or any” (Berlant 2008:x). The vague, revelatory, and emotional telling of motherhood revolves around the obstacles to realizing and achieving love.

Stories that convey such vague feelings pull together an “intimate public” where “a worldview and emotional knowledge . . . derived from a broadly common historical experience” is felt as shared (Berlant 2008:viii). Motherhood as a common and general experience provides all the essential conditions for an intimate public. Differences in class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and politics within the genre (in both the broadcast and networked versions) are glossed by creating “a sense of emotional continuity among women who identify with the expectation that, as women, they will manage personal life and lubricate emotional worlds” (Berlant 2008:5). Part of creating a general “emotional continuity” is to remain “juxtapolitical” to feminism, racial politics, or other political programs. Politics, if present at all, are intended to be mediated through the storyline of love.

For example, posts that confess ugly truths, unloving thoughts, or frustrations gloss complicated problems and reassert the transcendence of love. Facetiously, blogger Andie Fox deconstructs the unspoken rules bloggers deploy when writing about domestic, heterosexual disputes:

Before beginning your rant, and it will be a rant because you’re a woman writing this, always start that post with an apologetic, introductory paragraph about how truly nice your partner is and how he (and he will be a ‘he’) ‘helps’ you around the house and ‘helps’ you with the kids, a lot; really, quite a lot. So, he’s really very good, he’s not one of the bad ones and you love each other very much. Also, he is very tired. He works very hard. To rant without this introduction is disloyal and unloving. . . .

Never admit to the emotion experienced by you as being ‘anger’. It will sound a lot like anger, look a lot like anger, feel a lot like anger but it isn’t anger.. it’s something else, something pre-Betty Friedan, something safer. Frustration, perhaps? Irritation? Yes, irritation. Mild irritation bordering on rage. (“10 Rules for Women Blogging about their Relationship Woes.” *blue milk*, April 7, 2012, <http://bluemilk.wordpress.com/2012/04/07/10-rules-for-women-blogging-about-their-relationship-woes/>).

Fox taps into the stubborn reality that despite economic gains and increased labor force participation, women still routinely do the majority of housework, childcare and emotional labor.

Fox's post reads as a crack in the genre, a seeping in of feminist politics yet Berlant (2008:4) notes that "women's culture always contains episodes of refusal and creative contravention to feminine normativity"; such episodes "make its conventionality interesting and rich, even." Fox's creative deconstruction of women's blogging highlights the rhetorical mechanisms that simplify complicated, structural issues. Morrison finds that humor and a generous use of caveats shield dangerous or controversial topics for mommy bloggers (2013).

As another example of the blogged version of women's culture, the following excerpt from the blog Mom-101 by Liz Gumbinner exemplifies the coproduction of intimacy between blogger and reader, and the genre's tendency to turn away from political interpretations.

Gumbinner blogs through her mothering here:

There are just some things you accept that you give up experiencing when you're a working mom. New foods. New friends. New words, and new teeth. The first all-by-myself monkey bar expedition. The first fairy princess dress-up playdate. The first goal scored at soccer practice. The first snowman drawing. The first snowman making. Mostly I've learned to do without; what choice do I have? Still, some of them hurt a little more than others. There's not a day that I don't wish I had a magic mirror that Ozma gave Dorothy, so I could peek in on my girls at any given minute to witness the small triumphs and sweet moments. ("Something Always Gives." September 28, 2010, <http://mom-101.com/2010/09/something-always-gives.html>).

Gumbinner conveys frustration that her paid work interferes with the mundane and dramatic moments of motherhood but she strays from political interpretations because, as she states, she has "learned to do without; what choice do[es she] have?" As evidenced by her readers' comments, the post caused many to nod their heads in empathy and recognition. In fact, the comments section extends the main post as readers share their own stories, triumphs, and sacrifices, and pass on their own tips for surviving contemporary motherhood. The post generated 44 comments (as of February 18, 2014), with Gumbinner participating in the conversation, commenting on the comments.

While the administrator of a blog (typically the author) can remove or reject certain comments, the feeling on mommy blogs skews toward openness, support, and participation. The following exchange between a commenter and Gumbinner showcases a scene of participation, and a defraying of politics. A commenter, Marinka, responds to Gumbinner's above post with the following:

I'm going to break rank and tell you, because my kids are older and I am very wise, that you can't succumb to mommy guilt. Because it's, what's the word? Bullshit. Sexist bullshit. How many hours has their father spent fretting about not being able to accompany his daughters to the pediatrician? I'm guessing the number is a fraction of yours, and I'd also bet that he loves them just as much. If I told you that your place is with them, title cards be damned, when they get a shot, the internet would rise against me and I'd be Gloria Steinemed off the URL. And yet. What we do to ourselves as mothers is so much powerful and so much worse. I'm sorry that you're feeling bad about it, truly. I know it's not easy. But I'm sure it's harder for you than it is for your girls. ("Something Always Gives," September 28, 2010, <http://mom-101.com/2010/09/something-always-gives.html>).

The commenter points out a political and structural discrepancy between the emotional labor of mothers and fathers but ends on the common ground of shared feelings because she "knows it isn't easy." Marinka also highlights the thin line between politics, motherly love, and emotional support by humorously articulating the fear of getting "Gloria Steinemed off the URL."

Gumbinner responds in a way that keeps it supportive, and laughs off the political:

Oh yeah Annie, I'm already letting the field trip guilt creep in. Marinka, I love you and your tough love. I don't know if it's sexist or if it's just some biological maternal need to protect and comfort. Probably both. But I suppose it's more fun to blame the patriarchy. ("Something Always Gives," September 28, 2010, <http://mom-101.com/2010/09/something-always-gives.html>).

The above exchange between Gumbinner and her readers highlights how, instead of encouraging political interpretations or energies, the mommy blogs more often provide "relief from the political" (Berlant 2008:10). They are spaces of fantasy, feelings, and friendship, and

while feminism and politics are welcome to a degree, “the texts of women’s culture never pass beyond a certain point: the signs always say ‘Go home’” (Berlant 2008:205). The trademark of women’s culture is to mark the feminine position as “bear[ing] a special burden for reproducing and sustaining family identity, protecting what seem to be its core forms so that it (i.e., the family) appears invulnerable to change” (Berlant 2008:202). Berlant describes the burden further: “[W]omen are the emblems of intimacy: and when a woman negotiates its conventions and institutions it is read as a plebiscite on love’s very forms, which are deemed implicitly to ballast the ethical center of society tout court.” Challenges to femininity, gender, or the family become challenges to “love itself” (2008:205).

A look at the blog entitled *Renegade Mothering* written by Janelle Hanchett exemplifies a blogged version of women’s culture and its limits of disruption. Hanchett’s talent lies in her ability to write extremely honest and self-deprecating posts about herself and her experience of motherhood. She complains, and bears witness to the injustices of the family, yet always reins it in by the end. On her page that announces the *raison d’être* of her blog, Hanchett writes:

When I found out I was pregnant with my first child I wanted to kill myself and the man who got me knocked up (who I had known for 3 months and is, incidentally, still my husband). I kept the baby because he threatened to leave me if I didn’t and I loved him, and in my gut it seemed like the right thing to do. I looked at having a baby as a sort of event, a passing occurrence, like going to Mexico or getting your teeth cleaned. When the permanence of it hit me—when my belly started growing—I was furious. My body became somebody else’s. My sexiness faded like the jeans I used to fit. I felt robbed. Conned. Tied down. It was a sort of death I cannot explain. My youth passed in an instant, my freedom expired, my free-wheeling, hot & young days ended—abruptly, at 21, many years before I was ready. I swung between moments of compliance with my new identity and vengeful, furious rejection of it.

Sadly I didn’t become June Cleaver the moment I laid eyes on my precious baby girl. Instead, I spent a few years making huge, tragic parenting errors, which is another story and another blog. In short, I’ve been “that mother.” I’ve been drunk, absent, uninterested, impatient, narcissistically self-centered and obscenely immature. I’ve wished I’d never become a mother. I’ve pretended I could just ignore my kids and they’d go away. In fact,

I tried that once (didn't work). I've done all these things and now I'm finally on my way home, but I still wonder: "Where do the bad mothers go?"

Hanchett is "finally on [her] way home" because:

I see my first born baby, nine years old. I stroke her frizzy unkept hair and listen to her soft snores. I touch her cheek and my eyes burn in palpable adoration. I feel it surge up my body from my toes into my fingers—thick, fierce infinite expanding mama love. And I beg the universe in that moment to give her everything she will ever need and please God keep her safe and how is it that I am so lucky to have this child, right here. The one who robbed me of my great ass and flat belly and turned me into the mother I wasn't ready to become.

Someday I shall write my own version entitled: "What to Expect When You're [a jackass and] Expecting." Until then, I'll write this blog. ("Playdate In My Trailer, January 26, 2011, <http://www.renegademothering.com/2011/01/26/playdate-in-my-trailer/>).

Negotiating the "conventions and institutions" of intimacy and the family makes great blog material and mommy bloggers do push past previous conventions of motherhood. The ending, however, does not stray. Hanchett always circles back in to the normative and the feminine, a soft-focused close-up of a sleeping child, a mothers love.

The Berlantian fantasy of "community"—that "someone understands me"—gets remade in blog post after blog post and, as I explain in the next section, this fantasy becomes an always-unfinished commodity through free, digital labor. Through blogging, women, including mothers, have moved from being passive consumers of women's culture to becoming active producers of it.

## FREE LABOR AND AFFECTIVE LABOR: PROCESSES OF COMMODITY PRODUCTION

### *Free Labor*

The expansion of production of women's culture occurs through what Tiziana Terranova terms "free labor," which is "the moment where knowledgeable consumption of culture is

translated into excess productive activities that are pleurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited” (2004:78). Such activities includes “forms of labour we do not immediately recognize as such: chat, real-life stories, mailing lists, amateur newsletters” (Terranova 2004:79). Blogging in any form or genre, for pleasure or as a hobby, exemplifies free labor: women produce websites devoted to their experiences as mothers, as women, as urbanites, farmers, homeschoolers, ad infinitum, and they do so for free, or for the pleasure of production and the social connections that result. Catherine Connors notes the connection between free labor and pleasure as mothers especially “resist having their blogs become workmanlike; once one stops enjoying the writing and involvement in the community, there is little incentive to continue” (2009:96). In fact, Terranova argues that because “it is not enough to produce a good website, you need to update it continuously . . . the commodity, then is only as good as the labor that goes into it” (2004:90). Blogging lays radically bare good labor from bad—a good blog pulls in readers, is easy to navigate, and is aesthetically balanced. A poor one reads as desperate, cloying, or boring.

The Internet draws together the collective labor of millions of users enabling a socialization of the labor process and product. The open and massive production of culture is “produced collectively but . . . selectively compensated” (Terranova 2004:84). Well-compensated bloggers, however, set the tone and pace for much of the genre (Connors 2009:93). For every Heather Armstrong and *dooce*, there are hundreds of thousands of mothers blogging with little to no recognition. It is the free, collective, mass labor that makes and sustains networks for the elite, well-compensated few, and it is the influence of the elite that pulls in the labor of millions of readers, followers, lurkers, and bloggers.

The collectively produced, selectively compensated production system encourages and diffuses imitative processes, which includes both “the virtual form of a passing impression and the actual form of acts such as reading and writing, watching and listening, copying and pasting, downloading and uploading, liking, sharing, following and bookmarking” (Terranova 2012:7). Imitation, then, occurs through endless free labor. By continuously clicking and scrolling, we generate an always-on sociality, one that has been synched up with capital and able to be monetized with every click. The value of digital labor has both an easy measure (page views, links, and clicks) and not-so-easy measures (fantasies of becoming the next *dooce*; gaining Internet fame, followers, and fortune; and blogging oneself out of a unfulfilling, inflexible career).

As online spaces become intensively invested by capital, the line from free, digital labor to the production of economic value becomes more transparent, but the contribution of affective labor to value production remains murky. As Clough (2007) explains, affective labor operates under or beyond conscious experience and often “adjacent” to economic circulation, and it is exactly this adjacent realm from which free labor comes and into which capital expands.

### *Affective Labor*

Affective labor veers from free labor in that it is less a labor of conscious action because it “occurs between bodies,” yet it remains “social in that it constitutes a contagious energy, an energy that can be whipped up or dampened in the course of interaction” (Wissinger 2007:232). Clough describes affect as “preindividual bodily capacities” that include biological phenomena as well as “processes of laboring, socializing, and entertaining” (Clough 2007:25). Through digital technologies these preindividual capacities get put “to work” (Clough 2007:25). Thus, the

spread of moods via Twitter feeds or the viral sharing of specific content evidence the ways digital technology can whip up energy, freely extracting our labor and further encouraging imitation (Terranova 2012).

The ability of capital to invest in and amplify affect is a move away from disciplinary strategies of containment that proliferated during industrialization, as theorized by Foucault (1975) and Parisi and Terranova (2000). Put another way, affect is the excess of a disciplined, contained subjectivity--all that leaks or explodes out of the confines of modern identities, such as “mother,” “woman,” or “immigrant,” finds circulation and value in an affective economy. Marx described the tendency of capital to pull everything into the market as the real subsumption of labor; affect, unconscious and preconscious capacities and machinations of all forms of life, human and otherwise, further realizes such subsumption (Clough 2007). Everything gets put to work instead of using energy to repress and contain what falls outside of the norm. For example, motherhood, as told on the blogs, surges out of the confines of the disciplined, Leave-it-to-Beaver mold--yet mothers remain implicated in capital just the same. The more “trembly” the mother, the more content she can potentially produce.

### *Transformational Processes and Commodities*

Clough (2012b) draws on the psychoanalytic concept of the “transformational object” to interrogate affective labor, value, real subsumption, and the raw materials of postindustrial production. Transformational processes, first theorized by Christopher Bollas (1989), refer to our earliest experiences, preobject and prelanguage: the moments when the mother (or caregiver) moves the baby from one psychic and or physical state to the next, from agitation to calm, for example. At this developmental stage, the baby does not yet differentiate subjects and objects but

instead feels the mother as a reality-altering entity. This process leaves a fundamental psychic imprint evidenced by lifelong pursuits of transformation, often satisfied through art, relationships, politics, and other aesthetic experiences that shift, or promise to shift, our state of being.

Clough notes that such preindividual capacities are no longer beyond capital's reach. Our desire for the feeling of transformation finds expression through commodities as they are designed for the "user's future manipulation" (Clough 2012b; see also Harold 2009). In order to be consumed, such commodities require the consumer to work on or with it. Mommy blogs, as an example of a commodified transformational object, allows mothers to be "engaged in activities which find their own fulfillment in themselves, without necessarily objectifying these activities into finished products or into objects which survive their performance" (Thrift 2006:290).

Nigel Thrift's concept of the "unfinished commodity" applies to the mommy blog, as he writes: "Consumers have become involved in the production of communities around particular commodities which themselves generate value, by fostering allegiance, by offering instant feedback and by providing active interventions in the commodity itself" (2006:290). As an unfinished commodity, the blog transforms every time a reader "likes," shares, or comments on a post. The following excerpt from the blogger Kim Foster highlights how the readers of a blog contribute to its production:

So, first—thanks Brande. That was very cool of you. And your e-mail made me realize why I started writing this blog in the first place. I started because I'm a writer and I love to, need to, must write to be happy, sane and not bark at bank tellers and my husband. I started because I love good writing, great stories. I love funny, poignant writing. I wanted to write about this experience and write well. That was all that concerned me. ("I've Been Gone Awhile, Haven't I?" June 4, 2009, <http://theyummymummy.blogspot.com/2009/06/ive-been-gone-awhile-havent-i.html>).

Foster positions the act of writing itself as a transformational object as she “must write to be happy, sane.” Writing is an unending process that benefits as well from her readers’ input and labor.

Such future-oriented, consumer-dependent, and unfinished commodities are the instruments effects of numerous social transformations. Clough writes: “When, however, the commodity becomes the transformational object, it becomes a prime socializer or resource of motivation and rather than giving indirect moral support to market activity, the institutions of civil society become intensified sites of market activity” (2012b). Commodities become private, public, and market sites all at once. Connors, the author of the blog *Her Bad Mother* provides an example of transformation and socialization (and an intimate, digital public) via mommy blogs:

One day, during a [G]oogle search on “extreme baby gas help,” I noticed a link to a page that I hadn’t seen before. . . . Intrigued, I followed that link, and in doing so, tumbled down a virtual rabbit hole, and arrived in the mommy blogosphere. And my life changed.

The page that I had arrived at was Jezer’s blog. And the first words of hers that I read, referring to the challenge of a new baby, were, “this gig is hard, dudes.”

I may have gasped audibly. Somebody else knows. SOMEBODY ELSE KNOWS.

In an instant, I realized that I was not alone. I spent the next hour – hours – reading through her wonderful blog, laughing and wincing and nodding and goggling at the pictures of her adorable baby boy. (Go look! You will hyperventilate from the adorableness!) Then I started following her links. . . . And then I linked to another blog, and another, and another.

I was totally sucked in. (“To All The Moms That Blog And More,” May 12, 2006, <http://herbadmother.com/2006/05/to-all-moms-that-blog-and-more/>).

As a clear example of an affective transformation and its power to generate imitation, Connors gets “sucked in,” only to turn around and become a successful blogger, further “sucking in” others. A market is found as Connors realizes she is “not alone” in her experience; through blogging she and others exteriorize such private thoughts, circulating them through channels of

both care and commerce. We go to the market for examples of mothering: we Google “crying baby” and tweet questions to our followers, submitting our private lives to a public network.

I have shown how theories of free and affective labor apply to blogging motherhood and how, through blogging, capital mines preobject psychic processes. Within such interactive commodities and communities, the norms of motherhood expand yet the overall genre of women’s culture remains intact and even amplified. The mommy blog conversation falls back to stories of survival, how to get by, or how to “live on” through late capitalism (Clough 2012b). Berlant explicitly points out that the intimate publics that form around women’s culture provide “relief from the political” and are not spaces of social change. They are spaces of fantasy.

In the chapters that follow, I contribute to understanding how postindustrial capital expands further into inner, presubjective life while it simultaneously and wholly retreats from social welfare programs. Understanding the fantasies that circulate through mommy blogs opens up this paradox because, as Berlant (2011:2) notes, “fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world ‘add up to something.’”

## STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

I organize the following chapters around these reoccurring themes: negotiating the maternal body, the desire to mother and ambivalence about mothering, and the politics of blogging as a mother and as a woman.

First, I take up the labor of blogging motherhood and the politics of public life writing by women. I am interested here in the “how” of mommy blogs—how are they produced, distributed, and consumed? How does capital intimately reach into motherhood via blogging? In part, this reach takes place through corporate media platforms that promise unfettered communication

while simultaneously gathering, generating, and guiding (in other words, fettering) the communication that can take place. The reactions against mommy bloggers from broadcast media belie the threatening shift of this cultural production and consumption for the old media order. Mommy bloggers fight for their writing to be appreciated and not just to be a conduit for advertisers selling soap.

Next, the chapter on the maternal body examines how mommy bloggers negotiate their own corporality and also media representations of women on their blogs. Obviously, women's bodies have a complicated relationship with cultural representation and unattainable, airbrushed beauty standards. What happens when women produce their own culture and their own intimate publics, representing their bodies as they see fit? I take up this question and show how broadcast media and network media feedback on one another and shifting the norms within each. One entrée into the blogged maternal body is through mothers' stories about the changes motherhood brings to body and soul. Bloggers often perform a cost/benefit analysis, couching any changes in an economic logic. Examining the "selfie" (networked self-portrait) and the notion of the "MILF" (mother I'd like to fuck) draws out the argument that technology scaffolds affective economies and subjectivities.

In the chapter on maternal desire I consider the blogged ambivalence surrounding both motherhood and feminism. Desire and femininity have had a troubled history, to say the least, and part of feminism has been to normalize and problematize feminine desires. This chapter reads the blogs as scenes of desire and atmospheres of maternal attunement. Further, I consider why desiring motherhood is problematic.

Finally, I conclude with a consideration of the fantasy of the mommy blogger—the woman who works from home and supports her family from her blogging. This self-sustaining

blogger is able to leave behind the rigid workforce yet still earn money and still pick up her kids from school. She is appreciated by other mothers and women and is also there for her kids. She is a fantasy, a neoliberal fairy tale, and, I argue, the latest figuring of the princess archetype. I also consider examples of blogging that counter the sentimental genre of women's culture.

## BLOGGING, WOMEN ONLINE, AND THE MOMMY BLOG GENRE

### *Blogs*

The weblog as a writing form is fundamentally about fostering personal expression, meaningful conversation, and collaborative thinking in ways the World Wide Web had perhaps failed to provide for; not static like a webpage, not private like an email, as well as more visually appealing than discussion lists, blogging's rapid rise to online ubiquity bespeaks its quite particular fit into a previously unidentified hole in the digital universe" (Morrison, 2008, <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/companionDLS/>).

Blogs, the shortened moniker of "web log," began in 1997 as a literal log of links and hypertext web addresses that authors, initially tech insiders, chose to share with other tech insiders. They were online travel maps so speak, regularly updated by the blogger. In 2004 "blog" was the most looked-up word in Merriam Webster's online dictionary. Since then blogs have exploded. While the numbers are tricky to pin down, one estimate finds 181 million blogs in 2011 (and this measure comes from tracking sources of online "buzz"—there are probably numerous (thousands of?) other blogs that do not generate "buzz," however it is defined) (Nielsen Newswire, "Buzz in the Blogosphere: Millions More Bloggers and Blog Readers, March 8, 2012, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/newswire/2012/buzz-in-the-blogosphere-millions-more-bloggers-and-blog-readers.html>). Recent estimates find at least 18 million women bloggers and 3.9 million mommy bloggers in the United States alone (Faw, 2012; Laird, 2012).

Since their inception blogs have shifted in their function and content, and expanded across genres and industries. Yet the defining feature of the blog—the post—has remained

constant. A post can include any content—text, pictures, videos, links, narratives ad infinitum—but it is always an entry of information on a blog, always time stamped. Initially, one person was the author of a blog, but now multi-authored blogs have become popular in news media, education, and special niche interest areas. The following features, in various combinations, define blogs: (1) distinct posts, (2) date and time stamping of all posts, (3) reverse chronological order of posts (newest appear first), (4) hyperlinks to outside sources and to previous posts on the blog, (5) archive of posts, (6) capability for readers to comment, (7) ability to search based on keywords or blogger-created categories and tags, and (8) optional “blog roll” of similar, like-minded blogs.

Importantly, while blogs are versatile and adaptable for a wide variety of uses, the majority of blogs are personal, diary-like records. Personal blogs are by far the most popular and 60 percent of bloggers report doing such blogging as a hobby, citing “personal satisfaction” as the primary benefit. The average number of blogs per blogger has gone from two in 2010 to three in 2011, with the average blog hobbyist authoring two blogs. The most prominent blogs (blogs with the highest number of page views and unique visitors) are journalistic—such as *The Huffington Post*, *Gawker*, or *The Drudge Report* (Technorati 2011). These are, obviously, multi-authored blogs and operate much like a newspaper with a few paid reporters (although online news sources often do not pay, or try to barter exposure for writers with content production), advertising, and reliance on a large readership.

The rapid rise and success of blogs, however, is due in large part to the software development company, Pyra, and their creation of a software product called “Blogger” in 1999. Blogger offered templates for easy blogging, whereas before this software, blogging required coding knowledge. In 2000, Blogger had 2,300 accounts and by 2002, over 700,000. Google

bought Blogger in 2003. Since Blogger began, numerous other software platforms have materialized—WordPress, Tumblr, LiveJournal to name just a few. The most used platform, WordPress, an open-source and free content management system (CMS), now accounts for about 19 percent of the top 10 million websites (as of August 2013). Sixty million blogs are run through WordPress, or one out every six websites (Colao 2012).

The majority of bloggers use WordPress (Web Technologies Survey 2013) ([http://w3techs.com/technologies/overview/content\\_management/all/](http://w3techs.com/technologies/overview/content_management/all/)). WordPress was started by 19-year-old Matt Mullenweg, and remains “open source,” which means the code behind the platform is open and available to the public. In turn, users of WordPress can write and develop their own code and applications and share them with the larger WordPress-using community. The open nature of WordPress allows for bloggers to personalize and tweak the functions and appearance of their blogs.

The emergence of blogging software is a crucial turning point because it has allowed for the rapid growth of blogging, while also directing the form and networkability of blogs. For example, to embed pictures or videos into a blog, the code to recognize, run, display, or scale such data must be written into the blogging software. As of this writing, most blogging platforms allow for access to different social media platforms across the web. For example, many of the mommy bloggers have applications that link their blogs to their Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and Instagram profiles. When they publish a new post, these applications automatically send out notices through all of these social media networks. Readers too can spread mommy bloggers’ posts by tapping into their own networks through “Share,” “Like,” “Tweet,” or “Pin” buttons that follow most posts. Readers can click on such buttons and redistribute to their “friends” and “followers.”

For example, if I enjoy a post I can click on the little blue bird icon and “tweet” it to my followers. Langlois and Elmer (2013:14) credit these button apps with creating “felt communities” that situate and mark social media denizens in our networks. When users “share” they become “aware that one’s interactions with an object will have consequences for other users” and that “their actions are going to find an echo and define a new attentional context” (Langlois and Elmer 2013:14). What and where I share such “digital objects” online may prompt conversations, get reshared by like-minded friends, or, perhaps, lead some to “unfollow” or “unfriend” me.

All of these corporate social media networks flow in and out of each other and thus control, direct, and own much of content online (see Langlois and Elmer 2013 for discussion). Online sociality and networks are becoming increasingly dependent on corporate, private social platforms. Mommy blogs do not exist in a technological vacuum and do not represent a sudden uprising of maternal consciousness. Instead, the architecture of the web itself encourages, captures, and distributes certain forms of expression. Too often this corporate backbone is forgotten when focusing on the content of various media niches. While I consider much of what is said on mommy blogs, I also keep the networks and platforms in focus.

### *Women Online*

Because the online landscape changes and expands endlessly, it is difficult to study. Yet certain trends have emerged and, for the most part, mimic social patterns already in play—gender, age, income, education, and geographical location all predictably shape who does what online. Technorati (2011) breaks bloggers down into the following four categories: professional, entrepreneur, corporate, and hobbyist, and finds that certain social patterns run throughout each

category. For example, as income goes up so does online use. Overall, most bloggers (60 percent) identify as hobbyists and two-thirds (66 percent) of all bloggers are between the ages of 25 and 44. Over 40 percent of bloggers have a graduate degree—it is a hobby enjoyed by young, educated, and affluent people. The majority of bloggers in all categories are married and about half of all bloggers are parents (as measured by Technorati 2011). Professional bloggers (those who earn their primary income from blogging) have more blogs, update them more frequently, and spend more time on them. Importantly, when asked what has the most influence on one's blog posts, all categories of bloggers overwhelmingly cite "other blogs read" as their top influence. This intra-influencing highlights the networking of free labor and the contagious spread of affective energy. Bloggers also cite "personal enjoyment" as the primary reason they blog (Technorati 2011).

Inequalities lurk with these figures. Women bloggers write more and maintain their blogs longer than do men, yet the most "influential" blogs are repeatedly written by white American men (Henning 2003). Part of the skewing to men is the subject matter of the blogs—men write about politics and technology and women are more likely to write about personal experiences (such as motherhood) (Pederson and Macafee 2007). (Apparently, whoever determines the category "politics" did not receive the feminist memo that the "personal is political." As Terranova pointed out in 2001, women's activities online (such as chatroom participation) are repeatedly ignored and not considered labor. Among academics the situation is no better—Morrison (2012:3) notes that for personal blog writing, "despite their statistical dominance in the blogosphere, these texts are only beginning to draw critical attention."

Friedman (2013) points out that the "mamasphere" reproduces social inequalities and provides another example of the "digital divide"—access to computers and the Internet that

accompanies larger patterns of unequal access to education, health, opportunity and safety. More income and wealth translate to easier, better access to computer technology. Such patterns of access and inequality appear throughout mommy blogs: the average mommy blogger is 34, college educated, white, heterosexual, married, and has an average household income of \$80,000 (Laird 2012). Friedman (2013:17) stresses, “[T]he gaps in maternal experience online are not random. . . . Certain experiences are grossly overrepresented as a result of class and other privileges.”

### *Mommy-blog Genre*

So, besides their blinding whiteness, how does one recognize a mommy blog? A mommy blogger, as defined by Scarborough (2012) a market research firm, is any woman with “at least one child in their household [who has] read or contributed to a blog in the past 30 days.” (<http://dialog.scarborough.com/index.php/blogging-moms-influential-voice/>). According to their definition, fourteen percent of all American moms participate in blogs somehow. The broadness of Scarborough’s definition highlights how passive activities such as reading blogs contribute to the overall market activity.

The Scarborough definition of mommy bloggers includes lurkers as bloggers. This inclusion highlights the productive capacity of social media. Just by reading mommy blogs, one contributes to them. While there remains an important difference between one who sets up a blog, administers it, writes posts, and comments on posts, anyone who taps into the network generates something of value. The reader who does nothing more than read blogs produces at the minimum a page view, a unique “hit,” and if she shares a post or “likes” it, she creates value for the blogger, who can, depending of the total number of page views, pull in more or less paid

advertisers. This is “monetizing” in action. And the lurker generates “data” and leaves a trace of where she was previously and where she goes next. Advertisers, of course, are interested in all potential moves readers make—especially if they have more income than average, or control household spending, as mothers typically do (Crittendon 2010).

Beyond certain demographic and economic markers, mommy blogs are unified in that they “capture maternal experience, give mothers a voice, and foster conversation and participation,” which had previously been “left out of the story” (Friedman 2013:11). This maternal experience comes out of “a desire to speak the truth of the day-to-day experience of parenting in the face of a culture that both idealizes mothering in the abstract but offers very poor support for parenting” (Morrison 2013:4). Mommy bloggers articulate their daily experiences as mothers as well as their emotional reactions to them. Stories about children, reflections on milestones, mocking tales of family life, and self-deprecating stories mark the genre. Many bloggers include pictures of their children, their homes, and their activities, and some include video. And, of course, many reference motherhood, children, or family explicitly, implicitly, or ironically in their title and domain name. Many also have pictures of children, or scenes of motherhood in their website banners (the art/images at the top of the blog).

A common sentiment among mommy bloggers is that success at blogging requires one to write from experience, or as one of the most followed mommy bloggers, Ree Drummond of “The Pioneer Woman” posted, to write “as if you were talking to your sister” (“Ten Important Things I’ve Learned About Blogging,” September 8, 2010, <http://thepioneerwoman.com/blog/2010/09/ten-important-things-ive-learned-about-blogging/>). Paul de Laat (2008:60) put the same sentiment in academic terms and found that “reflections upon the self are the entry ticket to a potential new community, while the feedback from the

community may afford a better grip on leading one's own personal life." Personal blogging is powerful because it potentially counters the alienation unique to postmodern life. De Laat (2008) considers such blogging a form of "empowered exhibitionism" because it allows the blogger to control the presentation of the self in a world where privacy and expectations for it are continuously eroded.

One of the hallmarks of the mommy blog genre is the way blogging, the blog, and readers are pulled into a feeling of intimacy or "family." Mommy bloggers present their blogs as much an object of affection as they do their children: the blogs record all of the mundane and sacred moments of life and, further, the blogs are subject to milestones and markers of their own (One thousand page views! One year of blogging! A blog award!). Successful mommy bloggers create a feeling that the blog has a seat at the family table. The form of blogging requires an open relationship (or the feeling of one) between readers and authors and often fosters attachments. Much like the rhetoric of "attachment parenting" that encourages mothers to respond to their children's cues, bloggers must sync up with readers in a similar and intuitive way. The technologies behind blogging, the actual machines and software, and the real-time ability to post, comment, and respond, coupled with the social isolation of many new moms, the lack of extended family and social supports, and the rising education levels of women all make the mother-blog attachment easy.

As sociologists have repeatedly shown, family cohesion requires active emotional labor by, most often, the mother (Hoschild 1983). Mommy bloggers digitize similar emotional labor to connect their readers to their blogs, and this deployment of gender helps these bloggers stake out a large and loyal portion of the Internet. Bloggers build trust by self-disclosing private

experiences and truths—the more one exposes, the more trust assumed by blogger and reader (De Laat 2008).

All of this reiterates the trend that online life is deeply connected to offline life, often shorthanded as “IRL” (in real life). IRL extends and portends through our networks. The initial fear that the Internet would be a place to escape social markers, identities, and inhibitions now reads as a paranoid fantasy. If anything, we use online tools to create, mark, brand, and extend our social identities, even when such identities are not socially privileged. Even in communities that engage online networks for social change, IRL is worked on and through, not abandoned or ignored (Daniels 2009:118).

## METHOD

My method is based, in part, on Berlant’s (2011:9) approach to reading cultural texts for “patterns of adjustment in specific aesthetic and social contexts to derive what’s collective about specific modes or sensual activity toward and beyond survival.” Because mommy blogs are unique cultural texts as well as digital artifacts, I take them as my object of study. Through analyzing and closely reading blogs posts and the comments that follow, I find they provide a source of “patterns of adjustment” narratives to contemporary motherhood. Mommy blogs do this despite the ever-changing terrain of the Internet and the starting, folding, and exploding of specific blogs within this genre. On a few occasions during my study a blog post “went viral,” propelling the blogger into new dimensions of traffic, exposure, and attention. And a few removed or disappeared from their URL.

Despite the dynamic nature of blogging (as well as the slow plodding along of many bloggers), I focused on blogs that resonated with me, those that tapped into a familiar fit or

“gestural economy” (Berlant: 2011). If I were to start this study today, I have no doubt I would have a different list of blogs yet the themes, concerns, and references would most likely remain the same. Many of the blogs under study here have large followings or, more likely the case, these particular mommy bloggers are able to appeal to a general audience. Large numbers of readers relate to their work, while also feeling “in on it” where “it” is some vague economy of motherhood. The ability to write and blog generally yet speak to readers at an intimate register justifies my inclusion of the popular bloggers. The mommy blog as a “digital object” (a *entrée* point into the “multifaceted objects” that bring together media, networks, and personally situated users) bring the intimacy between women, capital, and technology, and mothers and their networks into sharp relief (Langlois and Elmer 2013).

### *Digital Methods*

This dissertation project contains elements of a traditional ethnography and borrows heavily from discourse analysis projects, but it also is an experiment in online research, testing the limits of participant observation, data collection, and the defining of research subjects, while pushing the boundaries of sampling, and even communication and subject-ness itself. Blogs are livelier than a standard broadcast media text, and just as contradictory as human subjects (Thelwall 2010; Wilkinson and Thelwall 2011:395). Mommy blogs in particular, confuse the boundaries between subjects and objects of affection (the blog or the baby?), processes of production and consumption, public and private family life, virtual and real intimacy, and human and machine. The stories, fantasies, posts, and pictures highlight the unfolding moments of maternal subjectivities through the complicated relations and “movement between not me and

not-not me” (Willink 2010:211) where the taken-for-granted “not-not me” is a mother, human, and private, and the “not-me” is the machine, the code, or the network.

Social science has studied motherhood extensively and focused on the social problems (mainly economic) associated with it, but the discipline has not been able to understand “what mothers felt” (Arendell 2000:1202). One reason it has been difficult to “capture” personal feelings for academic research is because “there has been no readily available data source comparable to a national census for most personal issues” and “until recently there seems to have been no methodological alternative to interviews and questionnaires,” which bring up all the baggage of self-reporting (honesty, accuracy, memory) personal information to a stranger-researcher (Wilkinson and Thelwall 2001:387). Blogs and other forms of online media bypass this research obstacle and allow researchers to study personal feelings as they are published online.

Studying blogs, then, requires methods beyond traditional sociology, a way to listen to the digital, the maternal, and the fantasies each generate, often in excess. Willink (2010:213) writes that “listening for excess requires a protocol beyond traditional textual analysis. These protocols focus on how to listen for silence and pauses. . . . It requires contemplativeness, not just listening for the solidity and solidarity of words, but for what lies under the surface.”

As an example of an informative silence, one of the bloggers in my sample digitally “disappeared” after publishing a post that was heavily critiqued online. Kim Foster wrote a post reflecting on the musician Questlove’s blogged meditation on the experience of being a black man in America. He wrote this piece shortly after George Zimmerman was found “not guilty”; Zimmerman is notorious for killing the African American teenager, Trayvon Martin after finding him suspicious while on a self-appointed “neighborhood watch.” In Questlove’s (Thompson

2013) blog post, articulating a Goffman-like study of public space and interpersonal dynamics, he describes his mechanisms for disarming people's fear of black men in public. He writes, "Seriously, imagine a life in which you think of other people's safety and comfort first, before your own. You're programmed and taught that from the gate. It's like the opposite of entitlement" ("Questlove: Trayvon Martin and I ain't Shit," July 16, 2013, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2013/07/questlove-trayvon-martin-and-i-aint-shit.html>).

To illustrate this preoccupation, he details an interaction he once had in an elevator with a woman whom he describes as "bangin"—the woman ignores him, does not answer his questions about what floor she lives on, or her destination in the building. He interprets her silence through the lens of race and assumes she felt unsafe. Kim Foster responds to his post by suggesting that imbalances in gender power might have been more at play in the elevator scenario:

Questlove not only admits to objectifying her in his head, he "flirts" with her as she gets off the elevator, and even then, even as he wrote the words on the screen and saw them there, was unable to look at his own internal monologue and see he was oppressing her. Isn't this exactly what white people do to black people? Isn't this the point of his whole article?

Maybe that's why she was uncomfortable. Maybe that was why she didn't disclose her floor. Maybe it had nothing to do with [him] being black and big. Maybe he was yet another man in an elevator plotting how he can get in her pants. It probably wasn't the first time that had happened to her that day. ("Why the Questlove Article Exposes Our Racism. And Our Sexism," July 27, 2013, <https://medium.com/gender-justice-feminism/8371abf4594d>).

Foster's post goes on to explain how violence against women occurs irrespective of race and that everyday street harassment is a constant reality women negotiate. While she makes valid points about gender and race, the analysis of did not stop there. Foster was thoroughly critiqued, criticized, and deconstructed by black feminists, who argued that she reiterated the

racist narrative of white women's sexuality being threatened by black men. One of the my most notable responses can from writer Jamileh Lemieux who wrote:

The sexist oppression of women is real and is important, but damn if we couldn't take a moment to acknowledge an issue that is outside of what White women experience. As a tall Black woman, I have found that White women sometimes clutch their purses and act funny style in the presence of me. I could say a lot more, but I felt Questlove's experiences and hurt were valid enough for us to stay there instead of playing "Oppression Olympics." But, alas, White privilege manages to take the gold every single time. ("I Guess You Really Ain't Shit, Questlove," July 26, 2013, <http://www.ebony.com/news-views/i-guess-you-really-aint-sht-questlove-303#axzz2wzqXZJra>).

Foster linked to Lemieux's response and included the following disclaimer before her original post: "I've left this piece up since deleting it won't change the initial mistake and a dialog has spun out from it. All the responses have forced me to re-think my lens on the world" ("Why the Questlove Article Exposes Our Racism. And Our Sexism," July 27, 2013, <https://medium.com/gender-justice-feminism/8371abf4594d>). Foster disappeared from twitter and her blog for almost three months. This silence is informative in that it points to a great difficulty in discussing sensitive topics without swift rebuttals and backlash. Yet, digital mediums are unique, especially for researchers, in that they offer such a fast paced dialogue. The above exchange further underscores why mommy bloggers in particular may steer clear of sensitive or controversial topics.

As the above exchange between different online writers illustrates, blogs offer novel benefits and more opportunities (as compared to offline methods) for social science researchers because they offer a "publicly available, low cost and instantaneous technique for collecting substantial amounts of data" (Hookway 2008:92). Hookway even claims blogs are a more "naturalistic" way of collecting personal information because the researcher, along with her tape recorders, notebooks, cameras, is absent. He points out that "the anonymity of the online context

also means that bloggers may be relatively unselfconscious about what they write since they remain hidden from view” (Hookway 2008:93). And, of course, the researcher can study geographically distant populations.

Hookway considers online research ethically and methodologically more advantageous and sound as compared to traditional methods of interview and participant observation. When researching personal issues blogs provide unsolicited narratives and musings, often in abundance. Directly soliciting narratives from subjects brings up issues of impression management, which can compromise results. I agree with Hookway that online narratives provide useful data but I also temper his enthusiasm since publishing a blog post also entails at least some degree of self-editing and impression management.

### *My Study*

To study mommy blogs I began by, simply, reading lots of them. From Googling “mommy blog” to looking at compiled lists of the “best” bloggers on Babble.com and blogher.com I found a few that drew me in. I would read these through in their entirety to get a sense of not only the blogger, but also her style, audience, and writing, and her academic, photographic, and website production skills. Because blog posts are episodic and in reverse order, getting to “know” a blogger takes time. Some of the blogs were exciting to read while others were more challenging. Factors such as the writing style or the background assumptions and politics affected the ease at which I could stomach a blogger’s writings. Needless to say, after reading mommy blogs (and reviewing related media about mommy blogs such as

newspaper articles or radio stories) from April 2010 to November 2013<sup>2</sup>, I selected 47 blogs to include in this study. Some of these, 16, I read closely as they set the tone and commanded large audiences (and I really enjoyed these). I also noticed how others bloggers would imitate the more popular writers. In the appendix I include a total list of all the blogs and also a brief description of the closely read blogs. To be included, a blog must satisfy at least three of the five following criteria: (1) the blogger must write about motherhood, (2) the blogger must write about blogging, (3) the bloggers must reflect on the labor of blogging and motherhood, (4) the blogger must write about her body, and (5) the blogger must be actively posting, without extended absences. From these five criteria, my sample emerged. I then read through their blogs (often for a second or third time) and found specific and appropriate posts to analyze. Some of the bloggers have been writing online since 2006. Initially I copied blog posts and created files for each blogger. As themes emerged, I organized posts by theme instead. A large part of my method, then, was to analyze the content, fantasies, and labor (as blogged) of mommy blogging. For my chapter on maternal desire, I created an open research blog to house relevant posts and to provide a space for me to work out ideas and arguments; that blog's address is: <http://www.momtheblog.open.cuny.edu>. I found, however, that printing posts for analysis better

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<sup>2</sup> The main way I kept track of the blogs in this study was through “igoogle,” which was a customizable RSS (rich site summary) page. I linked all the blogs I followed to my igoogle page and could easily see when any one blog had a new post. Google discontinued igoogle on November 1, 2013, which corresponded to the initial expiration of my IRB approval (which was subsequently extended for the writing of this study).

facilitated my research; there is something about the technologies of paper and pen that continues to work for me, academically.

I did not contact the bloggers while reading their posts and I did not ask for consent because the IRB board deemed my project exempt, as so little harm is present to subjects a full review is not warranted and also because blogs are public and open to observation (Hookway 2008). The bloggers I read copyrighted their material and wrote with the intention of a wide audience. One blogger in my sample did change her settings to private and asked readers to pay for further access to her work. I dropped this blog, unfortunately, from my sample. A few others announced their resignation and some just stopped posting. I decided against interviewing bloggers for the following reasons: I wanted to look at the genre as the millions of other readers do; I wanted to analyze the content as the object of investigation, not the bloggers themselves; and I was not seeking to uncover some deeper truth from the bloggers—what they actually published was my interest. One of my findings, as discussed in chapter four, is that mommy blogs upset the narrative form and any attending fantasies of a stable subjectivity—creating an interview narrative from these women would distract from goals of mapping the genre and the affective movements therein.

From reading the 47 blogs, I conducted a content or thematic analysis, and corroborated many of the same themes as found by mommy-blog researchers Morrison, Lopez, and Friedman. However, because I looked at the blogs as a space of fantasy, a slightly different story emerged—stories of sexuality and the corporeality of becoming a mother, the stifling of one's desire to mother, the surprises motherhood brings to identity and subjectivity, the ambivalence of staying at home/working out of the home, the strangeness of publishing the intimacy of motherhood online, the ability to connect to like-minded others, a digital form of alienation, and

the frustrations surrounding the politics of blogging as mothers and as women. I examine these unique themes in the following chapters and discuss the underlying fantasy of the mommy blogger figure herself.

## CHAPTER 2

### BLOGGING LIKE A MOTHER

#### MOMMY-BLOGGING LANDSCAPE

If, as Jodi Dean states, “blogging is a way to access the current conjuncture of media, subjectivity, and politics” (2010:38), then looking at mommy blogs illuminates the porosity between motherhood and technology, and the politics of both. Dean (2010:37) notes that blogs, in general, are considered “parasitic, narcissistic, and pointless,” yet their growth is exponential. Mommy blogs epitomize this trend: routinely mocked and infamously labeled as “online shrines to parental self-absorption,” recent estimates find as many as 3.9 million mommy bloggers with an estimated readership of 32 million in North America alone (Mashable 2012).

For example, over the course of this study, I witnessed the following scenario many times: a big news media outlet publishes a piece trivializing mommy blogs or women’s participation in the digital world, and within minutes, mommy bloggers react with indignation and post letters to the offending editors, their readers flood their blogs with comments and the bloggers re-ignite a sense that their work is radical. Mommy blogging is indeed radical, but not (only) because they unveil an authentic version of motherhood. Instead, as I argue in this chapter, their radicalness lies in the ever-increasing portion of the Internet these women command: they garner millions of clicks and page views, build loyal communities of followers, and create an expanding portion of online content and they accomplish this by bringing motherhood online.

As I detailed in the Introduction, participating online, freely and for enjoyment, is a form of labor and production. Yet, when discussions of digital labor occur, the last person on anyone's mind is a mother. Hence, the contributions of mothers to the online world remain blurred and often ignored or devalued because of gender expectations and biases: online spaces are gendered (and raced) in similar ways as offline spaces, and we often transpose stereotypes and prejudices between the two spaces (Daniels 2009). Further, our cultural image of a "mother" is antithetical to technology and business; motherhood is an exemplary labor of love and, even if women do not consider motherhood to be exploitative, narratives of toil, love, and loss of autonomy saturate our cultural storyline of motherhood. This gendered expectation, laboring for love, gets transposed online (often quite self-consciously by bloggers themselves). It seems an old lesson is returning via the digital: blogging motherhood creates value (online communities, profits, site traffic) for capital enterprises just as motherhood qua motherhood creates value (communities, profits, humans, and workers) for capital.

But while motherhood qua motherhood has been the subject of sustained and intense feminist attention for decades, the value of mothers' digital labor—and the exploitation experienced by mothers and women online—has not. Here, I consider both the labor of mommy bloggers and their online subjectivity (the work they do to strike the mommy blogger tone, the way they position themselves, etc.). The mommy blogger occupies a radical position through her close association with and affinity to technology. As Andy Hinds, the blogger of *Betadad*, confesses, "I love writing in the online parenting space, and I want to learn from the pros how to parlay my passion into paying opportunities. And the pros in the online parenting space are, by and large, women" ("The Daddy Business Trip," *New York Times*, May 15, 2013). Mommy bloggers have power online—and they get this power through blogging like mothers.

Taking up Dean's suggestion by unpacking the subjectivity, politics, technology, and labor of mommy bloggers, I find that their digital pull brings with it a familiar, gendered exploitation. While the analysis of mothers' labor has a solid history and feminist language attuned to exploitation and unpaid labor, when this labor happens online, it enters a market space and can, for once, make money. Or so many bloggers hope. Advertisers, corporations, and big social media organizations such as Facebook clearly see profitable opportunities in women's online networks. After all, even if a blogger does not make a dime, her work contributes to the overall affective flow of online motherhood. And still the value of women's online labor is usually accompanied by derision, mockery, and relegated to "fluff" genres and spaces. Writing in the *New York Times*, journalist Rob Walker (2010) notes, "Possibly media observers give women who blog short shrift, but clearly advertisers don't" ("Monetizing Motherhood," October 22, 2010).

And neither do mothers. As it turns out there is a huge market for this truth telling—women everywhere seek out blogs to learn about motherhood, to look at it, lurk around it, and find like-minded communities. Advertisers are eager to tap this market of "household consumers" as media use shifts from broadcast forms to digital networks (Daniels 2013). Yet, monetizing motherhood is a delicate balance of gender norms, business acumen, and digital self-promotion. It is a distinct, digital form of labor that must stay cloaked in gender, class, and racial norms to achieve monetary success. Mommy bloggers rarely convey their blogging as labor—to do so would counter the motherly tone writers in this genre must strike to maintain success. Yet, they convey the labor of blogging motherhood through the following recurrent themes: 1. Mommy bloggers show a deep and sincere gratitude for readers; 2. They apologize for absences, a lack of productivity, and sometimes for earning money (if not directly apologizing, they

carefully couch discussions of monetary success i.e., monetization); and 3. some blog about a digital form of estrangement. Together, these thematic and rhetorical devices showcase how the subjectivity of motherhood enters the market through blogs. First, I review the contentious label “mommy blogger” and detail the reception of mommy bloggers in the media. Then I will turn to the three rhetorical mechanisms that implicitly convey the labor of the genre. Finally, I return to the question of subjectivity, media, and politics.

## WHO OR WHAT IS A MOMMY BLOGGER?

### *Mommy Bloggers’ Definitions*

While some bloggers feel slighted by the title “mommy blogger”, the community overall has come to embrace it. May Friedman and Shana Calixte (2009:25) announce their support of the term here:

Our motivation for using the word is two-fold. On the one hand, we are speaking ironically to signify the incredulity we feel when multidimensional women are so easily reduced to such limited terminology. Our second motivation, however, is the reclamation of the words that we feel can be used to signify the extraordinary power that is being harnessed by women on the web.

Connors from the blog *Her Bad Mother* thoughtfully explains the problem with the term here:

I am mother, yes. I blog about my children, sometimes, and about motherhood, frequently, and about other things here and there (including but not limited to: religion and spirituality, grief, social causes, my nephew, cupcakes, social media, feminism, and zombies), and I do have the word ‘mother’ in the title of my blog. But I am not a mommy blogger (“I am Mommy Blogger, Hear Me Roar,” September 30, 2011, <http://herbadmother.com/2011/09/i-am-mommy-blogger-hear-me-roar/> www.herbadmother.com).

For Connors, the problem with the moniker is that it is shorthand for, as she writes, “vapid diaries about shit and binkies” and “glorified scrapbooks and virtual coffee klatches and dear GOD won’t someone shut them up already?” (“I am Mommy Blogger, Hear Me Roar,”

September 30, 2011, <http://herbadmother.com/2011/09/i-am-mommy-blogger-hear-me-roar/>). Changing her position within the post (a freedom online and self publishing allows), Connors goes on to argue that if mommy blogging includes the “radical” work of removing “the veil on the lifeworld that is motherhood, the lifeworld that has for the entirety of human history been kept hidden behind the walls of privacy and modesty and decorum, the lifeworld that has so long been kept at a remove from the public sphere and from public discourse,” then she wants to “claim the mantle mommy blogger and own it and wave it proudly” (“I am Mommy Blogger, Hear Me Roar,” September 30, 2011, <http://herbadmother.com/2011/09/i-am-mommy-blogger-hear-me-roar/>)

Besides having to always be on the defensive about one’s “mommy-ness” and the right to blog, the mommy blog genre is further set apart, as noted by Aimee Morrison (2010) by the following parameters: “self-deprecating stories about parenthood, cute stories about children, musings on what it means to mother in contemporary society, [and] calls for advice or support in solving parenting or other dilemmas.” These parameters are approached in a variety of creative ways, often ironically performing them as they in turn reference such guideposts. For example, part of blogging like a mother entails sticking to a recognizable script of maternal ambivalence and touching on an expected sense of loss that supposedly accompanies motherhood. Mothers present blogging as a way to compensate for such losses and ambivalence. The blogger Tracy Morrison, also know as “Sellabit” mum, exemplifies this rhetorical deployment of loss and compensation via blogging, in the following post to her daughters:

Because sometimes I don’t have anyone to talk to [but] you. No one tells you how lonely motherhood can be, but through writing I can communicate— -even if it’s just to myself and feel like I’ve said something today even though no words were spoken. . . . 3.  
Because there are amazing people out there that I can connect with on the Internets. We use our blogs and social media to form playgroups of our own and I’ve made lifelong

friends (“Dear Daughters, Why I Blog,” November 27, 2012  
<http://sellabitmum.com/2012/11/27/dear-daughters-why-i-blog/>).

As much as mothers deploy mommy references to in their URLs and in the stylistic choices for their blog layouts, they also deploy common tropes of motherhood as a non-identity or as a less than complete subjective position. The use of such metaphors helps signal and connect to sympathetic others in blogland.

The posts that reflect on what it means to be a mommy blogger highlight how technology has seeped into and is reconfiguring motherhood, and how the Internet provides a community for mothers who have previously been isolated in the home. A commenter on the *Motherload* blog explains:

I love getting comments on my writing and commenting on others’ pieces. It feels like I have a crew of colleagues rather than being isolated in my house all day. The first time I was a stay-at-home mom, I felt lonely and longed for the camaraderie of a work environment. Now that I’m at it again, I feel like I have that camaraderie. These women I read are part of my life. It’s definitely modern, and it’s definitely saving my sanity. ((Comment on “Queens of the Mom Blog Kingdom,” February 23, 2022.  
<http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/23/queens-of-the-mom-blog-kingdom/>).

Such commentary highlights how technology eases (and eases into) this unknown, often socially isolating experience of mothering, and the private, separated spaces of the home. The above post also illustrates the workings of emotional labor through networks. This affectivity is seen through the importance bloggers place on their blogs and blog communities; they write that mommy blogs have changed their lives, helped them find friendship and intimacy, made them laugh at the difficulties and joys of motherhood, and even come to feel like a member of the family.

### *Media Definitions and Reception*

Starting with a brief look at the label “mommy blogging” reveals the stormy politics within this genre, both from the writers within it and especially from those on the outside. The titles alone of the articles in established media that have covered women’s blogging reveal a sexist reception: “Does Anyone Really Take Mommy Bloggers Seriously?” (Ty Kiisel, Forbes, December 21, 2011), “Mommy Blogs: What Are They, and How Much Do They Matter?” (Janice D’Arcy, Washington Post, January 30, 2012), and “The Mommy Business Trip” (Katherine Rosman, Wall Street Journal, April 24, 2013). Five years after the infamous article “Mommy (and Me)” (David Hochman, New York Times, January 30, 2005), the New York Times once again enraged blogging mothers with a piece entitled “Honey, Don’t Bother Mommy. I’m Too Busy Building My Brand” by Jennifer Mendelsohn (March 12, 2010). In it, Mendelsohn chronicles the conference, “Bloggy Boot Camp,” for women who blog, and discusses the ways mothers are coming to terms with the possibilities of finding a cultural and economic presence through blogging.

Mommy bloggers’ reactions and critiques of this piece exemplify the viral movement of mood, energy and subjectivity made possible by blogging. Mommy bloggers swiftly responded to what they felt was a condescending tone in the article that degraded their writing and professional abilities. Liz Gumbinner of *Mom-101* posted a critique concerning the scope and focus of the article writing:

According to Sunday’s style section in the New York Times, moms shouldn’t be working. At least if you look at the article called Honey Don’t Bother Mommy. I’m Too Busy Building My Brand.

In the piece, she describes a conference called Bloggy Boot Camp that I don’t know much about: The topics on that day’s agenda included search-engine optimization, building a “comment tribe” and how to create an effective media kit. There would be much talk of defining your “brand” and driving up page views.

I know I wasn't there and all, but here I'm wondering—how is the agenda here any different than that at any tech conference anywhere, and why does that warrant a mention in the Times?

Oh wait . . . because moms were there.

And we're supposed to be home with our younguns suckling at our teats while we try in earnest to get our whites whiter, our pancakes fluffier, and our menfolk happier. (Liz Gumbinner, "Don't Bother Mommy. I'm Writing a Mildly Annoyed Letter to the New York Times," March 14, 2011, <http://www.mom-101.com/2010/03/honey-dont-bother-mommy-im-writing.html>).

Annie, of the blog *PhD in Parenting* noted that a publication such as the New York Times does not have the latitude to dismiss subjects in the same way self-published bloggers do.

She writes:

So when Jennifer Mendelsohn wrote an article peppered with mommy stereotypes in a tone that seemed to belittle the work of mom bloggers (although I hope and suspect that isn't what she intended to do), it is no wonder that there was a rash of protest. Every writer chooses the wrong words sometimes. I know I do. But I don't have an editing team to catch me before things go public. The New York Times does and this article should not have been printed without some significant revisions (Annie, "Does the World See Moms the Same Way the New York Times Does?" March 15, 2010 <http://www.phdinparenting.com/blog/2010/3/15/does-the-world-see-moms-the-same-way-the-new-york-times-does.html>).

Many of the readers of *Mom-101* responded (297 responses), venting their frustrations at the piece as well. Two responses in particular capture the frustrations of mommy bloggers and also express the importance of blogging. The commenter "Amelia Sprout" responds:

I would say I am shocked, but nope, I've come to expect it.

Men have conferences for hunting, fishing, RV's, sports, etc. There are home and garden shows, women's shows, food & wine shows, scrap booking, stamping, etc. All of these have multiple incarnations in cities around the country. They get 6 PM evening news coverage.

However, women use technology to write, connect, and yes, even make money, and this is how it gets treated.

Reactions to the tone and treatment of mommy bloggers in the Times piece spread throughout the mommy blog network quickly, highlighting just how wired mothers are.

Added to such criticism of mommy blogs is a suspicion of such bloggers' "mothering": What mother would be so enmeshed with strangers and technology instead of her children? What mother would invade her family's privacy for profit? Rebecca Woolf of *Girls Gone Child* summarizes (and mocks) such critiques here:

As we all know, there have been many occasions where we as a community have been called out for "exploiting our kids" because we choose to write about OUR experiences with them. Because they happen to be part of our stories, our lives. ("Censorship and the Blog," January 16, 2009 <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2009/01/censorship-and-blog.html>).

Commenting on a post on the *New York Times* blog, *Motherload*, a reader going by the name "Bob Lob" articulates disdain for mothers who blog:

I have a one-year old, and 90% of my free time is taken up by cleaning, catching up on work at home, or trying to sleep. On the weekend, it's constant activities and play time. Yet, I always read about these blogs in which mothers write endlessly about how little time they have or are overwhelmed. How do they have the time to construct such rants when they're taking care of a baby?? Is it when their partners take over? And if so, why do they waste that precious free time writing on a blog? (Comment on "Queens of the Mom Blog Kingdom," February 23, 2011. <http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/23/queens-of-the-mom-blog-kingdom/>).

Getting past the fact that this commenter had enough "precious free time" to comment on the article, the disdain expressed exemplifies a cultural aversion to the intrusion of technology between the mother and child. Commenter "Heather" captures this sentiment in the following comment:

I think writing about one's children is exploitative. Secondly, I'd much prefer mothers and women become successful because of actual achievements, not because of some amusing dribble they wrote on their blog. In my opinion, this isn't something to be admired and aspire to. . . . Also, why so much reference to the use of anti-depressants? Perhaps some of these women and men need to get off their computers and start living

their lives (Comment on “Queens of the Mom Blog Kingdom,” February 23, 2022. <http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/23/queens-of-the-mom-blog-kingdom/>).

Dean argues that the vitriol against blogging in general results from an anxiety about enjoyment: socially we feel that if it “were not for the bloggers” then “we would enjoy” ourselves or, at the least, “we’d be spending time with our family, not chatting with strangers on blogs” (Dean 2010:92). The following comment from “LE” on a post on the *Motherload* blog supports Dean’s argument:

I used to read mommy blogs but stopped because I realized I was getting distracted by the drama of people I don’t even know. I don’t want to miss precious moments with my little ones because I’m too busy reading about someone else’s child (Comment on “Queens of the Mom Blog Kingdom,” February 23, 2022. <http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/23/queens-of-the-mom-blog-kingdom/>).

Dean (2010:95) suggests that blogs “circulate affect as a binding technique,” meaning every time we read, comment, post, link, or participate in social media, we add “a little surplus enjoyment” to the flow of mediated sociality, where enjoyment fuels an economy of affects. Yet because of the quick pace and infinite scope of the blogosphere and the Internet, this smidgeon of enjoyment quickly fades away, compelling more participation. Mommy bloggers compound this anxiety since they not only “take” our enjoyment and keep us distracted from our families, but compel us to continue finding enjoyment online, in front of a screen and, seemingly, away from our children. The only acceptable enjoyment for mothers under our cultural reign of attachment parenting comes from the attached baby itself. The mommy blogger subjectivity is a figure attached to, caring for, and enjoying the wrong baby.

## BLOGGING AS LABOR: GRATITUDE, APOLOGIES, AND ESTRANGEMENT

### *The Work of Love: Care and Gratitude*

As mommy bloggers tell it, however, neither motherhood nor blogging are always easy and effortless. Instead of framing blogging as a daily grind, mothers situate blogging as a therapeutic or artistic endeavor, or as a way to be social. A post by the blogger named “Cindafuckingrella” captures this reframing of blogging-as-labor to blogging-as-therapy:

For some time now, I’ve had a bit of a blogging crisis. It’s not going as I had hoped. I’m neither as creative nor funny as I thought I’d be and my really good posts are few and far between. I am repeating myself and my texts lack originality. When it is going really good, I get an idea and everything just kind of writes itself. Other times, I have to pinch it out . . .

Nonetheless, sometimes I go through the archives and I realize that tiny as this thing is; it IS something. I am proud of it. It is a body of work. More than two years of blood, sweat and tears—right there for the world to ignore.

In short: I am sharing my life. And it just feels good. (Cindafuckingrella, “Why Blog?” May 15, 2013, <http://www.cindafuckingrella.com/?p=4578>).

Cinderfuckingrella does not consider her writer’s block a labor issue, even as she references the difficulty in producing content and the impressive archive she has created through “blood, sweat, and tears.” Posting one’s emotions and expressing intimacy with other bloggers, readers, and audience members is considered something that “feels good” and experiencing this sentiment acts as payment itself. Mary Fischer of *Mommyologist* captures the intersection of labor, blogging, motherhood and remuneration in the following post:

They say that if you are doing something you love, you will never work a day in your life again. And that is how I feel about this blog. Even if I won hundreds of millions of dollars, I’d still want to log onto my computer and write every single day. And I’d still continue to grow and develop.

I guess that blogging and being a mom pretty much go hand in hand, because both of these things are my full-time jobs that I don’t get paid for. Well, at least I don’t get paid

in CASH. My son pays me everyday in cuddles and kisses, and unconditional love, and you really just can't put a price on that. And this blog? It pays me in ways that I never could have imagined, with the connections I've made with other bloggers being the highest reward, along with the satisfaction of knowing that I've made people laugh or feel better about themselves. Once again, totally priceless. (Mary Fischer, "Six Months of Blogging Wisdom," April 23, 2010, <http://www.mommyologist.com/2010/04/six-months-of-blog-wisdom/>)

Bloggng too much about the labor of bloggng goes against the genre as much as framing motherhood as labor is untrue to certain dimensions of the experience—something about both bloggng and motherhood exceeds a straight-up labor analysis. Like the above quote, the labor of both is a mixture of inspiration, desire, and pleasure as well as hard labor, "right there for the world to ignore."

Glossng such digital labor and conflating it with motherhood, the blogs create a homey feel and position themselves as above strictly market considerations. A post by Jill Smokler of *Scarymommy* demonstrates that the author considers her blog and audience to be a member of the family:

Three years ago today, I sat down at my computer and started a blog.

I had no expectations, and being Queen of Starting Things And Not Following Through, I was pretty confident that it would be just another experiment to end up in my project graveyard. A baby book of sorts, it was intended to be. A way to keep track of Evan's early days and his growing siblings. A place to update friends and family with pictures and cute stories of the kids. That was it.

I had no idea what I was getting into. Three years later, and this little experiment has become an enormous part of who I am. It's my solace, my community and my fourth baby. It's found me friends and jobs and opportunities I couldn't have imagined. But, mostly, it's served as that baby book for all of my kids. The best baby book I could possibly give them. Thank you all for being part of the ride. It wouldn't be the same without you ("Three Years," March 9, 2011, <http://www.scarymommy.com/three-years/>).

While such "shout-outs," or acknowledgments of readers highlight the social connectivity created by blogs, they also stress the importance of the "users" in the digital world. As pointed

out by Terranova (2004), the labor of using websites should not be forgotten because it is that very use that makes the site valuable: users create use-value. As a counterbalance to the gendered focus on the “open-source movement” as the prime example of free digital labor, Terranova focuses on users’ labor. She notes that “writing an operating system is still more worthy of attention than just chatting for free for AOL. . . . [and that] the open-source movement has drawn much more positive attention than the more diffuse user-labour” (Terranova 2004:92).

Advertisers pay money to access networks of users, not to mention the data such networks of diffuse users generate. “Diffuse user-labor” not only provides an emotional support and connectivity for mothers, it also keeps their blogging enterprises afloat. The success and power of the mommy blogs comes from their digital deployment of emotional labor.

As the passages quoted above highlight, mommy bloggers take in to account and validate the feelings of their readers. Mommy blogs maintain such loyal readership because they extend and embody, in part, the most central symbol and metaphor of care—the family itself (Arendell 2000:1194). Beyond conveying care and concern for their readers, mommy bloggers mitigate a cultural unease about blogging motherhood by deploying the metaphors and tone of the “good mother” in their blogs (even if their descriptions of mothering are more fraught with ambivalence). They practice and emphasize noncompetition: a regular feature of the mommy blog is to direct readers to other mommy blogs, which drives up their “traffic” or page views. Granju describes this practice of linking to other blogs as “how it works” for mommy bloggers: “We depend on one another, and we like it that way” (“How Much Do Top “Mommy Bloggers Earn from their Blogs, and is it enough?” March 31, 2011, <http://www.babble.com/mom/how-much-do-top-mommybloggers-earn-from-their-blogs-and-is-it-enough/>). Katherine Stone

performs this caring mother subjectivity in her post where she takes the higher ground regarding blogging contests:

Honestly, I cannot let myself be tricked into thinking that if I give up rest, or down time, or time when I'm not social media-ing myself to death I'll somehow become rich and famous. I just want to talk to you, the person reading this right now. I like you and want to know you and am so glad you are here. That's what matters to me.

I love blogging. I love bloggers. I love social media people. I love the internet. I love what we are able to do, that our words can stretch across thousands of miles to make someone else feel understood and supported. I love that we are able to use our voices, and that no one can take that away from us. That's amazing. ("On Blogging Popularity Contests and Why I Quit." May 26, 2011, <http://www.postpartumprogress.com/on-blogging-popularity-contests-why-i-quit>)

Again, by focusing on the reader and community, these blogs strike a mothering tone, assuring readers that they will not use them for page views or hits, and their associated advertising income, or other gross measures of success. Success is seen as a by-product of authenticity and honesty, and anything less jeopardizes one's mom-ness.

### *Absences, Apologies, and Money*

Indirectly, mothers blog about the work of blogging and maintaining an online community. One way they communicate the work of blogging is through an "apology post": when they have not been keeping their blog updated, or anticipate being unable to blog, bloggers give readers warning and offer emotional support. Such posts are as much a business strategy to engage readers and keep them returning as they are heartfelt apologies. Rebecca Woolf of *Girl's Gone Child* announces her planned absence through self-deprecation:

I need a break so I am getting one. For the next week I'm going to stay away from this blog because when I don't post I feel horrible guilt and that's just stupid. I'm flattering myself to even think that people give a damn if I miss a day or two.

Thank you for understanding that mama needs a vacation. (“Ready? Break!” March 5, 2007, <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2007/03/ready-break.html>)

By situating blogging as a labor of love, a labor that occur outside of a waged workplace, mothers who blog must carefully justify time off. Woolf, writing a few months later, discusses another needed break and the “existential crisis” motivating it:

There is a good explanation for my MIA status in the days to come (and days past) and my apologies in advance for posting less frequently. I try to post as often as I can but right now it’s just too much—I’m pooped on the subject matter frankly and exhausted with writing about myself.

I’ll spare you the details of my minor existential crisis and say this: I’m dead tired. I love blogging. I’m not going to quit blogging but I need a break, or a collection of mini-breaks.

As it stands now, I can’t even write my name without bursting into tears. And poor Archer can’t even say, “Hi!” without me racing to my computer to compose a post about it. This is not good. This is not healthy. This is turning me into a narcissist and if I don’t nip it in the bud right now, or at the very least, trim the hedges a bit, we’re all fucked.

This isn’t an end. This is a break—like in a relationship when you kind of want to be single but the sex is too good to call off the relationship completely. I could never leave this blog, but I would like to spend some time writing about other things for a little while. At least sporadically . . . (“Putting the Dead in Deadlines, July, 11 2007, <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2007/07/putting-dead-in-deadlines.html>)

As recent critiques of the term “hyperemployment” stress, digital labor is feminized in that it is unpaid, unregulated, never ending, and often necessary to smooth social interactions (Robin James 2013, Karen Gregory 2013, Gordon Hull 2013). Like motherhood, there is no clear time off from digital networks and platforms. Thus, a recurring feature of the apology post is that the blog author expresses that she cares for her followers, her audience, and will not leave them hanging. A good mommy blogger announces her absence in advance, reassuring readers she will return, or apologizes for her absence and promises forthcoming content. Apologies for absences highlight the contract a blogger makes with her audience—a contract in the guise of care,

presence, intimacy, and friendship. Often times mommy bloggers justify absences with the work of mothering. Fischer places the work of motherhood before the work of blogging, all while reassuring readers that they are a close second:

My son is my absolute highest priority in my life, and sometimes that means that building Lego “space vehicles” just has to take precedent over blog hopping and tweeting. And I know that I haven’t been as good about reading other blogs and returning comments these days, but as my blog has grown, so has my workload, and sometimes I just find it impossible to write good content, answer emails, keep up with tweets, and still give my son all of the attention that he so rightly deserves all at the same time.

I love my readers. I love my bloggy friends. And I hope you all know just how much I appreciate you taking a few minutes out of your day to check in and see what The Mommyologist has to say. This blog would be nothing without you. (Mary Fischer, “Six Months of Blogging Wisdom,” April 23, 2010, <http://www.mommyologist.com/2010/04/six-months-of-blog-wisdom/>).

### *Monetizing Motherhood: Negotiating Success*

Blogging like a mother brings baggage with regards to earning money. Mommy bloggers address the topic of money periodically, and express a difficulty stating actual numbers. Part of the unease with discussing money results from the long history of motherhood being situated as endeavor motivated by love and outside of the labor-wage system. As feminists are aware, bringing discussions of money or value back into the framework counters powerful discursive histories of motherhood as the most pure labor of love. The lure of making money as a blogger feeds the “new mom dream” that one can work from home, flexibly, simultaneously making money and being there for the kids. McCoy, the blogger of *bleu bird blog*, takes time from her usual blogging to remind readers that this is her work:

my point is that i have grown. i have evolved. my interests have changed over the years. when i started this blog i was 28 and a single mother of two children that i had in my early twenties. i am now 33, am remarried and have had two more children in my early thirties.

this means that i have to have some sort of incentive to come here and blog day after day, because as much as i love this space and love taking the time to share my thoughts and experiences with all of you, it takes a lot of time. this means that i work with sponsors and take opportunities that come my way so that i can continue to stay home with my kids and continue this blog. that does not mean that i will only blog when i am paid to blog. that does not mean that i say “yes” to everyone that wants to work with me. in fact it’s quite the opposite, i try to only work with brands that fit my aesthetic. i have integrity. i do not blast my pages with giant ads for “this giant corporation” and when doing sponsored posts i maintain creative control. the posts are never full of giant logos and paragraph after paragraph of product descriptions. not that there’s anything wrong with that. i turn down way more than i take on because this blog is important to me. you guys are important to me and i want to keep this space a place that i can be proud of. i will continue to blog the way i love and to do my best to try and keep my readers happy.

i am writing this in hopes that some of you will understand why i blog and also why i take on occasional sponsored posts and advertisements. (“Some Thoughts on Blogging” December 20, 2012. <http://bleubirdvintage.typepad.com/blog/2012/12/some-thoughts-on-blogging.html>)

She goes to great lengths to reiterate her dedication to her children and to her readers. But she also makes clear that she blogs for enough money to support her family.

If any one mommy blogger hovers in the minds of the millions, it would be Heather Armstrong of *dooce*. Known as the “queen of mommy blogging” she makes hundreds of thousands of dollars a year from blogging. She began *dooce* before becoming a mother but saw her page views skyrocket as she chronicled her experience with postpartum depression after the birth of her first child. Armstrong routinely credits the blog for “saving her life” during this time. Her success from her blog laid the groundwork for millions of mothers to follow suit.

Connors, another successful and self-sufficient blogger, frequently encourages mothers and bloggers to discuss and monetize their work. She wrote a piece for the *Globe and Mail* that outlines ways to make money, instructing readers how to “monetize” blogging. Included in her outline are the following practices: identifying your niche, creating good content, displaying ads, finding affiliate marketing, including sponsored content and content integration, selling ad space, marketing your services, and marketing yourself as a technology consultant. Advertisers are

interested in the amount of traffic a blog receives, or how many page visits it gets per day, month, or year. The more visits, the more lucrative the blog. One common way bloggers increase their traffic is to comment on another mothers' posts and leave their own blog address, like an electronic signature. Scrolling through any of the big bloggers' comment sections will reveal numerous links to different blogs. Further, the more famous and influential bloggers such as Armstrong and Connors also make money speaking at events. Many bloggers are hired by corporations based on the work they do on the blog. Woolf has a show on HGTV, "Childstyle," because of her blog. Others have landed book deals, such as Bradley of the blog Finslippy ([www.finslippy.com](http://www.finslippy.com)). Yet, as reported in Quman, 69 percent of bloggers that incorporate ads earn less than \$20 per month (Lawrence 2009:132). Mommy bloggers control about a three trillion dollar market; and yet many blog about products for free, for samples, or very cheaply (Lawrence 2009:132).

Some mommy bloggers are skeptical of the combination of money and blogging. As Jen Lawrence (2009) points out, the practice of leaving a link to one's blog in the comment section of another person's blog changes the dynamic. She writes, "over time, I started to notice people leaving less-than-sincere comments on my blog simply to advertise their own blog's url. The comments field, once a place of conversation, had become a subtle method of advertising" (2009:137). Lawrence found that the more marketers found her blog, the more she viewed it as a business and the less radical the medium became. She edited herself and steered clear of some topics.

The ambivalence toward monetizing one's blog revolves around the content and genre constraints of the mommy blog itself. These blogs provide a space for mothers to be mothered, and to be mothering. They cover serious, intimate topics: sexuality, abuse, divorce, body issues,

ad infinitum. Such intimacy can backfire and sometimes bloggers cross a line, as when the blogger Kate Tietje wrote a post about how she loves one of her children a little more than the other (“Mom Confession: I think I Love My Son a Little Bit More,” March 15, 2011, <http://www.babble.com/pregnancy/mom-confession-i-think-i-love-my-son-a-little-bit-more/>). The network of mommy bloggers and their readers, again, exploded with comments and blog posts that either refuted sibling preference or defended Tietje’s honesty. Babble.com, where the original post was published, had to close the comment section and Tietje wrote a follow up/apology post the next day. While Tietje may have crossed a line, her boundary crossing encouraged was definitely good for bloggers, page views, and profiles.

The digital world of labor presents unique challenges to corporations and traditional models of production and consumption as users create, distribute, and profit from their content. It is also worth considering that these bloggers not only labor in and for the economy, they also experience an alienation unique to such work.

### *Digital Estrangement*

The theory of estrangement is important in this analysis because mommy bloggers themselves frequently post about the weirdness (or, in sociological terms, the alienation) that results from blogging one’s life. Mommy bloggers offer a unique case to understand the estrangement from digital labor because they bring one of our most private and culturally sacred relationships (motherhood) to the market.

The sentiments expressed lend themselves to interpretation through Marxist theories of estrangement. Explaining estrangement and alienation within an industrial, capitalist system, Marx found that labor alienates workers from what they do and make, and from who they are. In

this logic, leisure time, becomes the space to recuperate all that is lost while on the clock. Such recuperation occurred in the separate, private sphere of the home. Such a position overlooks how the home has always been a workplace for women who have not had a non-work space in which to recuperate from exploitation and labor. The tendency of capital, however, is to pull time, space, and life into productivity, so that eventually this leisure time and home space gets pulled into circuits of capital as well.

In the postindustrial economy, the distinction between work time and leisure time or public and private space has all but vanished. Where or what is alienation in a postindustrial economy? Can we say that affective work estranges us too? Or, is there a true self to recuperate when no private space for it exists? Some sociologists have been mapping out postindustrial alienation, and argue that immaterial labor, emotional labor, or any type of service labor that requires the worker to deploy her personality and emotionality to do her job potentially alienate the worker from her (inner) self more severely than might a 12-hour shift on a factory line. Kathi Weeks (2007) traces the concern about alienation and immaterial labor to C. W. Mills and Arlie Hochschild who both suggest that when personality, emotion, and affect become the necessary skills of labor (because they are the source of profit) then the demand on workers to deploy and standardize their feelings exhausts them psychically.

Mommy bloggers write about such alienation through a quieter discourse that floats through many posts concerning the role of their blog in their lives. Often this unease appears when a blogger discusses when she will stop writing about her child, or how her perception shifts when writing about her life and the effect that shift has on living it. Mommy bloggers express an ambivalent attachment to blogging, and an alienation unique to digital life. A post at *Girl Gone Child* captures this sentiment:

For instance: I've been very stressed out lately c/o much work + little time, family + career = what happens when writing about your family is your career + my life is a series of events I am more concerned with recording than experiencing + what am I doing and why am I doing it. ("Random. So Random. Random Town," August 20, 2010, <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2010/08/random-so-random-random-town.html>).

Another post points specifically to an alienation from the self:

I am sick to death of hearing myself type "me" and "my" and "us" and I need a vacation... from... my... self... or something. Because, this is not healthy and I have exposed myself to the point of wtf. No one wants to see a nudist naked because .... it's redundant and I'm feeling a little like a naked nudist these days ("Random. So Random. Random Town," August 20, 2010, <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2010/08/random-so-random-random-random-town.html>).

All of this is to suggest that the self of the affective economy is made through work— instead of lost there. In other words, affective economies find value in subjectivity itself, including states of alienation, thereby collapsing the boundary between a true and an alienated self. The self is the site of labor. The following quote from Connors, taken from her post about a list of life lessons learned, exemplifies the productivity of alienation:

4.) Your job is not your life / you are not your job.

We were on a Disney cruise, and I am – as we say – a 'Cast Member' of the Walt Disney Company. But I didn't tell anyone, not even in passing. I didn't talk about my work – as EIC at Disney Interactive, or as the author of this blog – once. I took that cruise as a guest; I was there as me, Catherine, wife/mother/vacationer, and not as an executive or as a writer or as an [sic] digital media 'brand.' I was just me. Which was a little disorienting in some early moments – I'm so accustomed to comporting myself within the context of one of my professional identities that it was difficult to not posture, to not frame the experience according to the lights of media sharing – but I adapted, and came to love it. Being me meant doing what I wanted, and not what would produce the best photos or anecdotes; being me meant not framing every experience with the context of a narrative (which is not to say that I don't still think that 'narrating' one's experiences don't [sic] add a layer of richness, just that it was liberating to not do it, for a while. And being me meant just being Emilia and Jasper's mom, and Kyle's wife, and that woman over there with the book, enjoying her solitude, because goddamn it can be nice to just be by one's self sometimes.

5.) Damn, it's nice to be by one's self sometimes. Like, really. ("Seven Things I Learned on My Winter Vacation," January, 11 2013, <http://herbadmother.com/2013/01/seven-things-i-learned-on-my-winter-vacation/#comments>)

Her respite from "framing every experience with the context of a narrative" is itself reframed as a narrative and brought back into circulation. She makes a self to both lose and then find, and does this online. Even aloneness and respite, when posted, shared, and circulated, are part of the economy—thus, just like production and consumption, inner self and outer self lose distinction. Woolf too struggles to cut herself off:

Honestly, I just need some time NOT to reflect publicly... I need some me time, yo. So I'm giving myself a week or so to put my hands over my head and submit to silence.

And who knows? Maybe something really awesome and inspiring will happen in Austin. Maybe something I won't be able to wait to blog about! But nice try, self, I'm not gonna. Because I think I might have a problem with announcing myself to the world. And I shouldn't want to blog about everything. ("Ready? Break!" March 5, 2007, <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2007/03/ready-break.html>).

These passages highlight the recalibration necessary to get back to one's so-called unmediated self even if this recalibration repeatedly occurs online. A version of the "self" is formed and found through social networks (and there may be numerous versions of the self depending on the network, a Pinterest self as compared to a twitter self). Mommy bloggers, especially those with a modicum of success, also highlight how completely work and life feed back and blur into each other. Woolf, inadvertently, provides an accurate definition of affective labor in her description of what happens when "your life becomes your living":

This last week was one of the most clarifying weeks of my life and for the first time in a long time spent the week without thinking about what I have to "post about" tomorrow. It's addicting, this blog. Twitter. Checking Facebook. Sharing information. I realized just how addicting it was when I had to physically pull myself away daily... When every time something funny or clever or interesting entered my head I automatically went to tweet it—and then... smacked myself in the face. I'll say this: When your life becomes your living, it's impossible to know where to draw the lines. For better or for worse, this blog

is so much more than what I do, it's who I am ("Ten Items or Less," August 27, 2010, <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2010/08/ten-items-or-less.html>)

## CONCLUSION: ALWAYS ALREADY CAPITAL

The alienation from one's self about which bloggers imagine and write, points to a form of subjectivity that results as much from technology and politics as it does from larger economic structures. Specifically, the spread of neoliberalism has left its mark in most corners of the world, and also the affected the subjects that inhabit them. Michel Feher (2009) theorizes this neoliberal subject—the subject encouraged and governed within neoliberal economies. He argues that the liberal distinction between a rational, calculating sphere and the sphere of love, reproduction, and regeneration has collapsed within neoliberal regimes. Citing Foucault, Angela Mitropoulos argues that “human capital dissolves class struggle by making everyone a capitalist” (2012:47). That is to say, the categories of capital and labor have collapsed bringing even the production of the self to the market. Every sphere of life is mined for value or experiences that appreciate (create value for) the subject. The defining feature of neoliberalism, then, is a new subject, one who is “human capital” (Feher 2009:24). “Human capital” is defined by Feher as:

[T]he things I inherit, the things that happen to me, and the things I do all contribute to the maintenance or the deterioration of my human capital. . . . [I]t now refers to all that is produced by the skill set that defines me. Such that everything I earn—be it salary, returns on investments, booty, or favors I may have incurred—can be understood as the return on the human capital that constitutes me. (2009:26)

Importantly, neoliberal subjects must invest in themselves to appreciate in value and cash in on self-esteem, while constantly attempting to “ward off the depreciation of their human capital” (Feher 2009:39). For Feher, the problem endemic to neoliberalism is that no one knows what creates and leads to self-appreciation and what causes depreciation because markets, and

life, are unregulated, uncontrolled, and unprotected. Everything trembles. The subject has to bet against unknown odds at all times, and consider everything against the undefined measure of increasing or decreasing self-appreciation.

This neoliberal subject of human capital is the voice of the mommy blogs; their main concern, borrowing from Feher, can be read as the struggle to make motherhood a self-appreciating endeavor. Such an endeavor—to find and gain value in motherhood—is problematic because motherhood is devalued by both economic and cultural forces but can create value online. Blogging about the experience offers a way for new mothers to cobble together self-appreciation (and esteem) in terms of page views, links, blog rolls and new, online friends. Blogging provides a way to “invest” in themselves and a place for the possible appreciation of their human capital.

As a perfect example of finding value in the devalued, appreciating the depreciated, Heather Armstrong created a separate mommy blog to house all of her hate (e)mail, trolling comments, and general disgust aimed at her blog, *dooce*. Her hate blog, titled *Monetizing the Hate* is filled with gawdy ads, and a displeasing design. She describes the project here:

people are sending me messages going, dude, do you see what is being said about you over here and over here? Oh, and right there in your comments section? And I'm all, no, but I can guess. Is it something about the way I look? My chin perhaps? The mole in the middle of my forehead? Is it about what I'm wearing, how unflattering it is? Or how I'm an awful mother? Or how I'm exploiting my children for money? Or how I love Marlo more than I love Leta? Or how my husband must be gay? Because it's all been said. Every awful thing you can say about a human being, it's been said about me and my family. Over and over again, like a broken record,

And I'm like, you know what? I'm going to let that anonymous comment help pay for the therapy that Leta is so desperately going to need once she finds out what awful things I've said about her on my website.

Internet, let me introduce you to Monetizing The Hate.

Here I will be posting all the hate mail I get in my inbox and all the hateful anonymous and not-so-anonymous comments left on this website. And let me tell you, it is a hoot! And the money? OH THE MONEY! I am going to roll around naked in all that money! Because that's what assholes do! ("Your Momma Said You Ugly," September 16, 2009, <http://dooce.com/2009/09/16/your-momma-said-you-ugly/>)

Armstrong's hate blog further showcases the business savvy of many "mommies"—the moniker itself distracts from the seriousness of their writing as well as their digital know-how and marketing expertise. While mommy bloggers lift the "veil" on the experience of motherhood, they simultaneously veil their technical and digital expertise under the symbol and genre of motherhood.

The radicalness of exposing motherhood, home, and the private sphere is stripped of its force in a neoliberal economy because there is no separate, private, nonmarket sphere. All of it—inner life, the home, sibling preferences, and hate, finds circulation and value. Any experience, no matter how deprecated, can find appreciation. Mommy bloggers are radical because they expose the neoliberal subject, the subject whose "life is a strategy at self appreciation" and who has no separate sphere, as her liberal counterpart did, to recuperate meaning (Feher 2009:28). By blogging motherhood, our most revered and private institution, mothers expose how everything, now, can be worked, monetized, tweeted, and blogged. Nothing is sacred, or free from monetization. Even a mother's love, even the hate.

## CHAPTER 3

### BODIES OF MOTHERS, BODIES OF BLOGGERS

“Communicative technologies and biotechnologies are crucial tools recrafting our bodies.”

Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*

#### OUR BODIES, OUR BLOGS

The feminist philosopher Sarah Ruddick (2009:29) suggests that those studying motherhood should “listen for the language—the words, symbols, colours—that might richly represent embodiment,” insinuating that maternal embodiment is buried and difficult to articulate. As I explain here, maternal embodiment, from the mothers point of view, has been parochial and out of cultural circulation writ large and required stealth methods for its recovery. All of this has changed with user-produced, digital technology. On the blogs, maternal embodiment is far from buried under flowery language or metaphor; mothers carefully, humorously, and therapeutically detail the physical changes brought on by maternity. Cacophonous posts about skin, fat, milk, tears, breastfeeding, sexuality, motherhood, aging, and every imaginable body part, surface so frequently that negotiating the body is a thematic pillar of the genre itself.

For example, Catherine Connors (2006) sums up the simple fact that when pregnant, “you are *body*, beholden to Nature. And you just have to, for the most part, suck it up.” This

“sucking it up” reportedly begins with a Google search, and is then crowd-sourced through posting pictures and comments, telling stories, and narrativizing bodily changes. As bloggers tell it, maternal bodily changes precipitate changes in status, esteem, and identity. Blogging the maternal body not only tracks the shifting boundaries of the body, it also leads many bloggers and their readers into realms of feminist politics asking why, exactly, maternity as a unique state of being “beholden to nature” has been silenced and sanitized. Or, in the words of the blogger Andie Fox (2010), what is the “terrifying softness of motherhood”?

Maternal embodiment, the physical process of becoming a mother, finds its medium, finally, after hundreds of years of silencing by patriarchal culture (which presented motherhood, from the perspective of men, as holy, pure, virginal) online. Through digital platforms and networks, mothers tell their side of the story, represent themselves, and rewrite maternity. I argue here, however, that any revolutionary celebration should be paused as the medium through which women construct maternity is the latest iteration of capital production/machinery, the very system that supported the heretofore silencing and sanitizing of maternity, effectively keeping it in the realm of “terrifying.”

In fact, the intractability of the maternal body is its value as it provides endless material for digital platforms: over the course of my study, numerous websites emerged that are exclusively dedicated to photographing and narrating the maternal body. One website, *The Shape of a Mother* ([www.theshapeofamother.com](http://www.theshapeofamother.com)), is devoted entirely to user-submitted body narratives and pictures of readers’ bodies in various states and stages of motherhood; the founder of the site explains: “It occurred to me that a post-pregnancy body is one of this society’s greatest secrets.” I witnessed this niche of the mommy blog world boom—exposing the secret of maternal embodiment commands large audiences. For instance, *A Beautiful Body Project*, *The*

*Fourth Trimester Bodies Project*, and *Umbilical Self Portrait* are sites that, while created, curated, or hosted by professional photographers and artists, are filled with readers' contributions of pictures, stories, and comments. All of these projects focus on capturing the so-called real maternal body (the non-Hollywood-airbrushed-celebrity-broadcast-media-made body) and the unedited experience of motherhood. The ability to pass on the 'secret' of maternal embodiment rests on digital technology and the abilities of users (in this case, mothers) to provide the content.

This chapter situates the mother-led project of reconfiguring maternal embodiment within the larger cultural and technological field, saturated in neoliberal ideologies and policies. First, I consider how women's bodies discursively circulate in the industrial era and the feminist politics that emerged alongside this technological period. Next, I briefly discuss how post industrial regimes both amplify and alter the mediated, modernist gender construction and the feminist politics that are currently shaping up around digital technology. I then hone in on bloggers' articulations of maternity, gender, and the body. Understanding how women's bodies discursively circulate through different technological systems highlights the entwinement of technology, embodiment, and discourse, showcasing how problematic, if not impossible, it is to think of bodies as outside of their technological milieu.

## INDUSTRIAL BODIES AND THE FEMINIST STRATEGY OF RESISTANCE:

### DISEMBODY

In his genealogy of disciplinary regimes, Foucault (1976, 2010) addressed the ways bodies have been deployed to reproduce the state, and state power. He infamously focused on the pre-modern to modern era that employed disciplinary strategies aimed at creating and containing both individual subjects (such as the soldier) and social institutions (such as the family). Due to

the biological reliance on women for new bodies and the social reliance on them for caring for all others, women's bodies and social roles became an anxious location: the vitality of the state relies on them. Such regimes have gone to great economic and legal lengths to control both the biological moment of pregnancy and all the social labor that has tethered to it. McRobbie argues further that femininity, as a technique of social control, relies not only on the state but is "constantly produced and reproduced" through "the giant media corporations" (2013:132). While disciplinary strategies came into being alongside Industrialization, they continue to unevenly operate today, even as strategies of gendered, social controls unique to post Industrialization take root.

Modern, industrial articulations of power operated through disciplinary mechanisms such as pathologizing/medicalizing sexualities that deviated from heterosexuality. Such disciplinary, biopolitical regimes excluded (and, to varying degrees, continue to exclude) women from political and economic power by denying them rights. Such a denial of rights is predicated on discourses of knowledge that define women as different and lesser than men due to their bodies, biology, reproductive functions, brain waves, ad infinitum (Laqueur 1990). Controlling access to birth control and sexual education restricts women's economic autonomy while further entrenching the idea and reality of distinct biological difference. Once marked as mother, women are both implicitly and explicitly contained in the home or gendered sectors of the workforce. Given these disciplinary strategies aimed at controlling women, feminism has developed a critical skepticism towards both technology and maternalism, as both have been used as forms of control (Clough 2012c; Haraway 1991).

One of the most successful strategies women and second-wave feminists used (and continue to use) to counter disciplinary biopolitical tactics was to minimize reproductive

capacity, maternalism, and bodily difference. The position they took is that, reproductive capacities aside, women are indistinguishable from men. The logical flipside of this push for equality is that to be equal, one must be “without care responsibilities,” or be like a man (Orloff 2006:30). This strategy has successfully gotten women into social spaces formerly closed to them: higher education, certain sectors of the work force, and politics. And, while this has been an explicitly political feminist strategy, it has left little room for maternity, which, while keeping cultural iterations in the foreground, is still rooted in biology.

The push for equality, and the disavowal of the maternal and biological (to borrow Butler’s (1993) thesis that cultural gender systems materialize through our psyche and bodies) work through the generation of women steeped in second-wave feminism, Title X, self-help cultures aiming to “revive Ophelia,” (Piper 2005) and encouragements to “lean in” instead of “opt-out” (See Stone 2008). All of the above political and therapeutic programs are predicated on containing maternity, leaving it at home so to speak. One of the most radical voices of second-wave feminism, Shulamith Firestone (1970:180), infamously wrote: “Pregnancy is barbaric ... the temporary deformation of the body of the individual.” Firestone suggested using technology to free women from maternity, which would do no less than “threaten the social unit that is organized around biological reproduction and the subjection of women to their biological destiny” (1970:185). Women’s liberation in this account hinges on escaping pregnancy, maternity altogether (and escaping it via technology).

Women’s participation in different public sectors hinges on their ability to embody certain privileged “masculine” traits: ambitious, rational, and independent. De Marneffe explains how such logic plays out today through contemporary women’s psyche:

Yet the problem for women struggling with the symbolic meaning of weight, of which eating disorders are an extreme case, is not only that the culture purveys an ideology of

femininity that demands that women sacrifice themselves to care for others, an ideology at odds with achievements coded as masculine. It is also that real needs and goals inherent in the feminine activity of caring for children are both pragmatically difficult and psychologically conflicted for women for whom other (so-called “masculine”) ambitions matter a great deal. That the conflict between “feminine” and “masculine” ends is played out by a woman on her reproductive body (“for many anorexics, the breasts represent a bovine, unconscious, vulnerable side of the self”) is not incidental. (2005:194)

The privileging of the masculine further contributes to what Fox terms the “terrifying softness” of motherhood. When Fox asks “Why are we so afraid of losing control, of being softened, of giving in, of being affected, of changing?”, a reader answers, suggesting that the emphasis on maintaining a pre-pregnancy body and life comes from “try[ing] to make motherhood look something like fatherhood,” which includes keeping the “job and career trajectory” and “at least some of child-unfriendly social life (late nights, noise, adult centered conversation, alcohol-fused stuff) (Fox 2010).

The maternal body signals that it cares for another being, and, in America especially, this undermines autonomy and economic power. Connors articulates this cultural unease with pregnant bodies by responding to fitness guru and reality TV star Jillian Michael’s claim that she would not have a baby because of the damage pregnancy does to a body, retorting:

When she said that she didn’t want to do *that* to her body, Ms. Jillian was, I think (*emphasis on ‘I think’—this is only my opinion*), expressing her disgust at the basic idea of becoming—as women do in pregnancy and childbirth and beyond—*biological*, which is to say, tethered to her body, to her messy, unpredictable, physical *femaleness*. This is, I think, something that reflects a broader public sentiment—I’m not holding her responsible for it—and it’s a shame, even though it’s rooted in messy fact. When you’re pregnant, you don’t—you can’t—control your body. You cannot control whether you lose or gain weight—no matter what, there’s something growing inside of you, and that thing has mass, and *needs*—and you cannot perfectly control how your body feels or how it moves. (“Jillian Michaels Hates Your Body. Maybe. Or Not. Should You Care?” *Her Bad Mother*, April 26, 2010, <http://herbadmother.com/2010/04/jillian-michaels-hates-your-body-jillian-michaels-can-suck-it/>)

The loss of control of which Connors writes fuels anxiety and never-ending body-work (see Bordo 1993). Maternal embodiment is meant to be minimized, denied, and quickly moved through at all costs and closeted while in public as the recent struggles to post breastfeeding pictures on Facebook attest. Up until 2013, Facebook did not allow pictures of nursing mothers on its site even though pictures of scantily clad to nude women were allowed. Connor's "messy fact" of maternity speaks to disciplinary regimes aimed at containing motherhood into a sanitized, dry-bodied identity.

The physicality of motherhood and loss of bodily control is antithetical to both (hetero)sexuality and to the world of work and autonomy. Connors makes a similar argument here:

We know that we live in a society in which natural bodies—the natural female body, in particular, and the natural aging female body and the natural postpartum female body (not to mention the *breastfeeding* body)—are regarded with something approaching disgust. Her words just underline that, and they point to the shame that is too easily attached to matters concerning the female body, and not just matters of weight. Jillian Michaels reminds us that we live in a society that is not just fat-phobic—although it certainly is that—but one that is *gyno*-phobic, if we take *gyno* to refer to women *qua* women in all their natural messy glory and not women *qua* Barbie dolls. She reminds us that everyone likes to look at and talk about and champion women's bodies—but only if they are, or are in the process of being, sanitized and perfected for proper cultural consumption. ("Jillian Michaels Hates Your Body. Maybe. Or Not. Should You Care?" *Her Bad Mother*, April 26, 2010, <http://herbadmother.com/2010/04/jillian-michaels-hates-your-body-jillian-michaels-can-suck-it/>)

Feminism has both been an instrument and effect of troubling gendered and sexed bodies—many of the great victories of second-wave feminists were won because they purposely and actively negated sexual (reproductive), maternalist difference. Such repression, of course, requires colossal discipline, both at the institutional and individual level. Yet, even feminist, poststructuralist scholarship deconstructed biology into inert matter, shaped by power and

knowledge. Speaking, as Connors does, of “physical femaleness” or “women qua women” became a fraught academic enterprise (Butler 1993; Kawash 2011:972). But, again, the repressed returns: Women who, because of second-wave victories, advanced their educations and careers find themselves pushed outside of these realms when their “physical femaleness” exerts an undeniable presence. However, these women have what feminists of yesteryear did not: blogs and vast social networks.

## POSTINDUSTRIAL BODIES

Scholars of technology and society argue that with the rise of post industrial societies, social control and governance have shifted from the modernist, industrial, militaristic program of disciplining bodies into narrow and enclosed spaces, such as the family, marriage, schools, and even gender itself to letting such social institutions bleed out through contingency and precarity (Terranova and Parisi 2000). The modernist program of disciplining of bodies into narrow subjectivities required more energy than is recoverable. For example, the family as a heterosexual, two-parent with offspring unit accounts for only a quarter of households in the United States. Maintaining this form requires an economic system, living wages and social benefits that are no longer in place. As wages stagnant, the cost of living soars, and jobs become less stable, subjectivities open and families respond with new arrangements.

Postindustrial capital, instead, finds energy and profits by harnessing what falls outside of disciplinary boundaries—avoiding the “heat death” that accompanies industrial machines. As social institutions diffuse from enclosed spaces such as the family or the factory, the subjectivities that accompanied industrial worlds shift and diffuse too. Instead of syncing up to one waged job, workers can expect numerous career changes and may in fact be “freed” from the

contracts of waged work at all. Put another way, we are always working. Out of this slackening of disciplinary power comes the importance of affect as a value producing force that moves between and through bodies.

As subjectivities move from disciplinary culture aimed at containing firm boundaries and positions, the maternal body/figure is refigured too. For example, some of the blogs convey an ecstatic sense of pregnancy, birth, and lactation—one that may not be new but was buried in the regimes of second-wave feminism, industrialization, and biopolitical disciplinary containment. This rediscovery of the maternal occurs through technologies of digital communication, and requires endless networking of bodies.

Theorists such as Mark Hansen (2004) make the case that our new media technologies today allow us see the “in between” of life, to register what usually occurs so fast that it is beyond human perception. Hansen (2004:589) claims such technology is causing nothing short of a “technical expansion” of “subjectivity.” This technical enlargement of the self “allows for a fuller and more intense experience of subjectivity, that, in short, technology allows for a closer relationship to ourselves” (Hansen 2004:589). This new intimacy occurs because our technology expands time by its ability to capture and enlarge smaller units of experience. Blogs do this work of expansion—moving into the daily rhythms of our lives, recording easily forgotten moods, capturing bodily changes, and registering the mundane moments of motherhood. Digital technology taps into our embodied states.

Exemplifying Hansen’s technological expansion, the blogged photo series of Erin Loechner’s home birth expands her labor and delivery, frame by frame (140 total). Readers watch her descend through labor and then witness the birth almost as intimately as the father, who serves as a proxy for the viewer holding the new baby in the last photo. Because there are so

many frames in this post, viewers are pulled into an expanded experience of a laboring woman, clicking through in anticipation of the baby's arrival. In one photo we see her in pain immediately followed by numerous frames of her engaged in mundane activities—the rhythm of labor is presented along with images. Such an expansion of a subjective state is her aim as she claims she wants to foster a shift in perspective. Loechner explains:

After giving birth to my sweet daughter a little over a week ago, I've finally had time to process the intense experience. It was everything I'd imagined: grueling, emotional and incredibly trying, but nothing compared to the moment our daughter was born and the peace that surrounded our home during that beautiful two-day birth.

I also understand that birth photos are incredibly personal. And not for the faint of heart (although admittedly, my friend is an amazingly tasteful birth photographer). Sharing such intimate photos is so very out of character for me, someone who rarely divulges private details about her family.

But I also understand that I chose an alternate route when birthing my daughter—a choice that some still have a strong aversion to and a path that I wanted so badly to shed light upon. ("What a Home Birth Looks Like," August 1, 2012, <http://www.babble.com/babble-voices/erin-loechner-first-time-around/2012/08/01/what-a-home-birth-looks-like/#day-1-8am>)

In a similar attempt to recover and expand the experience of birth, the artist Ana Alvarez-Errecalde set up a photo shoot of her holding her daughter immediately after giving birth, with the placenta and umbilical cord still attached and in the photo. Against a white backdrop, she is pictured standing naked, radiantly smiling, covered in blood with her baby, also naked, at her breast, umbilical cord connecting them and the placenta on the floor. Alvarez-Errecalde (2013) states in a video that she created this work because:

Women have given birth this way for centuries. What happened is there aren't enough images representing it. We believe what we see through television or through photography. Much of art history has shown these maternal women because it was the heterosexual male's vision: mothers have to be pure and sacred and clean. To see a picture of a woman giving birth, smiling, bloody and breastfeeding her baby with the placenta to the side is, of course, ground-breaking because we are not used to seeing it, but I do not consider myself a rule breaker.

And I thought it was important because I felt that by showing these images I was also adding to the collective imagination. With these images I also wanted to show that my experience of motherhood has been more primal. It was not related to Eve and her divine punishment of giving birth in pain but probably more to Lucy, an experience of losing control, of letting go, but also knowing that I was present, with great lucidity.

Alvarez-Errecalde articulates the move away from disciplinary, modernist conceptions of subjectivity—instead of using energy to contain birth into a sanitized event, resulting in cherubic and clean baby, she documents the “primal ... experience of losing control” (2013). The loss of control, the mess, and the so-called waste of childbirth is brought back into the picture. This recuperation of the primal nature of birth, however, depends in large part on the ability of digital technology to create and distribute Alvarez-Errecalde’s contribution to the “collective imagination” (2013).

Further, she notes that while the pictures of her are personal, they implicate the viewer in moments of intimacy. The naked honesty of the pictures creates a relationship between her and her viewers, where neither is privileged over the other. She states:

Sometimes I’m asked if I’m afraid of giving up my privacy but when I see the pictures I no longer recognize myself. I know that the experience is my own but I’m not the same person. Actually, I expose myself as much as the viewer is exposed because I expose my experience but the viewer can also be exposing their prejudices, their rejection of the unknown or their empathy and admiration. (Alvarez-Errecalde 2013)

The above quote also highlights the changing nature of privacy: As the disciplinary walls of identity soften, and as our technologies further infiltrate the intimacies of our lives, the concept of privacy is reconfigured too. Our subjectivity opens up too such that we “no longer recognize” ourselves.

While the ability to distribute alternative accounts and imagines of pregnancy and birth occurs through digital media, it is also through such media that capital recuperates the labor of the pregnant and newly post-partum bodies, bodies previously outside of its machinery and

circuits. By moving from industrial regimes of containment to postindustrial regimes of biopolitical control, women's bodily reproductive capacities circulate in new ways and produce new forms of value. Yet, as the above bloggers and artists highlight, important cultural shifts about beauty norms, sexuality, and gender roles attend this movement from broadcast to digitally networked media.

## INTEREMBODIED EXCESS: THE BODY, BABY, AND BLOG

### *Interembodiment*

To situate blogged digital expansions of the maternal body, I build upon Deborah Lupton's (2012:40) term "interembodiment;" a state in which bodies connect physically and/or psychically to other bodies, a state of being when "individual and autonomous bodies are actually experienced at the phenomenological level as intertwined." Pregnancy and motherhood are emblematic instances of interembodiment as such a state occurs through "relational states created by close physical proximity, touch and intimacy" (Lupton 2012:40). As a paradigmatic form of interembodiment, motherhood also comes to stand as a form of excess in cultures infected with varying degrees of neoliberal ideology, especially the tenant of work as the measure of self-worth. While this ethic of work and autonomy is nothing new in American culture (see Weber's "The Protestant Ethic"), the ideology behind neoliberal policies amplify the rhetoric of self-reliance, choice, and individuality. Interembodiment, however is not only relegated to physical bodies, it also occurs through narratives and, I argue, media itself. Of focus in this chapter is the mediation of interembodiement and narrative via mommy blogs. In fact, the pull of both the blogs and our digital devices comes out of their ability to create "relational states" (Lupton 2012:40).

For example, taken together, blog posts and readers' comments about bodies, Kate Willink's (2010:211) conceptualization of the "not me" to the "not-not me" structures narrative expressions of maternal intimacy. Blogging the body pulls readers into intimate relations either by directly articulating shared experiences or by providing examples that might not be their exact experience, but is close enough, the "not-not me." The "not-not me" may be the mother who did not suffer post partum depression but struggles with her body image. The connection comes through relaying the personal, intimate experience—the specific details do not have to line up.

Through digitizing of intimate narrative practices of interembodiment, readers and bloggers network aspects of maternity that was previously left to family or friends and outside of the market (see Clough 2012b). Willink (2010:207) explains the role narrative plays in generating intimacy: "personal narrative crosses many thresholds—passing intimately from mouth to mouth, ear to ear, body to body. Such narratives routinely exceed thresholds between self and other." The intimate narrative scene found on the blogs further crosses boundaries between human and machine through the technical assemblage of machine, network, platforms, and interfaces. Blogging maternity crosses boundaries because intimate narratives pose both "risks and opportunities" for bloggers and their readers. Risks include uncovering "wounds" or secrets of maternity, which revolve around the disruption of autonomy, sexuality, and economic standing.

And opportunities emerge because "the act of telling ... address the wound. ... We become otherwise" (Willink 2009:208). Blogging, as a form of intimate narrative practice writ large, allows mothers a way to crowd source risks, experiences, and solutions. The becoming "otherwise" is often expressed as moving beyond expectations and previous experiences of the self. For some, "becoming otherwise" is political: these bloggers convey opportunities that

pregnancy affords—a chance out of the heteronormative confines of feminine beauty and culture and a perspective shifting experience of their bodies and love itself. Not all mommy bloggers express a challenge to gender regimes, instead calculating the risks of maternity and try to balance their credits (a baby) against their debts (a lost body). These two narrative logics of opportunity and loss, or risk of loss, run through blogged posts about the maternal body.

### *Excess*

Countering the neoliberal amplification of self-reliance is Willink's conceptualization of excess, which she describes as a “rupture of expectation or an interruption of the normal” and “that which does not fit ... pertaining to words, silence, bodies, and knowledge” (2010:207). This definition supports bloggers' descriptions of maternity and motherhood and blogging, reading, and commenting is expressed as a powerful way to break the “silence,” the secret, surrounding maternity. Speaking this silence feels like it breaks the norm, crosses imposed boundaries of the self, boundaries that stand as relics of disciplinary regimes. Mothers document bodily changes with disgust, amusement, and shock and, while mommy blogs have been part of the collective online world for over a decade, new mothers continue to write of the experience in a revelatory way.

Bloggng motherhood always feels excessive as it forces questions of privacy and publicity: what is too much? Pictures of children, birth, placentas, words of one's children or posts about husbands, wives and partners? Mommy bloggers routinely inform readers of the line of self-disclosure they cannot cross. For example, Heather Armstrong (2010) of *dooce*, who blogged her way through post partum depression and two pregnancies, announced that she would

write less about her older daughter, Leta, as she becomes more conscious of what it is her mother does:

In the last couple of weeks I've had some friends talk to me about going through the same thing with their own children, and I could not be more thankful. Because I thought I was alone in this. I know, after all these years of keeping this website that this is the *last* thought I should ever have about anything. But there I was feeling it. And while there is a part of me that wishes I could talk about it here to help others who might be going through the same thing, I don't think it's fair to Leta, not at this age. ("The Older Child," August 9, 2010, <http://dooce.com/2010/08/09/the-older-child/comment-page-2/>)

Armstrong here points out that blogging "after all these years" has made obvious the falsity of the being "alone in this." This negotiation of boundaries, both of mother and child and also mother and media, must be public because blogging mother, through the networking of both her body and psyche, showcases the interembodiment and porosity of subjectivity itself.

### *The Mother/Media Interembodied Body*

As devices and screens become the tools of middle class motherhood today as much as bottles and diapers, many mothers have developed, alongside an attached or intensive mothering, an intensive communicating: "Smartphones," computers, and social media platforms attach to the mother and make up an intertwined mother/media assemblage. Like attachment parenting, such intensive communicating relies on our bodies: our touch, eyes, voice, and fingerprints seamlessly connect our bodies to our networks. An increasing portion of the social, reproductive labor of the middle class mother is digital, and therefore the analysis of interembodiment must include the relationships between the mother and her digital devices and networks as well as what happens when mothers lack access to social mediated networks.

Expanding the concept of interembodiment to include the intertwined relationships between mothers and their machines, media, networks, and readers, highlights one way capital

recoups maternity itself. Motherhood lives “alongside and in response to” not only their children’s bodies but also their digital social networks (Lupton 2012). Kate Losse (2013) points out that on Facebook “women’s images drive the site itself, where the most popular content has always been intimate, personal photographs of women,” highlighting how central user-generated content is in giving media platforms value. Thus, blogging maternity, or a body “beholden to nature,” tells us not only about motherhood and nature, but also about technology beholden to bodies (and vice versa). And of capital leeching off of both.

Social media pulls bodies into the network and mothers negotiate this pull in specific ways—some keep their kids out of public pictures, others keep themselves out, and a growing group use social media and body pictures as a way to empower mothers.

### *Blogging the Lost Body*

As I have shown so far, motherhood demands a baseline minimum of interembodiment, which upsets the ability, temporarily, to maintain autonomy. Blogged writings about the body negotiating autonomy are often thus framed in terms of loss: the loss of one’s pre-baby body, of a sexually attractive body, of self-esteem, or of one’s authority in the world outside of the home. Some bloggers mourn their lost identities while others offer advice as on how to regain what has been lost—one of the more popular remedies is found in and through various feminine beauty regimes and rituals.

Some bloggers refuse to mourn, and include the disclaimer that whatever alterations or disfigurements have occurred, “it was worth it to bring a life into the world” or, in a more *homo economicus* logic: “the benefits of having a child are worth the costs to my body.” A post from *Babble.com* captures the logic here:

I usually don't get too personal but to hell with it: My boobs have dropped after two pregnancies. It's true. But I gotta say, I appreciate them more than ever. Maybe due to several years of various members of my household vying for their attention. (There's been a lot of boob-love around here, and it might just have seeped in and replaced more youthful insecurities.) Sure there are days when I look at myself and think: crap. I experience a healthy amount self-loathing like any one else with a mirror and a brain. But I'm also pretty well settled into the idea that boobs are meant to sag eventually and what you really need to do is just sit up straight and get a good bra. Life's too short to hate yourself for something caused by living it.

Though it can transform us in ways we sometimes don't like—or expect to like—motherhood can also help us see our bodies as a source of life and love. *If you ever feel any remote hint of this idea coming over you at any point during pregnancy, run with it!* (Morris, "Of Boobs and Sag," August 9, 2011, <http://www.babble.com/pregnancy/of-boobs-and-sag/2011>)

Like this cost/benefit analysis, many bloggers suggest that because beauty inevitably fades, motherhood provides a shelter or distraction from the loss of youth and shifting of sexuality.

Mommy bloggers routinely write in graphic and specific ways about changes in and to their bodies, buffering the topic with humor. As exemplified by the author of the blog *Motherhood Uncensored*, Kristen Chase, nothing is left unexamined: "Um, because I've never heard one person, no not one never ever ever, talk about their big old post-partum vagina. But apparently, that's exactly what I'm sporting these days. Except in this case, big is clearly not better" ("Bigger Is Not Always Better, October 29, 2007, [http://www.motherhooduncensored.net/motherhood\\_uncensored/2007/10/big-is-not-alwa.html](http://www.motherhooduncensored.net/motherhood_uncensored/2007/10/big-is-not-alwa.html)).

Anna Luther writing for the website *Scary Mommy* lists the top ten bodily changes that accompany motherhood:

Having three kids has done a number on my body... and my life. From the giant elephant that used to be my vagina to the varicose vein that constantly gets snagged on the coffee table, there are countless parts of myself that I no longer recognize. The top ten...

**1. My Elephant.** You might call yours a vagina, but I made the mistake of taking a hand mirror down there for some post-childbirth exploration, and all I saw was a giant, weary

elephant looking back at me. Sometimes I have nightmares that he's trying to eat me. On Mondays, I can hear him sighing in exhaustion.

**2. My Legs.** What I used to consider legs are now mountainous road maps that all seem to point to a nursing home. I snag my varicose vein on the coffee table multiple times a day. And don't even get me started on the sexiness that oozes from my compression hose.

...

**4. My Stomach.** I really don't know why it's called a muffin top. Muffins are delicious and make me smile. But the dough ball that continues to rise over the top of my pants is not delicious and it does not make me smile. But it does keep me from being able to look down and see my varicose vein, so I guess that's a good thing.

...

**6. My Dry-Shriveled Carrots.** AKA, my breasts. After three years of breastfeeding, I got so talented that I could swing one behind my head and pass it around the minivan for anyone that needed a snack. I just asked that it be passed back before anyone got out of the car. (I do have *some* standards.) Now that my breastfeeding days are over, my breasts have been replaced by dried out, shriveled up baby carrots.

**7. My Right Eye.** Am I the only person on earth to have one eye become larger than the other post childbirth? I have WebMD'd this issue countless times—but there appears to be no known disease to diagnose me with. All I know is that my face used to be somewhat symmetrical. After baby #3? Well, I don't want to brag, but I have been invited to be the crazy-eyed freak at the circus.

...

**9. My Perineum.** I didn't even know I had a perineum until it was destroyed by three vaginal births. And apparently—I have a SHORT perineum—which means that I tore from hole to hole during each childbirth – resulting in a giant vasshole. And giant vassholes produce a lot of sharts—*trust me*. (“10 Unrecognizable Post Baby Body Parts,” <http://www.scarymommy.com/unrecognizable-post-baby-parts/>).

Posts such as these put forward the idea that through motherhood one loses not only sex appeal but also gains new body parts. Through blogging about lost body parts, bloggers highlight the straightjacket that exists for women's sexuality and sexual expression. Chase starts to get political and considers how and why motherhood displaces sexual identity here:

But if you notice, women who have those boobs, and that butt don't get the compliments. It's the moms who get it all together, drop their weight, slip back into their old jeans, and strut it that are considered HOT. And really, it's because they don't look like moms, right?

“You don't even look like you had a kid!” Isn't that the biggest compliment? I know I've done my fair share of basking in that after I had my daughter and shrank back into two sizes smaller than I was thanks to my elimination diet.

And while there are many women that feel the term MILF is not offensive, there is something to be said about it being fairly limiting. That we're only hot because we're moms, and because we don't look like them.

And so I ask, when will it be hot to be a \*regular old mom—with our “battle scars”, and stretched out hips, thighs, and *you-know-whats*? Is the skinny size 4 = sexy image embrazened in our minds forever, or is that something that we have the power to change?

Like Francesca, I'm not sure we'll ever be able to take back the term MILF. But perhaps we can create something else that says, “I'm hot, even with my flabby stomach.” And if you don't like your flabby stomach, by all means, do 400 sit-ups. But, know that you're still a hottie even with it.

At least you should think so. (“Bigger Is Not Always Better, October 29, 2007, [http://www.motherhooduncensored.net/motherhood\\_uncensored/2007/10/big-is-not-alwa.html](http://www.motherhooduncensored.net/motherhood_uncensored/2007/10/big-is-not-alwa.html)).

The above passage questions the narrow parameters of gender and sexuality. Chase asks if “we”—her readers—can change the equation that size four equals sexy. Four years after this post, Chase returns to the topic offering a remedy for a lost sense of sexual attractiveness: she blogs about her need to dress up for an event and how she recovered a sense of self through shopping and dressing up. The remedy, and the ambivalence, is found in the heteronormative femininity she previously challenged. She describes wearing her new leather shorts:

My legs aren't exactly strangers to being shown off, but that was many years ago, when I was young and daring, and hadn't had the weight of four pregnancies and four slingworn babies on them.

But I wore them nonetheless, with a little extra self-tanner, a fabulous pair of high heels and a slightly red lip, hoping they'd help mask the sudden burning unsuredness of my decision.

And it worked.

So did the wine.

Despite the effects of motherhood on the body, in which she take pride (“four sling-worn babies”) she concludes that sexuality and motherhood can coexist.

But I think every mom needs something, even just one item, that makes them feel just like I did every time she puts it on.

No matter your size, your age, your number of kids, find your black leather shorts.

A sexy bra, a new pair of underwear, that pair of heels you keep telling yourself you have no good excuse to purchase.

Then give yourself a reason to wear them. Even if it's just around your house.

Because that feeling. (Chase, “The Black Leather Shorts,” *Motherhood Uncensored*, August 22, 2011, [http://www.motherhooduncensored.net/motherhood\\_uncensored/2011/08/the-black-leather-shorts.html](http://www.motherhooduncensored.net/motherhood_uncensored/2011/08/the-black-leather-shorts.html))

She follows the post with a picture of her, waist down, in the shorts and heels. These two posts, taken together, express the pride mothers feel (“the weight of four pregnancies”) and the ambivalence (the “burning unsuredness”). Chase's exploration of sexuality and the body articulate a reconfiguration of motherhood, a reconfiguration coming from mothers themselves.

## OF MILFS AND SELFIES

### *MILFs*

The sexuality of motherhood has recently found a mascot with the figure of the “MILF.” Entering the cultural vernacular, “MILF” stands for “Mom I'd Like to Fuck,” sometimes also

referred to as a “yummy mummy” (the UK’s version) or, as Chase defines it, mothers who are “only hot because [they’re] moms, and because [they] don’t look like them” (2007). The MILF hovers in mommy blog land, straddling the line between a revolutionary sexual figure for women and the pernicious return of an unattainable ideal. For both positions, the MILF is a new body on (and for) which capital can work—a body to be “perfected for proper cultural consumption” (Connors, “Jillian Michaels Hates Your Body. Maybe. Or Not. Should You Care?” *Her Bad Mother*, April 26, 2010. <http://herbadmother.com/2010/04/jillian-michaels-hates-your-body-jillian-michaels-can-suck-it/>). The MILF generates ambivalence because she is both a sexual object but also a sexual subject who seduces (often younger) men (often called a “cougar” with this age difference). She enjoys sexuality beyond the strict limits of traditional heteronormative roles of marriage and monogamy. Her appearance corresponds with some women’s increasing educational and economic power, hence the celebration of what some feel is an expansion of feminine sexuality. Mommy bloggers deconstruct the MILF and tune into the contradictory positions such a figure represents.

Rebecca Woolf deconstructs the “yummy mummy” trend in her post titled “Yummy Mummies: The Empress’ Old Clothes.” She works through her ambivalence surrounding yummy mummies by beginning with a confession that she loves fashion. She starts off, “Fashionable and Motherly? Fuck yes. But wait . . . Wait. *Wait* . . .” She elaborates:

I fully support the working mother. And more than that, I fully support the style-conscious, fully made-up, heels-at-the-playground mom. I wish for the days of yore when everyone dressed up and well, even if they didn’t bother to leave the house. When there was no such thing as shorts and the only Crocs in existence were wandering around Florida. When dressing well and looking good wasn’t considered “shallow” but “respectable.” When people dressed up for one another socially. When people dressed up to go to the supermarket. When everyone, regardless of her budget, could dress well because even JC Penny carried pea coats and pencil skirts and stacked heels and felt hats. When mothers, even of the stay-at-home variety, wouldn’t be caught dead barefoot in the kitchen because I don’t care what anyone says—Comfortable shoes are not sexy. And a

woman should always feel sexy. Life's too short for sweatsuits outside the gym and pajamas beyond the bedroom.

But she continues, "Something isn't right here. Something isn't real. Something is totally and completely wrong with this picture" because:

Here's what I know: The Yummy Mummy doesn't exist. She is a mirage: an Empress in flesh-colored Lanvin. I also know that breastfeeding doesn't make you skinny and that sex is not the same after a vaginal birth. I know that women don't look *this good* without professional lighting and air-brushing [ . . . ]

But let's be honest: A mother is not a mother unless her shit is stained with drool. And there is nothing "yummy" about bullshit stories congratulating women for getting manicures and still having time for a play-date on the weekend. Because even in a fluff piece, vacant as the eyes of the women featured on its pages, shielding readers from the reality of motherhood goes against everything we should perceive as "modern." ("Yummy Mummies: The Empress' Old Clothes," *Girl's Gone Child*, September 6, 2007 (<http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2007/09/yummy-mummies-empress-old-clothes.html>))

Mommy blogging *en masse* lets readers in on a more "drool" stained experience.

The MILF/yummy mummy figure highlights one instance of a capital recuperation of a previously excluded consumer and producer. McRobbie does not celebrate this recuperation. She contends that nothing less than "cultural intelligibility" for mothers rests on "a spectacularly slim body, a well groomed and manicured appearance, with an equally attractive baby and husband" (2013:131). The work of such "cultural intelligibility" is never ending, especially as social media profiles and updates keep us "on" 24/7: "few aspects of everyday life and working life are now exempt from this requirement to self-promote" (McRobbie 2013:133). Maintaining, or working towards, "MILF-ness" is a condition of intelligibility and participation as "motherhood no longer offers a short time-off period of respite from those forms of social power which comprise incitements and persuasion to get back in shape and to resume the work of achieving the highly sexualized body image" (McRobbie 2013:133). As more women live-tweet through labor and

delivery, post pictures of the first moments of birth, and every mood thereafter, motherhood does not offer a respite, a break from body-work and self presentation.

For example, in late 2013, the blogger, Maria Kang, went viral (over sixteen million page views on Facebook) with her post titled “What’s your excuse?” in which she encourages mothers to make time to exercise and “take care of themselves.” The post began with a picture of her bikini clad, incredibly fit body and her three young children (all under three years old) sitting at her side. The response to the post went far beyond the mommy blog niche. Many blogging mothers, however, claimed she was fat-shaming women, acting like a bully, and emphasizing appearances over the important work of motherhood.

### *Selfies*

One important technology of the MILF, both as a feminist challenge to beauty ideals and as a technique of capital recuperation, is that of the selfie. “Selfie,” refers to self-taken photos, usually with Smartphone’s that allow the user to position the lens facing the self. Losse (2013b) credits the selfie explosion to the iPhone 4’s front-facing camera. Jenna Wortham (2013) reports that “everyone from the pope to the Obama girls has been spotted in one.” In August of 2013, the Oxford Dictionary Online incorporated the term into its lexicon (“My Selfie, Myself,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2013).

Yet, as blogger Sarah Gram (2013) points out, the selfie is a form of labor: “[T]he culmination of research—most girls tilt their heads down, look up and shoot from above ... — and skills.” Bodily clues frame the selfie too—“the face tilted toward the laptop’s surface, an arm outstretched as it holds the phone at a distance”—as the selfie “inscribes a body into a

network,” using devices “capable of distributing it on a network almost immediately” (Culturetuo 2013).

The popularity of the selfie is reshaping representation, especially of women. In an answer to Chase’s question, “do we have the power to change representation?” photoblogs such as *A Beautiful Body* (ABB) emerge alongside selfie culture and in opposition to the narrow ideas of sexuality. Jade Bealle, the photographer behind ABB claims she accidentally started the project by taking pictures of herself, naked, postpartum, with her infant. While her camera equipment is more professional than a Smartphone, she nonetheless distributed the shots through social media networks. In a newspaper account she tells her story:

When I got pregnant, I gained 50lb and, after the birth, found myself having serious issues trying to lose weight. I knew the last thing I should be bummed out about was my body – it was an honour to be a mother and I had an easy birth. But it was a challenge to wrap my head around how much I had changed. Then I realised I now had the sort of body I’d been wanting to photograph – for some time, I’d been keen to expand my portfolio to show a broader range of body types, but I’d had trouble finding models. So, totally scared and suffering from post-partum depression, I dragged myself into my studio and took some self-portraits.

I put them on my website and received a flood of emails from women in similar situations, asking if I would photograph their post-pregnancy bodies, too.

When I posted this on my Facebook page, the whole project went gangbusters. Women from all over the world started contacting me, thanking me for showing a tummy that looked like theirs. (“Jade Beall’s Best Photograph—A Dancer After Childbirth,” August 21 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/aug/22/jade-beall-best-photograph-dancer-childbirth?commentpage=1>).

Images of real women expand the possibilities of sexuality, shape, and femininity.

Veronica Arreola of website *viva la feminista* started a “feminist selfie a day” photo project in which she ask readers to take a selfie everyday during 2014. The aim of the project is to increase representations of women of color, transgender people, and anyone outside of the standard media

representations of women (white, young, attractive, thin). Arreola (2013), explains the aim of the project:

Conquer that fear of seeing yourself every.single.day. We might look at ourselves to put our contacts in, even put our make up on, but taking a selfie and posting it means REALLY looking at yourself. And hopefully at the end (or much sooner) you will find it less painful and more enjoyable” (“#365feministselfie—Are you in?” *vivalafeminista.com*, 12/31/2013). The website created a flickr page for users to upload their pictures and encouraged readers to use the hashtag “#365feministselfie” when posting pictures on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or any other social media site.

In this instance, the selfie has become a feminist form of resistance.

As mothers like Beall and Arreola attest, many mothers and readers in the mommy blogosphere claim that jumping in front of the camera is not always easy. A viral blog post titled “The Mom Stays in the Picture” (2012) explains how Allison Tate Slater came to realize that while she took tons of pictures of her kids and family she herself was in very few of them. She worried her children would forget her and realized that they do not see her as critically as she sees herself. The call to get in front of the lens was also about documenting the labor of motherhood. Slater writes:

Too much of a mama’s life goes undocumented and unseen. People, including my children, don’t see the way I make sure my kids’ favorite stuffed animals are on their beds at night. They don’t know how I walk the grocery store aisles looking for treats that will thrill them for a special day . . .

Someday, I want them to see me, documented, sitting right there beside them: me, the woman who gave birth to them. (2012)

In the post, she reasons that moms avoid being in pictures because they are “sporting mom bodies and [are] not as young as we used to be” and because “the kids are so much cuter” (ibid.). Moms everywhere reposted her essay, and vowed to get back in the picture themselves. *The Huffington Post* tapped into this affective energy by offering a picture gallery for readers to submit their own photos with their children. Of course, this request brought the site massive page

views, the free labor of mothers and their free content generating a contagious affective buzz throughout social media platforms as women flocked to upload and view pictures on *The Huffington Post*.

As feminists and scholars have shown, representation matters: even the personal imperatives of taking pictures *with* kids and not just taking pictures *of* them, is political. A few months prior to Slater's piece, Katie Roiphe (2012) wrote an article in the *Financial Times* lambasting mothers for using pictures of their kids as their Facebook profile pictures.<sup>3</sup> Shaming mothers with the ghosts of Betty Friedan and other second-wave feminists who fought to get women out of the shackles of the home and domestic life, Roiphe wrote: "The choice [to use a picture of one's child as one's profile picture] seems to constitute a retreat to an older form of identity, to a time when fresh-scrubbed Vassar girls were losing their minds amidst vacuum cleaners and sandboxes." This use of children's images, Roiphe asserts, is like a mother saying, "I don't matter any more," and also a way that motherhood "leaches itself of sexuality."

Slater and Roiphe both, despite using different rhetorical tactics and methods—the first using empathy and the latter shame—call for moms to get back into the picture and back into the digital circulation of selves and identities. The danger, as they see it, is double: either your kids will forget you, says Slater, or you'll forget yourself, says Roiphe. Both might agree that, by extension, the lack of circulating pictures of mom means that society forgets you too. Slater takes the Marxist-feminist perspective that the invisibility of motherhood contributes to a cultural

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<sup>3</sup> In this, Roiphe articulates a popular aggravation, demonstrated by the existence of an "app" called "unbaby.me" that will remove pictures of babies from one's Facebook feed and replace them with pictures of dogs or lattes, for example.

amnesia surrounding it, as well as its exploitation, while Roiphe takes a more outmoded feminist position that motherhood itself cancels out identity by destroying one's sexuality and presence in the larger world of public life. For both, identity is tethered to a social media presence.

Andie Fox, the author of the blog *blue milk* articulates, however ambivalently, a possible third perspective in response to Roiphe. Fox writes, "Roiphe believes mothers are vanishing, but really, the problem as I see it, is that these women and their new priorities are too visible to her" ("Disappearing Mums," March 24, 2013, <http://www.dailylife.com.au/life-and-love/real-life/disappearing-mums-20130313-2fzjv.html>). Fox claims that motherhood feels like a new "crazy love" that disorients because it is both so pleasurable and so difficult—mothers' prolific posting of their children's pictures happens because they are caught up in this unbeknownst state of interembodiment. Taking pictures of children and posting them everywhere happens because "children's young beauty is still a mixture of wonder and vanity." New mothers producing and circulating the pleasure and beauty they find in their children flies in the face of a culture that devalues interembodiment and maternity.

In response to Rophie's reiteration of the sexless mother trope—a generation of mothers that "leaches itself of sexuality"—Fox admits that "some of motherhood is sexless" but only because we have a narrow idea, culturally, of what sex is, and continues: "[M]y body awed me in new ways and I did not need sex to feel excitement or sensuality" ("Disappearing Mums," March 24, 2013, <http://www.dailylife.com.au/life-and-love/real-life/disappearing-mums-20130313-2fzjv.html>). The onslaught of baby pictures makes motherhood hypervisible, and challenges the idea that sexuality means one thing, that pleasure is always in some relation to masculinity. Adrienne Rich noted the problem of not recognizing maternal pleasure in 1976: "If motherhood and sexuality were not wedged resolutely apart by male culture, if we could choose both the

forms of our sexuality and the terms of our motherhood or nonmotherhood freely, women might achieve genuine sexual autonomy (as opposed to sexual ‘liberation’)” (1986:184). The mommy blogs deal with the this split, if not by addressing it directly then by the massive presence of pictures, stories and updates about the newfound and revolutionary pleasures of motherhood. Fox admits struggling with the trope of sexless motherhood, writing that beauty rituals provided her a path to cultural intelligibility:

But eventually I began to feel lost. So, I did things that made me feel tended to and that weren’t terribly feminist. I bought products for my skin and hair, television grade make-up, tight skirts that forced me to hold my stomach in, and I stuffed myself back into bras with under-wire. It worked. I have several decades experience weaving self-worth out of artificial constructs of beauty. Performing these rituals made me feel like an adult woman again, as though motherhood, with all its stoic sincerity, had detached me from seriousness and grooming was somehow more sophisticated. And with my beauty regime restored it wasn’t “free” I felt, and it wasn’t necessarily more “me” either, but I did feel more present, and that was enough. (“Disappearing Mums,” March 24, 2013, <http://www.dailylife.com.au/life-and-love/real-life/disappearing-mums-20130313-2fzjv.html>)

Fox questions the “enough” that beauty regimes provide and briefly notes that the concern over mothers “letting themselves go” misses the more problematic issue that mothers, and all women, should “never relax and always to keep trying to win admiring attention.” If women’s engagement with the world, their intelligibility, is determined by their ability to maintain sexual attractiveness, than a certain straightjacket under the guise of sexual freedom, choice, and even feminism, continues to bind women, including mothers. To be “legible as women/girls/mothers at all” a circulating MILFy, selfie is demanded (McRobbie 2013). Sympathetic to this bind, Fox lets readers in on her complicity with femininity, confiding that her Facebook profile picture “hints at the two more acceptable preoccupations in a woman’s life today—paid work and polite sex. It’s a flattering photo; I have a new haircut, and I’m wearing make-up and smart clothes.”

The imperative to maintain appearances when pregnant, as a mother (and even as a grandmother, hence the word “GILF”), and to document and circulate the self via the selfie exemplify the melding of two theoretical strains: Foucault’s disciplinary forms of control and power and the Deluzian flow of divided selves. The selves and bodies found on mommy blogs flow undisciplined, un-airbrushed. A broadcast regime controls all disseminated images closely, constructing airbrushed bodies that are more virtual than real, leaving young girls, women, and mothers to encounter and read these images in spaces that do not allow reader comment, critique, and contribution. The selfie economy, a networked system, runs on user/consumer labor, mothers producing and distributing their own images. Terranova and Parisi (2000) describe this melding of power regimes: “[W]hen the walls come down, disciplinary command functions are not dismantled, but rather released. They disseminate and vary, coming to be even more finely distributed and multiplied, and life channels into an even more intimate embrace.”

When “the disciplinary walls come down” power does not retreat, it only changes forms. New forms that feel familiar emerge: the MILF is a response to the release and extension of heteronormative sexuality to wider populations of bodies. The MILF represents yet another way digital media ushers in the “indefinite production, which is desired by capital” (Terranova and Parisi 2000) while simultaneously representing a chance for women, for mothers, to assert their bodies and sexuality outside of the previously strict, disciplined walls of motherhood, the family, and the private home. McRobbie interprets the sexualization of mothers somewhat differently arguing that maintaining “heteronormative desirability” works to “encourage marriage fidelity and hence family stability” (2013:131). Perhaps, but it is possible that maintaining desirability provides mothers with a form of sexual capital as the divorce rate hovers close to 50 percent and the form of the family itself opens, crumbles, shape shift and trembles.

## *Body Acceptance*

The release of disciplinary controls brings unintended consequences. Within the mommy blog world, some mothers also tell, or try to tell, another story of motherhood, embodiment, and pleasure: for them, pregnancy brings a welcomed loss of preoccupation with body size, fat, and vigilant dieting; the dismantling of the disciplinary walls of feminine beauty is a relief and subjective revolution. Less than a “time out” from the ceaseless and unattainable beauty culture, pregnancy and motherhood surprise bloggers with their biological capacities to reproduce and nurture a baby. This insight is expressed as a gain, a pleasure, and an unknown excess. Connors articulates this surprise and awe: “I felt, in a way that I never really had before, physical. Biological. Animal. It was profoundly discomfiting. Also, amazing. It took me a long time to get to ‘amazing’, but I did. It was amazing, and worth every ounce of discomfort and then some” (“Jillian Michaels Hates Your Body. Maybe. Or Not. Should You Care?” *Her Bad Mother*, April 26, 2010, <http://herbadmother.com/2010/04/jillian-michaels-hates-your-body-jillian-michaels-can-suck-it/>). The following from Michelle Horton of the blog *Early Momma* exemplifies the kind of gain pregnancy and motherhood provide:

Yet when I was pregnant, I learned to work with my body, listen to my body, respect my body. For the first time I felt in tune with not only what I wanted, but what my body needed. I stopped eating “diet” food pumped with additives and preservatives—focusing on whatever had the most nutrition rather than the least calories. I stopped pushing my body past its limits. I listened.

And that’s never gone away, even after pregnancy. In fact, after seeing all my body can accomplish—from labor to breastfeeding—I have an even stronger respect and appreciation for all my body is capable of.

So while I was googling what would happen to my stomach, my skin, my breasts, my feet, my hips, I had no idea that the real change wouldn’t be my body, but my relationship *with* my body. And even though I do have some stretch marks and my pre-

baby abdominal muscles haven't tightened back to their original strength, the changes are pretty minimal. Shockingly minimal, in fact. I mean, I'm not sure I'd wear a two-piece bathing suit just yet—but who cares? (To be fair, I haven't exercised a single day since I gave birth. Yikes!)

After seeing all that my body can do, those concerns just don't matter anymore. And in that respect, I'd much prefer my post-baby body. The one that I listen to. The one that I'm proud of. The one that gave me my child. ("The Truth About My Post Baby Body," June 9, 2011, (<http://www.earlymama.com/2011/06/09/the-truth-about-my-post-baby-body/>))

Implicit in this realization is the act of "googling" as a form of socialization and reproductive labor. Pregnancy, in this instance, trumps Google's search results as "Early Momma" describes (and disseminates) the realignment of her perspective.

The following discussion from the blog *blue milk* explores the pause pregnancy can put on maintaining the cultural standards of beauty. In reviewing a book, Fox celebrates the respite pregnancy allows:

However, I have one little bone to pick with this book and all of its "humorous honesty" and that is that it makes much of the author's weight gain and how unappealing she found this aspect of pregnancy to be. For many women Dux's complaints will represent a chance to break free of the eternal pressure to be "glowingly pregnant" but for others of us it feels perilously close to reinforcing the kind of body image issues we're hoping to finally escape now that we're knocked up and temporarily out of the game. Some examination of our society's misogynistic contempt for the maternal figure would be a valuable addition to a book like this one. For every mother who finds her pregnant body impossibly uncomfortable there is one like me who found it a source of wonder and liberation. ("Disappearing Mums," March 24, 2013 <http://bluemilk.wordpress.com/2013/03/07/review-of-things-i-didnt-expect-when-i-was-expecting-by-monica-dux>)

Fox's call for an "examination of our society's misogynist contempt for the maternal figure" appears to be born out of her experiences, a sentiment that is echoed throughout the blogs. This expressed surprise in the pleasure *in maternalis* is problematic mainly because it is highly antithetical to neoliberal culture that assigns personal worth with paid employment, and

paid employment rarely supports maternity. Women, steeped in such a culture, are caught off guard by the physical work of pregnancy. Connors explains this work here:

I was completing my doctoral degree in political philosophy when I was pregnant with Emilia. Before the pregnancy, I lived pretty much entirely in my head, and so it was a shock to be dragged so fully and completely into my body, into my meaty, physical self, and be stuck there. Yes, stuck. I felt stuck. I couldn't concentrate efficiently and consistently. I had to nap more often, which is to say, always. Some days, I couldn't make it to campus because I was just so exhausted from the work of being pregnant—the passive but nonetheless utterly fatiguing work of having one's body devote itself entirely to nurturing a fetus—and if I did make it, I would invariably fall asleep in my office before I'd made it through a single page of my dissertation. My mind wandered constantly, but not upward, toward the pure Platonic Form of wisdom, but to the flutters in my belly, to the heart beating, literally, next to mine, to the tiny foot planted squarely on my bladder. (“Jillian Michaels Hates Your Body. Maybe. Or Not. Should You Care?” *Her Bad Mother*, April 26, 2010, <http://herbadmother.com/2010/04/jillian-michaels-hates-your-body-jillian-michaels-can-suck-it/>.)

Being “exhausted from the work of being pregnant” does not carry much authority in an “employment-for-all” society, nor does it help women “lean in” to their careers. Yet the bloggers are attempting to carve out and re-write what counts as sexuality. Ironically, the medium in which they do this work is part of the system they wish to counter. Mommy bloggers feed into the digital, capital media system as they rally against the damage cause by the older, broadcast capital media system.

## CONCLUSION

### *Mother/Media Body, Part II*

While digital technology exemplifies the networking of the self, it also affords new intimacies and new bodies. Coming to terms with bodies, and feelings about them, online, mommy bloggers showcase how intimately technology aids in the work of subjectivity. This intimacy is not lost on the bloggers as they are often reflective about how such media shifts their

relationships to their bodies, to their own self-perceptions, and to others. Woolf folds herself, her blog, and her readers into the following post:

Dear GGC Reader/Fellow Mom-Blogger/Friend,

I have been thinking a lot about you, all of you . . . Those of you who come here, comment here, have sites of your own that I frequent, new friends, and I want to say thank you for the joie de vivre dot com you have brought to my life since I started GGC (formerly CBH2.)

It was pretty lonely going through pregnancy with no pregnant/mom friends and I turned to sites like [babycenter](#) for advice and kept mainly to myself. My dude friends pretty much fell out of my life, except for [Uncle Frank](#), of course. I can't blame them really. Getting knocked up and pregnant is like kryptonite for a gal's guy-friendships.

Suddenly I found myself desperate for women. I wanted to talk about girl-stuff. Vaginas and boobs and maternity wear. I wanted to giggle with a gaggle of gal-pals. I wanted to French braid someone's hair and then do a switcheroo. I wanted to get my nails did.

Since starting this blog, I feel like I have fulfilled my need to surround myself with like-minded women. I feel close to many of you. I read what you write and nod my head. You have reached out to me and I am grateful. Truly. It means more to me than I can describe. You are more than "bloggy friends" I read. You are people that I want to know. You're like friends with benefits. Women with ideas and advice, warmth and some serious motherly lovin.

So this post is really a (lame attempt at a) thank you to all of you who have restored my love and respect for women and my pride in being one. You truly are mother-figures not only to your children but to your peers, specifically me. If I could kiss you, I would . . . But alas, the distance . . . So if you could just kiss yourself for me. Like that. Perfect. ("Friends with Benefits: A GGC Love Letter to Momz," January 25, 2006, <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2006/01/friends-with-benefits-ggc-love-letter.html>).

Through the blogs and digital technology, these mothers generate a body with different capacities—the capacity to connect to others, to see beyond and challenge cultural beauty standards, and to normalize the maternal body in all its variations. Examples of this digital body include the post like Woolf's above. She finds relationships, real ones, online where they had been absent in her offline life. The "letter" to these women crosses a boundary between on- and

offline life spaces through the “motherly lovin’” they provide. Woolf (2006) articulates the ways maternity extends through the digital: “You truly are mother-figures not only to your children but to your peers, specifically me.” Blogging brings this personal, narrated, interembodied state to life—readers and writers instantly connect, comment, like, and share words and posts. One mother, of the now-defunct *Baby on Bored* blog, captured the physicality between the body, blog, and psyche when she described the numerous websites dedicated to showcasing bodies during and after pregnancy as a dose of “Xanax” for body insecurity. The blog posts that delve into bodily ambivalence and the surprising pleasures of maternity remake the maternal body.

Feminists have been skeptical about technology because of the tendency toward “a detrimental displacement and devaluation of the human body, especially the female body” (Clough 2012:94). Not only do bloggers call out unrealistic beauty standards and what they feel are arbitrary weight and body expectations from the medical world, they also highlight the constraints imposed on sexuality, beauty, and feminine experience. The collective presence of mothers online challenges media that rests on the male gaze, supplementing it with a digital maternal gaze, or images that contradict conventional representations of women, the family and maternity. The mommy blog network is filled with examples of every bodily condition or experience, and the abundant retelling of the body effectively removes the shame and isolation that many women reportedly feel about their bodies. It is this carving out of both the pleasures and necessities of interembodiment, whether maternal or digital, that articulates feminist politics. In an interview on *The Mamfesto* (2012), Fox calls for more connections between blogging and personal, embodied life:

This brings me to something important . . . I don’t think I do this nearly enough on my blog because it has become less and less anonymous—but I am now convinced that feminists want very much to read about how other feminists are living their lives. There is a huge curiosity among us about the in’s and out’s of feminist lives. We don’t have a

lot of role models, we don't have a lot of traditions to follow. We want to know how you arrange your life, what decisions you're making, what are the challenges, where do you feel compromised, what do you fight about with your partner and how does it get resolved, what are you lying in bed at night stewing over at 3am as a feminist? And in that, a good feminist blogger has a lot to offer all feminist readers regardless of whether they are parents or not. Because we share many similar questions—whose career is getting prioritised, will you get married, will you take your partner's name, will your relationship be “open” one day, how are you working on your relationship, what do you like about being single, how do you feel about getting older and losing conventional definitions of sexual desirability, whose job is it to clean the toilet, how do you manage your body image issues when you see your family for the holiday season, are you free to grow, who are you becoming? We want to know this stuff about other feminists so my advice would also be not to diminish your blog if you're blogging about “the personal”, it's important. (“The Femisphere: More Mama Bloggin’,” April 16, 2012, <http://themamafesto.wordpress.com/2012/04/16/the-femisphere-more-mama/>).

Fox suggests that feminists should seize the opportunities afforded by digital platforms to re-write feminism by unearthing connections between life, body, and blogs. They should, in other words, capitalize on the ways women graft technologies onto and into their lives. A reader on Fox's blog proposes that blogging about motherhood is more than kvetching because:

it allows us some small way of speaking back to the expectation that mothers must give all to their children while simultaneously being found wanting for doing so.

Maybe it's an act of protest that goes beyond the personal dynamic of mother-child into the politics of motherhood and social change?

### *Neoliberal Feminist Politics: The Threat and Promise of Interembodiment*

Both embodiment and interembodiment are feminist issues and motherhood puts them in sharp relief. The importance and placement of the mother's body as part of definitions of “good” mothering recently played out within the very corporations that provide social media platforms that mommy bloggers, along with billions of others, utilize for social networking and distributing content. Two specific examples from Facebook and Yahoo illustrate the politics of interembodiment with both babies and with media.

Kate Losse, author of *The Boy Kings* (2012), offers a sharp critique of the social media-sponsored, feminist campaign to “lean in” that was spearheaded by the chief operating officer of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg. Using self-help language, Sandberg’s book, *Lean In* (2013), encourages women to push for more recognition and responsibility in their careers, to be an always-available worker, and to untether from outside obligations. In so doing, she puts the burden on individual women to combat structural inequalities and institutional discrimination.

Losse critiques *Lean In* along these lines but also highlights the way Sandberg’s feminism strikes at the interembodied time of women’s lives. Losse (2013) writes:

The fact that *Lean In* is really waging a battle for work and against unmonetized life is the reason pregnancy, or the state of reproducing life, looms as the corporate Battle of Normandy in *Lean In*. Pregnancy, by virtue of the body’s physical focus on human reproduction, is humanity’s last, biological stand against the corporate demand for workers’ continuous labor. For Sandberg, pregnancy must be converted into a corporate opportunity: a moment to convince a woman to commit further to her job. Human life as a competitor to work is the threat here, and it must be captured for corporate use, much in the way that Facebook treats users’ personal activities as a series of opportunities to fill out the Facebook-owned social graph.

The “threat” to which Losse refers can be understood as the interembodied life of mother and child, especially for certain segments (middle-class, educated, feminist, and relatively privileged) of American and Western women who, often, highly value and espouse the attachment parenting ideal (AP)<sup>4</sup>. As previously detailed, pregnancy interferes with paid work.

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<sup>4</sup> Attachment parenting stresses the importance of skin-to-skin contact, breastfeeding on demand, co-sleeping, and “wearing” your baby as much as possible. The main proponent of AP, William Sears, went as far as to encourage women to quit their jobs if at all possible so they may foster strong attachments. Ironically AP owes its popularity to social media platforms such as Facebook, which allow parents to join groups and learn from one another.

What Losse considers the “Battle of Normandy” is not exclusive to Facebook. The recent brouhaha surrounding Marissa Mayers, the chief executive officer of Yahoo!, provides another example of the problem with the mother/baby body and the the social media industry. Mayers announced that Yahoo! would be ending the work-from-home option many of its employees utilized: all workers would have to work at their office. The leaked Yahoo! memo (found here: <http://allthingsd.com/20130222/physically-together-heres-the-internal-yahoo-no-work-from-home-memo-which-extends-beyond-remote-workers/>) explains the decision:

To become the absolute best place to work, communication and collaboration will be important, so we need to be working side-by-side. That is why it is critical that we are all present in our offices. ... We need to be one Yahoo!, and that starts with physically being together.

Beginning in June, we’re asking all employees with work-from-home arrangements to work in Yahoo! offices. ... Being a Yahoo isn’t just about your day-to-day job, it is about the interactions and experiences that are only possible in our offices.

Yahoo! recognizes the importance of interembodiedment, but only that of the workers to each other and to the physical space of the office. While the “perk” of working from home is not a given in any industry, mothers who blog claimed that this policy disproportionately hurts workers who often have exorbitant childcare costs or patched-together care networks that can go haywire with one bout of the flu. The real rub of Yahoo!’s decision came out of Mayer’s own pregnancy and motherhood. She returned to work almost immediately after giving birth because she had a nursery built into her office. Mothers blogged the hypocrisy throughout their networks.

The privilege to develop the interembodied state of AP remains economically untenable for increasing numbers of women. The co-opting of feminism by corporate logics such as lean in further entrenches the “farewell to maternalism” ideologies that push employment-for-all (Orloff 2006) and justify cutting social programs and supports. American women who, as compared to

other first world countries, already have the least amount of maternity leave and protections. Ann Crittenden puzzled over why American women especially do not feel “entitled” to social programs such as extended and paid maternity leave (personal communication date). The corporate branded feminism emphasis on work above all contributes to shifting the debate and rhetoric away from maternal supports and the value of interembodiment.

Angela McRobbie connects the spread of neoliberal thought to the erasure of the feminist fight for universal, socialized childcare. The “lean in” feminism and Yahoo example provide an instance of “the value of feminism for the neoliberal regime, offering a distinctively gendered dimension to the mantra of individualism, the market and competition” (2013:121). McRobbie further notes the racial-gender dimension of this corporate, neoliberal feminism: “Imperative to this new neoliberal feminism is its stand and status in regard to its imagined other; the Muslim woman assumed to be oppressed and subjected to various forms of domination and control” (McRobbie 2013:121). Leaning in becomes the only freedom, and the threatening alternative an extreme form of racialized, traditional patriarchy.

Losse and McRobbie both point out how maternity threatens the bottom line of many employers yet neither fully account for the source of value mothers bring to digital platforms. As I have shown here, mommy bloggers’ labor connects millions of women online, producing not only content for platforms, value for social media corporations, but also producing contemporary motherhood. The labor of motherhood provides the content for the labor of blogging, and the consumption of blogging feeds back into experience and practice, the labor, of motherhood. Future feminist politics must keep the interembodied nature of maternity and media front and center.

## CHAPTER 4

### SCENES OF DESIRE, ATTUNEMENT, REPRESSION, AND RETURN:

#### THE MATERNAL AS WRITTEN

##### INTRODUCTION: MATERNAL THEN AND NOW

Lauren Berlant introduced her 1988 paper “The Female Complaint” with a story about Erica Jong, the novelist praised for writing about femininity, heterosexuality, fantasy, and desire in her famous novel *Fear of Flying* (1973). Berlant recounted a speaking engagement where a radical feminist audience booed Jong for “reading a series of poems that celebrated pregnancy and birth while affirming a woman’s strength and power” (Berlant 1988:237). The audience, allegedly, felt betrayed by Jong and by feminism in this moment of maternal performance.

Fast forward to 2010 and Jong is once again discussing motherhood, but in a much more critical manner. In an editorial for the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) titled “Mother Madness” (November 6, 2010), Jong writes, among other things, that our cultural standards surrounding motherhood are “a prison for mothers, and represents as much of a backlash against women’s freedom as the right-to-life movement.” She is speaking about (and against) many of the ideals and standards of “attachment parenting” (AP)—the philosophy that parents should work to physically and emotionally attach to their child because the child’s development can be molded

and maximized by touch and intimacy. And, “parents” here often means mother—extended breastfeeding makes up a large slice of the AP pie. Jong professes:

Indeed, although attachment parenting comes with an exquisite progressive pedigree, it is a perfect tool for the political right. It certainly serves to keep mothers and fathers out of the political process. If you are busy raising children without societal help and trying to earn a living during a recession, you don’t have much time to question and change the world that you and your children inhabit. What exhausted, overworked parent has time to protest under such conditions?

Jong’s essay spread like fire on the Internet, especially through mommy blogs. This time the audience, now virtual, of mothers felt burned by Jong. Jong’s claim that the practices of many mothers were anathema to feminism (and even against their child’s best interest) upset many because, as many bloggers suggested, it pit women, feminists, and mothers against each other in a debate that this audience sees as only smoke and mirrors, the media equivalent to a toddler’s clamoring for attention.

It didn’t stop there: In a follow-up editorial for the *New York Times* online parenting blog “The Motherload,” Jong responded to the criticisms of her WSJ piece and directly attacked mommy bloggers: “All the rage of the mommy bloggers would be better spent on political pro-parent action than on one-upping each other about who is the better parent” (“From Erica Jong,” *New York Times*, November 10, 2010). Again, bloggers and readers immediately voiced the idea that mothers make an easy target and mothers can never “do” motherhood right.

Overlooked in this online storm was the essay written by Erica’s daughter, Molly Jong-Fast (“Growing up with Ma Jong,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 6, 2010), about her own experience of motherhood (and of her experience being mothered by Jong) that followed Jong’s original piece in the WSJ. Jong-Fast practices, and loves, the attachment parenting her mother critiques; after reading her defense of attachment parenting, Jong’s call for “protest” seems completely out of touch. Jong-Fast also describes a fear she felt animated her mother’s choices:

“To my mother and grandmother, children were the death of a dream; they were the death of one’s ambition.” Jong-Fast ends the piece by thanking her mother and other feminists of her mother’s generation as their work led directly to the choices women have today, including the choice to stay home.

Ironically, it was because of my mother’s hard work that I have the life I do now. She worked hard so that the women of my generation could have the choice to work or to stay home. She slept in hotel rooms in San Diego so that I could cuddle with my own children. She spoke to large groups of women in Toledo so that I could work at the school book fair. We can devote ourselves to our work, or we can decide to be 1950s June Cleaver types. And that’s because of the sacrifices that my mom and her feminist comrades made.

Sacrifice for Jong, as imagined by her daughter, is motherhood itself, while sacrifice for Jong-Fast is whatever impedes motherhood and “choice.” An “impasse” has emerged: Just as Jong feels out of touch with mothers today, her daughter, and the mothers of today, feel out of touch with the feminist struggles of the recent past.

In this chapter I unpack this very moment of disconnection between the figuring of the mother, and argue that technological changes in writing and media collude with changes in our ideas, academic and otherwise, about mothering and motherhood. Of specific interest here is in the shifting understanding of the “desire” to mother. From Jong’s motherhood and feminism (and methods of writing her desire) to that of her daughter’s generation, the figure of the mother has a different story, attaches to different fantasies, and a different medium for telling. Women like Jong-Fast (as in, women of a certain class and educational rank) and, surprisingly, today’s feminists express a certain “desire” to mother children and to do so in a way that looks, outwardly at least, like the 1950s version that older feminists rallied against. This appearance is deceptive because the telling of motherhood today rests on an entirely different media architecture.

The registers of motherhood, mothering, and the mother figure have shifted. I focus here on three locations that manifest this shift, starting with the move from the novel to the blog. The novel works through the narrative form, which has been argued to rely on an oedipal subject. The structure of the blog does not support the traditional narrative form and, instead, relies more on the earliest psychic mechanism of transformation. The blogs do not, cannot, tell a story of a figure who experiences some crisis and overcomes it by the end of the story. The subject of the blog tells of moments of attunement to motherhood. Psychoanalytic theory undergirds many readings of texts and literature, and it also has been a key discourse in the making of the mother figure. The shift from narrative to attunement has seen a concurrent shift in psychoanalytic thought on the mother and her desire. I pull all of these registers together here to understand the move between Jong and Jong-Fast, and to illuminate where feminism may need to look today.

*Shifting the Desire Apparatus: From Repression to Transformation*

Of course, the word “desire” cannot be spoken without sounding the Foucauldian alarms. Here, desire “always already” has a discursive foundation and materializes through technological mediation, experts, institutions. Discourse forms objects of, and interpolates subjects who, desire by ceaselessly articulating their repression—or constantly figuring what thwarts their ability to act on their desire. From the early novel to academic research, “feminine desire” has a history of being both the subject and object of inquiry, suppression, and neglect. Writing technology itself is part of the desire apparatus—what it supports determines, shapes, and changes what we can know and hence produce. As digital technologies have shifted, analogous shifts in the subject who speaks, writes, or, in my case, blogs “desire” has also taken shape. And, as the subject of desire changes, so do its many objects.

Ultimately, this chapter shows how desire is predicated on the prevalent narrative form of the times (and the narrative itself is a function of writing technology), from modernity and the novel to postmodernity and the blog. As such, the structure of desire in the novel does not correspond to the narrative of the blogs. Blogs work more with and through what Kathleen Stewart (2010) labels “attunement,” what Clough (2012b) considers an “affective transformation” (especially as a transformational process), or what Berlant (2008) refers to as “fantasy.” The repressed desire of modernity, which Foucault deconstructed, required a narrativized, individual, Oedipal subject; after studying these blogs, I argue this subject is nowhere to be found.

The writing and narrative on mommy blogs highlights the deployment and engagement of a different psychic structure: the pre-object, transformational desire/process. Online narratives are less concerned with coherence, less linear, and more piecemeal, preconscious, repetitive. Time itself on the blogs is beyond a beginning-middle-end, instead bringing a “not-yet-lived or future experience into the presence” (Clough 2012b: <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/Public-Feelings-Responses/Patricia-Ticineto-Clough-The-Transformational-Object-of-Cruel-Optimism.pdf>). Specifically, blogs, as a commodity, bring a future experience into the moment because they motivate its users, (in other words, consumers), to work on and through them. Commodities in Clough’s (2012b) account offer transformation—the “regressed” pre-object state that Bollas describes (1987:14) as “a recurrent experience of being” that is “more existential” than “representational.” As commodities provide “something in the future to transform the present” (Bollas 1987:16) they become “intensified market activity” that acts as “a prime socializer or resource of motivation” (Clough 2012b).

Commodities deploy our deepest, most primal need for transformation and in doing so open capital to areas previously outside of its moneyed circuits—the home and the mother (and the baby!). The blogs, then, socialize by promising transformation, which is “not a desire,” through consuming products, ideas, or facilitating conversation (Bollas 1987:24). Not only is blogging a transformational activity, it is also a transaction between the blogger and her readers as both offer bits and pieces of themselves to each other (Clough 1992, 2012b). This digital activity props up the market, props up digital capital, and props up the mother.<sup>5</sup>

The repressed desire of which Foucault wrote needs rethinking as it created and then relied on an autonomous subject written into being through realist narrative, instead of the blogged self of “bits and pieces,” written through its attunement to its environments. The concept of attunement highlights how commodities can transform and helps us rethink desire in online environments. Specifically, I flesh out the idea of a digital, maternal attunement—a reflective writing that endlessly situates the writer and reader to the affects of motherhood; a writing that takes up all the moments, impulses, and feelings that occur between love and loss that have dominated the modernist, narrative of mothering. Such in-between moments occur “when a list of incommensurate yet mapped elements throws itself together into something. Again” (Stewart

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<sup>5</sup> More interesting is how this activity gets transmitted to the baby; if mothers are socialized through blogs, they bring this socialization to their moments with their children. It is a circuit of capital that uses the mother for direct mediation between the baby and the market. (Of course, capital always has used the mother as mediator but she was kept out of the market for such purposes).

2007:30). The blogs endlessly “throw together” elements, objects, environments, and desires of motherhood without concern for or presentation of a unified subject.

I locate such attunement on the following blogs, which I draw from extensively here: *dash and bella*, *Girl Gone Child*, *Kim Foster NYC*, *Mom-101*, *Simple Lovely*. All of these women are successful bloggers, have large followings, and have been blogging for more than three years. They are all white, appear to be middle to upper middle class, and live in urban areas.

### *From the Mother of Desire to the Desiring Mother*

Academic discourse is itself a productive node in the production of desire, motherhood, and feminism and it is necessary to briefly review how the mother has figured here. Academics have extensively studied the conditions surrounding motherhood—but mainly taken the mother as a passive object onto which things happen: poverty, strain, inequality, neoliberalism, joy, love. After a thorough review of the social science scholarship on motherhood through the 1990s, Terry Arendell (2000:1202) suggested scholars did not successfully map the affects, the subjectivities of motherhood, and that future research should pay “more attention to mothers’ own voices,” or answer the questions “how do various women feel about being mothers” and “what, exactly, do mothers do?” It is almost uncanny how the mommy blogs would explode a few years later, filled with nothing but feelings about motherhood. At the time of publication, Arendell’s suggestion to investigate the inner life of the mother, according to Kawash (2011), fell on deaf ears. It wasn’t until 2009, nearly a decade later, that Victoria Pitts Taylor and Schaffer dedicated an issue of *Women’s Studies Quarterly* to motherhood.

Kawash (2011:972) suggests one reason the topic of motherhood was abandoned by scholars in the late twentieth century was because “[t]he deconstruction of ‘woman’ and the

poststructuralist accounts of gender and power left motherhood to the side, an embarrassing theoretical relic of an earlier naive view of the essential woman and her shadow, the essential mother.” Motherhood, when considered discursively, was a confluence of tricks orchestrated by capital and patriarchy, one that any self-respecting woman would avoid. Despite the valuable work of poststructuralists to destabilize identities and detach gender from biology (see Butler 1993) the reality remains that “reproduction cannot be dissociated from the female body” (Kawash 2011:990) and a rethinking of bodies and their capacities has come back into vogue. As Freud famously noted, the repressed always returns. As scholarship on motherhood has picked up some are reinvestigating the sweeping of “the maternal” under the rug. Or, as Lisa Baraitser (2009:17) asks, “Why is it so difficult to keep putting the maternal back on the table, as a substantive area for social science investigations, for theoretical investigations, for psychoanalytic investigations, for literary investigations?”

The elision of the mother is especially noticeable in psychoanalytic theories, theories that start with the mother-infant relationship. This relationship has traditionally, and until recently, been considered from the perspective of the infant. Even Nancy Chodorow’s (1978) seminal contribution to both sociology and psychoanalytic theory, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, focuses on motherhood as it emerges from the perspective of the young woman, the daughter. In her preface to the second edition, Chodorow (1999:xvii) notes: “*The Reproduction of Mothering* is written from the daughter’s point of view more than that of the mother, even as the kernel of the mother’s viewpoint, in the psychological capacities, desires, and identities whose development it describes, can be elicited from within it.” Dianne Elise (2008:74) argues that the mother–daughter relationship Chodorow illuminates has been thought of as the very mechanism that quells feminine agency and desire: “Merger in the mother-daughter relationship has been a

major lens through which to view lack of autonomy and agency in sexuality, aggression, competition, achievement, power and authority—all aspects of desire subsumed in the wish to secure relational bonds.” The “bonds of love” implicit in motherhood (or the imagined self-sacrifice and endless unpaid, tedious labor) threaten the autonomous positions that women and feminists (depending on class, race, gender, etc.) have either fought for or been increasingly forced into. As Daphne De Marneffe (2004:58) writes, “Motherhood is, in the first instance, a relationship,” one that “seems radically at odds with the kind of goal oriented activity that is commonly viewed as leading to success.”

Second-wave feminism played a part in detaching biology from subjectivity. Daughters of second-wave feminism learned about motherhood from classics such as Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (1976), Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), and Jessica Benjamin’s *The Bonds of Love* (1986). All of these books highlight how a woman’s autonomy is compromised in and through motherhood—that “there was something inherently disempowering in being a mother caring for one’s children; that patriarchal society had instigated and enforced the disadvantageous position for women; and that it was a goal of theory to unearth the unconscious tributaries feeding this oppression” (De Marneffe 2004:63). In that line of thinking, a woman came to desire motherhood because she was seeking a deep connection, merger, with another since she reluctantly and incompletely separated from her own mother. For Chodorow (1978), this gendering of psychic structures gets passed on through generations and is one of the main obstacles to equality: as soon as men can connect and women can successfully separate, the gender war will melt into air. Yet, as with the generational shift between Jong and her daughter, a few decades later De Marneffe (2004:64) asks why the so-called desire to mother is “never

treated as a motivator or first cause” and why this maternal desire was “not fully articulated, almost as if it were politically suspect.”

Thus, a new theory of mothering starts with the mother, and her desires. “Maternal desire” reflects the “longing felt by a mother to nurture her children; the wish to participate in their mutual relationship; and the choice, insofar as it is possible, to put her desire into practice” (De Marneffe 2004:3). She carefully defines this desire because it easily comes across as antifeminist, conservative, or religious, none of which she considers apt to her conceptualization of desire:

I juxtapose “maternal” and “desire” to emphasize what we feel oddly uncomfortable focusing on: that wanting to care for children is a major feature of many women’s lives. We often resist thinking through its implications because we fear becoming mired in clichés about woman’s nature, which will then be used to restrict women’s rights and freedoms. (De Marneffe 2004: 6)

Again, while she does not deny the economic self-sacrifice society imposes on motherhood, she draws attention to the trickier aspect of psychological self-sacrifice. Psychological self-sacrifice is felt both as self-abnegating and as an “intrinsically valuable impulse, as an expression of what [the mother] subjectively experiences as her authentic self” (De Marneffe 2004:8). Bloggers get this. Cue the many passages from Rebecca Woolf, author of the blog *Girl Gone Child*, who repeatedly writes about finding herself through motherhood:

I am not and never will be defined by motherhood, but I will wholeheartedly admit that motherhood has inspired and enabled me to define myself. . . . *Girl’s Gone Child* is proof that parenting has changed me, moved me, agreed with me, that having a child has given this girl more than she could have imagined. Mommy. Mom. Woman with offspring...Whatever people are saying this week. (“On Past and Present Futures,” August 2, 2006, <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2006/08/on-past-and-present-futures.html>)

I would have grown up eventually. I would have been fine, more than fine even. I would have found happiness and love and dot dot dot, but that’s not what happened. This is what happened. I got pregnant. I had a baby. I became myself, and THAT is what this

blog is all about. (“The Changes that Occur Overnight” August 18, 2011, <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2011/08/changes-that-occur-overnight-sponsored.html>)

It wasn’t until Archer was born that everything changed. Everything changed, everything changed, everything changed I will say it a thousand more times until I’m blue and pass out and then I will wake up and say it again because it’s the truth. Archer’s birth was the first time I let myself be happy. Truly, honestly, without guilt happy. And even though, in the first few years after his birth, I suffered and struggled and spent many a night, day, week crying over a new and confusing life, I was free. (“In Defense of Happiness,” June 28, 2010 <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2010/06/in-defense-of-happiness.html>).

Freedom, of course, can only be found if one is previously unfree—or repressed, according to Foucault (1978). Repression of maternal desire floats through the discourses of motherhood, in both academia and online media.

While De Marneffe focuses more on how maternal desire is repressed, partly because we cannot see it or hear it, the blogger at *Girl Gone Child* explores this scene of repression and asks:

Is being happy unforgivable?

Must we hide the fact that we love being mothers or fathers, women and men? That we love being with our children? That we think we are doing a damn good job?

I have to believe that many of you are like me—that you are afraid to admit to the world that you are amazing. That no matter how hard it gets, you are proud of who you are as people and parents.

Because I’m so tired of all of us thinking it’s necessary to wax poetic every week about how much we suck at being mothers and how hard it is and how afraid we are that we are fucking up our young. Day after day. Blog post after blog post. Memoir after memoir.

Fulfillment and confidence and joy should not be stifled or hidden or kept secret. No one should feel embarrassed to admit they think they’re awesome: a good parent. (“Good Parent,” May 1, 2007, <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2007/05/good-parent.html>).

Academics are especially tone-deaf to this desire: The questions and interpretations of academic studies reiterate the devaluation of a woman’s desire to mother. A recent study on parenting by Steven and Christopher Rhoads (2012) takes on new meaning when interpreted

through De Marneffe's theory. The study found that in terms of childcare, enjoyment, and sharing of household labor between women and men tenure-track professors, women do more childcare than men and, importantly, enjoy it more. The study corroborates De Marneffe finding, unbeknownst to the researchers, that female professors with young children (two and under) report greater enjoyment caring for them than do male professors. The authors also found that when men were given paternity leave they used it to further their publishing work, turning their time home into a sabbatical and furthering gender inequality in academia.

The discrepancy of enjoyment led the researchers to conclude that policies that stress the awarding of equal parental leave end up hurting women. Attitudes towards gender equality were not the problem in this sample, enjoyment (or pleasure to care for a child) was. The results of the study perplexed the investigators because the logical conclusion is that policies that encourage equity in parenting are off target. In fact, many feminists, including Chodorow, have argued that fathers' involvement in childcare and household labor is central to achieving equality. But through the lens of maternal desire it may be the case that childcare means more to (some) women; our inability to see this and respect it tells us more about our culture and an internalized sexism than about motherhood per se. This forces another, different question: what would policies look like that supported parents' differences in enjoyment of childcare? How could we allow women (and especially men) to act on their desire to be mothers and achieve equality in the workplace and society at large?

Thus, De Marneffe (2004:5) finds it all the more pressing to investigate why, for women, "caring for their children matters deeply." She asks, "what if we were to take this mattering seriously, to put it at the core of our exploration?" but then immediately warns:

even to pose the question is to invite almost instant misconstrual. It's as if this would recommend to women to live through others, forsake equality, or relax into the joys of

subsidized homemaking. But that reflexive misinterpretation is itself evidence of how difficult it is to think about maternal desire as a positive aspect of the self. (De Marneffe 2004:5)

## WRITING DESIRE: THE NOVEL AND THE BLOG

Foucault hovers and haunts De Marneffe's investigation of maternal desire because, as he articulated, the repression of desire is always discursive. Nancy Armstrong (1987:13) writes, "Foucault asks us, in other words, to understand repression at once as a rhetorical figure and as a means of producing desire." His infamous words express this here: "the question I would like to pose is not, Why are we repressed? But rather, Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?" (Foucault 1978:17).

By claiming desire is repressed, maternal or otherwise, we simultaneously create the idea of freedom, truth, and a way to have a "self-encounter" with the world (Berlant 2012:7). All of which is to say, we create repression to create desire. Armstrong (1987:11) infers that Foucault "asks us to think of modern desire as something that depends on language and particularly on writing." His theories of repression and desire prove to be crucial to understanding the modern, narrativized subject since "writing actively conceals the history of sexuality by turning repression into narrative form" (Armstrong 1987:13). And, as Clough (1992:5) argues, "narrativity puts unconscious desire into play," which simultaneously then "restrict[s] the play of unconscious desire." The writing and discourse Foucault wrote of was a discourse of modernity and, Clough (1992) adds, a narrative, oedipal logic.

Katherine Fitzpatrick argues that personal blogging is an emergent literary form that shares important similarities with the early novel—both have been coded as "feminine" and brought attendant anxieties about their literary worth. The early novel "made female forms of

desire central to its concern” (Fitzpatrick 2007:173). As Armstrong (1987) carefully delineates, the focus on feminine desire found in the early novel was a way to fashion a modern subjectivity and rework the location of political power. Women characters in those novels navigated a changing political landscape and helped bring into being a subject who was above all an individual, free from the politics of kinship and the precedent of tradition (Armstrong 1987). The early novels generated anxiety about their low-brow cultural value in part because of their focus on women. Armstrong (1987:5) clearly states, “the female was the figure, above all else, on whom depended the outcome of the struggle among competing ideologies.”

Desire in literary texts can be mapped through psychoanalytic theories as such theories provide a useful language to read texts and understand the assumptions on which various subjective positions cohere. Clough (1992:3) describes the connection between narrativity, psychoanalytic thought, and desire: “Thus the shift to the study of narrativity also draws on psychoanalysis, not only because of the relationship of narrative and desire but because desire is disavowed in narrative, shaping the subject of reading and writing unconsciously.” For Clough (1992:4), oedipal narrativity (or a drama that has a beginning, middle, and end) rests on the logic of sexual identity, which is “always informed with the loss of the mother as well as the refusal of that loss.” Stories work to reunify the subject, to bring an unconscious satisfaction of wholeness, but this is a “defensive” move made to “disavow and supplement the failure of identity” (Clough 1992:4). The narrative itself is the defense, imposing coherence because such coherence is unknown, unknowable. Reading texts with this interpretive logic highlights the unconscious structures on which subjective positions rest. Woolf, again, mocks the Oedipal script here:

I can unflinchingly write about my deepest secrets. I can be self-deprecating, write about turmoil and pain and the raw truth, no problem. I can easily write about feeling like a bad person and a shitty mother, and I admit, at times I do feel that way.

It is clear that people want what is raw and honest and the truth. People want to read about people who struggle and are in pain. The idiosyncratic parent. The fucked-up hero. The unlikely star.

Because there is no such thing...

As being alone. (“Good Parent,” May 1, 2007, <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2007/05/good-parent.html>).

The storyline she describes captures the oedipal search for coherence, and the desire to read about a reality that is “raw and honest and the truth,” out of which “the fucked-up hero” emerges. She questions this logic as she realizes it no longer makes sense: there is no raw truth to uncover and, hence, no hero to come from the telling of it. Blogging as a discourse of desire operates through different technologies, mediums, and subjects. Thus, it generates less a maternal desire—a la Chodorow—than a maternal “attunement.”

There are certain clear parallels between the early novel and mommy blogs: they both touch on similar anxieties of worth and value and also express “the stuff” of families today. Yet, following Fitzpatrick, the subject of blogs differs in that the mother/writer is defined less by her individuality and more by and through her network. The self of a blog comes to be through readers, bloggers, hypertexts, links, and tag clouds instead of being encapsulated in a static document with a clear beginning and end. Readers get a “sense” of the blogger and her story but these scenes leak out to other online spaces. The following excerpt from the blogger Janelle Hanchett highlights how the network brings the blogger into being:

I want to write books. I want to make a living writing books. I can't do that if I'm killing myself working at outside jobs and raising kids (which I'm doing now), so I'm going to try to open up some time and space through this blog. There just isn't time to work and have kids and write big shit. I need a room of my own. I get you, Ms. Woolf.

Who knows? It might actually work.

Incidentally, part of this is your fault. You keep asking me to write a book. You keep telling me you'll read it. And you've given me fire, and hope, and a sense of direction. It's weird to figure out what you're supposed to be doing via accident. ("Dear Readers, Expect Some Changes Up In Here," March 1, 2014, <http://www.renegademothering.com/2014/03/01/dear-readers-expect-some-changes-up-in-here/>)

Hanchett "accidentally" finds herself via her readers and their encouragement. Anxieties about blogging arise, for both readers and writers, because we never know how closely the posts reflect reality, how much depth we are privy to, or how much foresight went into a post. As Fitzpatrick (2007:168) claims, the question with blog is always "Who is this?" Yet, these same uncertainties make the blogs pleasurable to read and watch unfold over time.

Such anxiety is assuaged on the blogs through the pleasure of accretion—bloggers offer bits and pieces of themselves and readers, over time, are able to locate her politically, geographically, economically. It is less about making "sense" of the blogger's character and more about whether the reader shares any affinities with her—is she married? Single? Happy? Liberal? Religious? Is she beautiful? What does she struggle with? Even, what does her home look like—what does she wear?

The blogged "self" take shape "through its million little narratives" (Fitzpatrick 2007:176). These "narratives" occur not only through writing: pictures, Pinterest boards, and Twitter feeds all provide various moments of the self. Such piecing together or, more apt, pulling apart of a self always brings the attending spectacle that no self is truly coherent: "A self constructed through the form of the blog is not discrete but distributed, not coherent but fragmented, not unique but profoundly socially situated" (Fitzpatrick 2007:178). The desire, pleasure, and anxiety are less in whether the bits add up and more in the ability to attune to each moment—to experience something online. Thus, the desire is for attunement itself.

## THE SCENE OF MATERNAL ATTUNEMENT

On the blog *dash and bella*, a post titled “I Know a Mama Who” brings together the voice of six different “mamas” and combines their scenes of self-encounter via motherhood into one stream of conscious text. In the below excerpt, all phrases begin with the title “I know a mama who . . . :

Knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that she could lift a truck if her son were trapped under it. Takes forever cooking dinner so that she can be by herself in the kitchen. Makes her son go without his morning milk because she needs it for her coffee. Kicks a hole in the kitchen wall. Desperately misses her pre-breastfeeding breasts. Drinks martinis while cutting her children’s hair. Grounds herself by placing a hand on her son’s head. Wants to run away once a month. Still believes that Prince Charming is coming. Yells *what the fuck* at her son. Parallel parks her car into a tree branch. Sneaks in while her children sleep and inhales their exhales. Has an abortion because she is scared her marriage won’t survive a third child. Keeps pretending she’s too tired to read “Charlotte’s Web” to her son because she doesn’t want to live through Charlotte dying again. Doesn’t love her babies until they’re no longer babies. Says to her son *you are my beauty cakes my little goose my precious donut*. Doesn’t always use a car seat. Calls her son a jerk in front of his best friend. Listens to Kelly Clarkson even when the kids aren’t in the car. Is always one poem away from bursting into tears. Climbs into bed with her son when he’s sleeping because that’s when it seems like he loves her the most. Is scared of her daughter’s beauty. Forgets she has children. Wonders if the love she feels for her son is the same kind of love that other moms feel. Gets jealous when someone else’s kid is amazing. Loves one of her children more than the other. Throws books at her husband. Feeds her son dinner in the bath. Yells at her kids a little bit every day. Calls her husband *motherfucker* in front of her son. Still knows the dance moves from Pat Benatar’s “Love is a Battlefield” video. Flirts with her daughter’s teacher. Is one tantrum away from taking away Christmas. Thinks white bean soup with potatoes and Brussels sprouts can fix anything. Wishes she had a large tribe of women picking her up, carrying her along, rooting her on. Says out loud *I’m a mama I’m a mama I’m a mama I’m a mama I’m a mama I’m a mama I’m a mama* and still doesn’t quite believe it. Feels like she’s drowning. Feels like a superhero. (“I know a mama who,” December 13, 2013, [http://dashandbella.blogspot.com/2012/12/i-know-mama-who\\_13.html](http://dashandbella.blogspot.com/2012/12/i-know-mama-who_13.html)”)

Most “mamas” would be hard pressed to not find something to connect with in this field of scenes: one can attune to one phrase, recoil from another, and still identify with the whole piece. There is no real “construction of a unified subject identity” here even if identification is possible with the text (Clough 1992:27).

As the above post illustrates, when reading blogs it is difficult to sort out who is authoring what, to pull apart fact from fiction. Much of the writing on the blogs does not necessarily operate on the oedipal logic of desire as described by Clough (1992) mainly because the technology behind the blog text does not force linearity: it complicates an arc of time and character because blogs, unlike novels, are, potentially, never ending and always hypertexting beyond their own boundaries and beyond the authority of the author.

The mommy blogs present, to borrow from Stewart, an “atmospheric attunement” to motherhood, or, what I consider a “maternal attunement”:

Atmospheric attunements are not just the effects of a distant something elsewhere but the actual affects of modes of living being brought into being. A commonplace, labor-intensive process that stretches across imaginaries, social fields, sediments and airs, linking disparate and incommensurate registers and scales into some kind of everything (<http://rubric.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Atmospheric-Attunements.pdf>)

Blogs are one such “labor-intensive” space and they are so successful because they attune us to potential objects, promising desires—they bridge the “gap between an object’s specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it” (Berlant 2012:12). In their instability, constant feedback, and textual, visual, and auditory modes, the blogs open and shade spaces between and around our objects of desire and pull us into future transformations.

The blogs, like clouds and atmospheres, shift from post to post, link to text. In the following excerpt from the post “So Close You Can Feel It,” Phyllis Grant writes of the atmosphere between memory, the kitchen, and motherhood:

Pick a dozen of the yellow flowers that shoot up every June and remind you of the day your son was born.

Ignore the dishes.

Regret never having written your son’s birth story.

Sigh out he's six he's six he's six oh how could he be six.

Almost cry.

Add insult to injury by trying on all of your bathing suits.

Clear your desk to clear your head.

Blaze through dozens of emails to make sure you haven't missed out on a teacher gift, a birthday party, a memory book, a let's-do-soccer-in-the-fall push, a trophy presentation, a we're-done-with-kindergarten party.

Rant we are ruining our children with all of these celebrations and making them feel too special and we need to let them be ordinary once in a while.

Distract yourself by thinking about what you're going to do with the apricots and cherries.

Feel the magnetic pull of your kitchen.

Realize when you bite into a firm apricot and then a lackluster cherry that you've jumped the gun a bit on summer.

Broil half of the fruit with olive oil, balsamic vinegar, olive oil, thyme, and ricotta.

Bake the remaining fruit into an apricot, cherry, and brown-butter crisp.

Groove to the extractive and color-enhancing properties of salt, sugar, and heat as they transform the apricots into tart and fluffy pillows and the cherries into a sticky sweet jam.

Rejoice that it's not even noon and *fuck yeah* the beds are made, the pantry is summer-ready, dinner and dessert are cooked.

Blast some music.

Do the dishes.

Do the dishes.

Do the dishes.

Sit back down at your desk.

Sip your coffee.

Float your way back to that sunny Saturday morning in 2007.

Remember your daughter holding your gaze, gripping your hands, swaying right along with you during those first few contractions, repeating *you can do it mama you can do it mama you can do it mama*.

Smile.

Write the story of your son's birth ("So Close You Can Feel It," June 12, 2013, <http://dashandbella.blogspot.com/2013/06/so-close-you-can-feel-it.html>)

The post concludes with a recipe for "broiled apricots and cherries with thyme" and mouthwatering pictures of the dish. Grant is, after all, a professional chef and after reading her blog, I never know what I am hungrier for—her writing, her food, or her attunement to motherhood.

Another post on Grant's blog articulates how desire in and for motherhood emerges from moments of "ordinary affects" (Stewart 2007). Such ordinary affects are "not so much forms of signification, or units of knowledge, as they are expressions of ideas or problems performed as a kind of involuntary and powerful learning and participation" (Stewart 2007:40). Here, the "ordinary" refers to "a circuit that's always tuned in to some little thing somewhere. A mode of attending to the possible and then threatening. . . . It flows through clichés of the self, agency, home, a life. It can pool up in little worlds of identity and desire" (Stewart 2007:12). In an imaginary conversation with the singer Taylor Swift, Grant transmits the ordinary affects of motherhood at age 43:

Without missing a beat, I can answer questions like do people eat cow brains, what is a MILF, when is our dog dying, can we go to Disneyland this weekend. I actually say things like do as I say not as I do, don't run with scissors, use your inside voice, if you

have nothing nice to say then don't say anything at all. I have this uncontrollable urge to watch my children sleep. I kiss kiss kiss them until they're awake enough to say I love you back. On a daily basis I hear how much I'm hated, how I never say yes, how I'm the meanest person on the planet. I haven't breastfed in almost five years but an expression of love, via a kid's hand on my heart, or a word uttered at just the right moment, or a glance smile sigh, will make my milk let down. My weekends are no longer mine. I will never ever sleep through the night again. But if people are telling me the truth, this phase will be over in a flash and I will be left with that quiet house I currently crave so much and an obsessive lifelong desire for my kids to come home please come home as often as you want please come home. ("This Morning I Yelled," May 10, 2013, <http://dashandbella.blogspot.com/2013/05/this-morning-i-yelled.html>).

The above posts highlight the complete shift in narrative structure with the rise of personal blogging. While many of the bloggers in my study also write books, blog writing can barely approximate the "fantasmatic construction of unified subject identity" of the novels that came before (Clough 1992:26).

#### THE TRANSFORMATION OF DESIRE

I propose here that the shift to a digital, socially mediated writing technology picks up desire at a different register; it picks up a narrative that is either "pre-object" or at least not structured on the "failure of identity" (Clough 1992:26). The narrative of the blogs is structured more on the transformational processes of early, pre-object life (Clough 2012). Transformation occurs when the mother "transforms" the infant's world before "delusion operate[s] in the infant's identification of the mother," meaning before the infant has a firm, possibly oedipalized, sense of self and other (Bollas 1987:15). Before the mother is lost, she "is experienced as a process of transformation" that patterns all future pursuits of objects that promise a shift in affective states. Bollas (1987:14) points out that "the quest is not to possess the object; rather the object is pursued in order to surrender to it as a medium that alters the self." Psychoanalysis and

academic scholarship, not to mention capital, has turned to the processes and promises of such future-oriented attunement.

Within previous academic research of mother-infant studies, De Marneffe (2004:68) suggests that the psychoanalytic interpretations are off: “in the interaction between a mother and a baby, both parties express a great deal more individuality than the somewhat swampy metaphor of merger evokes.” The merger between mother and baby is what must be violently severed in traditional psychoanalytic thought for the infant to develop a “self”; this severance leads to the disavowal that Clough (1992) describes as informing narrative. De Marneffe (2004:68) suggests that mothers and babies are far more attuned to each other as separate entities, and it is our ability to, finally, see this awareness that helps “create a new narrative more true to our experience.”

For example, in clinical settings, De Marneffe (2004:77) finds a connection between how parents narrate their past relationships to their own caregivers and the attachment style of said parents’ childrearing. It does not matter if, for example, a mother had a bad relationship with her mother—as long as she is able to reflect on it, her child has a better chance of attaching securely. The narrative structure here is less about a gendered disavowal of connection or forsaking independence and more about reflection and the ability to transform perceptions from the past into the future.

De Marneffe focuses on how such attunement structures experience, even when attunement is askew. She describes transformation: “A mother’s responsiveness combines both her willingness to enter into emotional states with her child—what we commonly call empathy—and her ability to reflect and offer a different perspective” (De Marneffe 2004:32). She further elaborates on transformation in the moments of daily life: “The normal back-and-forth between

two people who care for each other—the miscommunications, the repairs, the repeated attempts to connect and to elicit each other’s interest or pleasure—these are the ‘stuff’ of secure attachment and intimacy” (De Marneffe 2004:81).

These moments of attunement and the ability to transform perceptions and states, rooted as de Marneffe and Bollas suggest in early mother–infant relationships, is the stuff into which blogs and similar digital software tap. And, Clough (2012) notes how the “stuff” of transformation has now entered into circuits of capital. The formal subsumption of labor has gone beyond Oedipus to the pre-object dimension, the affective register (although “register” implies consciousness and affect is below this level) of the ordinary. Digital technology captures this “new narrative of the ordinary by supporting writing that is of the moment, and reflective, fleeting. The writing here moves the readers, however briefly, and then in a click, things change again. Factuality is no longer the ‘screen’ of desire against which a subject writes a “coherent self” (Clough 1992:112) the screen of desire is now seven open “tabs” of different voices, sites, pages, and layouts.

### *Scenes of the Ordinary, Objects of the Good Life*

Berlant (2012) offers a compelling case for the importance of desire in structuring and—central to her analysis—thwarting ordinary life, even if she does not discuss motherhood or maternalism per se. Desire keeps us attached, however tentatively, to the world—desire informs how the “conventional ideas of the good life get implanted in our viscera” (Berlant quoted in Rorotoko 2012,

[http://rorotoko.com/interview/20120605\\_berlant\\_lauren\\_on\\_cruel\\_optimism/?page=2](http://rorotoko.com/interview/20120605_berlant_lauren_on_cruel_optimism/?page=2)).

Berlant’s (2012:6) discussion opens up our thinking on desire:

Desire describes a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object's specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it. . . . Desire visits you as an impact from the outside, and yet, inducing an encounter with your affects, makes you feel as though it comes from within you; this means that your objects are not objective, but things and scenes that you have converted into propping up your world, and so what seems objective and autonomous in them is partly what your desire has created and therefor is a mirage, a shaky anchor. Your style of addressing those objects gives shape to the drama with which they allow you to reencounter yourself.

Addressing objects is how and where we endlessly reencounter our self: each mommy blog has its own style layout around a "cluster of promises" that attach to motherhood (Berlant 2012:6). The blogged mother is far from the previous psychoanalytic instantiation of a generic, faceless and castrated identity. Motherhood online can only be known in its unique telling on every unique blog. Like the psychosomatic experience of "stress," motherhood can "only be seen through its singularities . . . in order to see how its elements kept throwing themselves together through difference and event" (Stewart 2007:44).

Before one can feel desire, a million affective states and shifts occur under the surface: while desire is a state, attunement and affect may not be—they hum along as "the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences. They're things that happen" (Stewart 2007:2) even when things are "so not happening" (Stewart 2007:31). Taking the mommy blogs as a scene made of millions of smaller scenes, links, jumps, hypertexts, likes, and tags, they create a sense of endless self-encounter that, in its totality, creates an attunement to motherhood.

### *A Blogged "Scene" of Attuning to and from Desire*

One blog I have followed throughout this study, *Simple Lovely*, written by Joslyn Taylor, focuses, literally, on scenes. Taylor has a recurring post titled "scenes from the weekend" where

she publishes numerous pictures of her home, her daughters, and the activities—usually interior-design related—in which they engage. She never includes much text, which is good because it is in a painfully small and light font, but the pictures are beautiful; since she started blogging she has been hired as an editor for a lifestyle magazine in Dallas. All of her objects—from her jewelry, her children’s woodland fairy-themed birthday parties, her home décor, the food, backyard, their trips—are interesting, tasteful, and distance her from mass-produced motherhood. In her blogger profile, under her avatar, she situates herself by her taste and alignment with beautiful objects. She describes herself as: “Mama, magazine editor, sometimes maker. I like: Thelonious Monk, Stinson Beach, succulents, records, wood bowls, marble, 70’s pottery, Ilse Crawford, Cherner chairs, Leroy Grannis, Elliott Puckette, Cy Twombly, Bauhaus, Heath, Marfa...” Each of the above-listed “likes” is loaded not only with meaning, but style and coolness. She’s relaxed and beautiful, casually elegant. Taylor’s self-description resonates in Stewart’s (2007:51) consideration of “objects” as those things that “enact the dream of sheer circulation itself—the lure of new lifestyles patched together from commodities gathered into scenes of a possible life.” Thelonious Monk, wooden bowls, Marfa pull together at this blog spot.

Taylor blogs a beautiful “possible life” of objects and scenes but counters this image of perfection in her extremely small text, detailing her struggles with materialism and consumerism, and even labeling it, using tags, as “sorting through the muchness.” She posts the following about it:

Let’s just say there is *a lot* of stuff out there friends, and trying to figure out what out of the mass bubbles to the top is like my “[Sorting Through the Muchness](#)” exercise on steroids. I feel like I’m some sort of editing athlete in training.

But it’s a good thing. The culling is making me smarter (maybe), stronger, more discerning. . . . It’s, oddly, making me want *less*, as there’s just something about seeing

so much stuff that makes you realize there's always more just behind it. It makes me less "covet-y" and more aware of when something really is special. ("Editing is the Skill of the Century," June 14, 2012, <http://www.simplelovelyblog.com/2012/06/editing-is-skill-of-century.html>).

Underneath the "muchness" runs a sense, as Stewart (2007:52) articulates, that the "home is peppered with a hint of addiction, aloneness, something rotten or worthless." The "stuff" Taylor posts skews to the pricey, deepening a promise of fantasy around such beautiful and unattainable objects. Class plays a murky role on this blog and I sense a feeling of guilt underlying her repeated quest for "simple" and "lovely" scenes and objects. Class on this blog is less about the objects' pricetags and more about Taylor's ability—her "chops"—to "turn fantasy into a plan rather than having it become a prison" (Clough 2012). Berlant theorizes the toxic connection between things and fantasy here:

In all of these scenes of "the good life," the object that you thought would bring happiness becomes an object that deteriorates the conditions for happiness. But its presence represents the possibility of happiness as such. And so losing the bad object might be deemed worse than being destroyed by it. That's a relation of cruel optimism ("Lauren Berlant on her Book 'Cruel Optimism,'" June 5, 2012 [http://rorotoko.com/interview/20120605\\_berlant\\_lauren\\_on\\_cruel\\_optimism/?page=1](http://rorotoko.com/interview/20120605_berlant_lauren_on_cruel_optimism/?page=1))

Yet for Taylor, her objects do imprison her to, at least, the "repetitious enactment" of "defending [her] attachment in advance of [their] loss" (Clough 2012). She understands that her capacity to draw on affect is because of her class privilege. Taylor regularly struggles with such "cruel optimism" on her blog:

I've been feeling sorry for myself a lot of late. . . . And I'm stuck in this one-person pity party despite the fact that I know I am luckier/more blessed/richer (that last one is figurative, for the record) than 99.9 percent of, well, everyone else on earth (i.e. abundant love, beloved family, dear friends, health, shelter, food, water, transportation, safety + *way, way more*...you get the idea). I feel shameful about my "woe is me" M.O., I do. And yet...I can't seem to shake my sort of perpetual state of Charlie Brown-ness ("A Pity Party...And A Book," June 26, 2013, <http://www.simplelovelyblog.com/2013/06/a-pity-party-and-book.html>).

Taylor finds another object to relieve her ennui: she links to a book, sold on Amazon, titled *An Experimental Mutiny against Excess*, that is apparently helping her, while in this funk, to once again, “sort through the muchness” of working, mothering, and consuming. The book, she casually suggests, could help readers as well (and probably kick something back to Taylor as Amazon offers incentives to bloggers to direct traffic to them). Berlant reminds us that desire is experienced individually, but scaffolds subjectivities, each with their own history. Taylor repeatedly struggles with “simplifying,” and often writes about needing to “re-charge” and slow down—this is accomplished on her blog by focusing on consuming the right objects or through meditations on not consuming at all. Taylor’s “repetitious enactment” is the post in which she always wonders if her objects of desire are just too “much” or too “shaky” an “anchor” (Berlant 2012). Yet they always prove to be “more than [she] can resist” (Stewart 2007:49).

Blogs, babies, the home: objects that generate “cloud(s) of possibility” (Berlant 2012) while also “spawn[ing] socialities, identities, dream worlds, bodily states and public feelings of all kinds” (Stewart 2007:10). Blogs literally structure possibilities of encounter through the “tag cloud,” which refers to a widget that visually represents the frequency of textual data—usually the categories created by the blogger—appearing on the blog itself. The more often a category or tag is used for a post, the larger the word appears in the cloud. The most frequent words on Taylor’s blog, and thus the largest in the tag cloud, are “design, family, getting dressed, just lovely” ([www.simplylovelyblogspot.com](http://www.simplylovelyblogspot.com)). Tag clouds, then, literalize the scenes of a blog and offer visitors a sense of the possibilities of encounter at this site.

Mommy blogs share scenes of maternal life and desires and scenes of the blogger’s “self-encounter” with her readers. For readers, posts are an “impact from the outside” and allow, or guide, the reader to her own future self-encounter (Berlant 2012:6). Sometimes the scenes

backfire: as one mother told me, she wanted the blogger who published a photo of a sweet children's reading nook to "pan out" and give readers a 360-degree shot of the house—hoping the rest of the home was not as perfect as the corner. A blog seduces its readers, or turns them off. Yet, this is no romance between two individuals—all it takes is a click to move on and turn down a blog's advances. For example, through pictures and hypertext, Taylor shares a scene of self-encounter, offering and extending the scene to readers: "We swam at Deep Eddy pool and drank margaritas and ogled pretty things at Jardineros and Hijo and Spartan and JM Dry Goods. But mostly we just, well...were. No pretense, no overplanning, no agenda. Just letting the day unfold... We need more of that action." Readers can "ogle" and buy the "pretty things" by clicking on the hypertext words (underlined words or links) that lead one to various stores' websites. The objects of Taylor's desire—the material things or her day of "no overplanning"—can also be yours. Stewart (2007:59) touches the impulse behind staging "scenes" in modern life through an "affective subject" that "seeks out scenes and little worlds to nudge it into being. It wants to be somebody. It tries to lighten up, to free itself, to lose itself." This affective subject is radically different from the oedipal one who must maintain firm boundaries and dramatic scenes of being.

Whether or not these blogged scenes add up to a full-blown maternal desire, or desire to mother, would be impossible to know but, I suggest, the expansion of blogs contributes to our ability to think about the desires that attach to, animate, and emanate from motherhood. Endless self-encounter with objects of motherhood structures the desire of the mommy blog genre.

## OBJECTS IN THE WAY OF DESIRE

De Marneffe (2004) suggests that maternal desire has been unintelligible because women have been threatened by an encounter with the Berlantian “cloud of possibilities” that corresponds to motherhood (such as weight gain, economic dependency, loss of autonomy). Second-wave feminism may have dismantled the taboo on sexuality for women but De Marneffe (2004:5) suggests that, while “women’s sexual desire no longer comes as much of a surprise,” maternal desire, as defined above, has become taboo. She characterizes the repudiation of such a desire as “readily available in the culture, that wanting to care for children is regressive—politically, personally, economically. If she is ambitious or mature or truly autonomous, this story goes, she really ‘should’ want something different” (De Marneffe 2004:88). Or, as one blogger put it, motherhood challenges “women’s feminist duty to be ambitious” (<http://whatwouldphoebedo.blogspot.co.uk/2013/07/the-stay-at-home-moms-confession-she.html>).

Stepping away from (but not forgetting) the academic assumption that the reason women mother and do a disproportionate amount of care work is because they lack social power, De Marneffe finds that some, even perhaps many women do this work because they find it fulfilling for their own self-development, (or borrowing from Bollas and Clough, mothering may offer a means to experience transformation). In fact, the ability of women to act on the desire to mother depends on having social power and a corresponding ability to side-step external obstacles such as inflexible workplaces; the necessity of income and benefits; or the lack of supportive partners, coparents, and family networks. She notes, “like so many things in American life—health care, good schools, fresh air—motherhood has turned into something of a luxury. You have time for it only if you are very lucky” (De Marneffe 2004:19). Motherhood itself, as an object of desire, has

come to hold fantasies of “the good life” that includes economic security, time, secure housing, health insurance, stable relationships, and numerous other objects of beauty.

Further, as Berlant (2012:16) points out, individuals are held responsible for “surviving the destabilizing effects of desire” even though desire structures which individuals come to matter. Desiring motherhood, for example, works for a certain class, gender, or race of women but creates problems for others: the desires of teenagers, women in poverty, or immigrants for motherhood do not come to matter (if they can matter, or materialize at all) in the same way, within the same structures as does the white, able-bodied, middle-class, citizen.

*Another Scene: Not-Having-It-All, or, Desire Interrupted*

A specific version of maternal desire and ambivalence repeatedly finds expression through posts about work and life balance issues; posts about separating from babies, weaning, and children’s milestones; and discussions of either crying at their desks come Monday morning (missing their kids) or finding themselves in a panic Saturday morning (missing their work). De Marneffe (2004:8) rethinks some of the more common catchphrases bantered about concerning motherhood, such as “You can’t have it all” or “Motherhood requires self-sacrifice,” keying into this ambivalence. Underneath such proclamations she hears something slightly different: worries about being able to do it all are less about “squeezing procreation into one’s life than how to be the *kind* of mother one wants to be” (De Marneffe 2004:7). Liz Gumbinner “Mom-101” repeatedly works through her ambivalence about working and mothering in the way she desires. In the following post titled “Something Always Gives” she gives readers a glimpse:

And then, in the middle of a meeting, I get the call from the nice doctor about the shot. The guilt hits. The crushing, debilitating, evil, pathetic working mom guilt. The stuff that never goes away even when you think you’ve got it all under control. Like it just has to creep up into the forefront of your consciousness once in a while to keep you in check; a

stinging reminder that no, you can't do it all. Something always gives. It's a guilt that wants you to feel it, and feel it good. Yes, right now. Yes, right in the middle of a meeting. And no, you can't suppress it. I'm wondering whether my 3 year-old feels betrayed or abandoned or simply in pain and I'm just not there. I'm in a meeting debating the very important, life-or-death decision of *how big the title card should be at the end of the commercial*.

The tears burn the back of my eyes. I'm just not there. ("Something Always Gives," September 28, 2010, <http://mom-101.com/2010/09/something-always-gives.html>).

Gumbinner cannot be there, cannot be the mom she wants or needs to be because of the necessity of her paid work. As discussed in chapter two, Gumbinner does not get political despite her "debilitating, evil" guilt and instead holds back the tears. Berlant (2012:21) describes this difficulty in collective imagining:

It sees the world as in an impasse and a situation beyond the normative good life structures, where people have a hard time imagining a genre that makes sense of life while they're in the middle of it. I'm saying that intense personal emotions about the shape and fraying of life are also collective, and have to do with an economic crisis meeting up with a crisis in the reproduction of fantasy.

Lack of social supports for working mothers, fathers, and families; the retreat of the state from funding public schools; and the necessity of two-wage families all swirl together and push those "in the middle" to cling to objects of desire—epitomized in a "balanced" motherhood—that repeatedly disappoint. Gumbinner, stuck in a the middle of crushing not-being-there moment, cannot "make sense of life."

### *Blogging Desire*

Writing itself figures as an object of desire on the blogs—most of the bloggers, at some point, consider their relation to writing, blogging, motherhood, and desire. Through blogging these mothers work through ordinary scenes and try to attune to life in a "way that makes sense

while they're living it" (Berlant 2012). Woolf shares her revelation that all of her previous parental worries that became blog posts over the past seven years matter little. She declares:

It was ironic because someone ELSE had made a comment about my "free range parenting" days previous because Bo was running around and Archer and Fable were off leash and everyone was just existing. LIVING.

And it helped me realize that everything is kind of preposterous. How temporary all of it is. How we're all trying to find answers and clubs and groups to help us figure out how to define everything but we're really just trying to define a moment.

And then she brings it back to writing, blogging.

One of the reasons I don't write about parenting as much as I used to is because after eight years and 3,000+ posts, I kind of feel like I've exhausted every issue. And in exhausting every issue I've come to recognize that none of it really matters. I mean, sure, it matters in the moment. It matters a great deal in the moment but then the moment ends. The questions answer themselves. Our children grow up and out of diapers and tantrums and teething.

And pretty soon we've forgotten we ever worried. Or googled. Or wrote blog posts. ("The Ballad of Clingy Smalls (and Other Songs)," July 11, 2013, <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2013/07/the-ballad-of-clingy-smalls-and-other.html>).

Woolf's reflective post showcases how the affective subject of blogging never has to add up: she basically writes off her entire seven-year blog in one post! As she moves through mothering four children, blogging loses its pull as a scene of self-encounter.

Yet, for many and even for Woolf, mommy bloggers regularly connect their desire to write with motherhood—the need to connect, share, release frustrations, and document the atmosphere of their motherhood. Deleuze (1999) spoke of the "tit-mouth machine" and, with the mommy bloggers we have a new digitized version of it: the tit-mouth-finger-computer machine that channels and routes desire, fantasy, and attachments. Woolf literally blogs while hooked up to the breastfeeding pump:

ive had a bAaby on my lap all dsy. this is hiow i type with a baby on my lap and then i go back afetr the post has been written and fable is skleeping and i change all the typos and mistakes and try to make sense of my thoufhys. (insert something funny here)

is it weird that i feel likev i can do anything right now (including typing a hundred words a minutewith my left gand.)? that i can be everywhere AT ONce? i csn mske dinner and blig and mert friends for birthday drinks and trim my bangs without getting little hairs im my eyes.

some womrn get post-partum depression but i think i have post-partum... something else. i feel like im high. on coke or ecstasy erxcept the only side-effects of this kind of high are illegible blog posts and the occasional reminder that i can't do everything. be everywhere at once.

ive been meaning to blog a love letter to my life and tell it how awesome it is but i've been nervous... becUSE i want people to rekate to me and maybe im too happy rifght npw abd people think its annoying and theyre sick of my big fat smile and want me to shjut the hell up already and 'tell the truth.' because its supposed to be hard with two kuds ANd a thousand other respoinsibilities. ivev b een told that im supposed to stressed. supposed to be having a reak hard vtime. 'just wait!' everyone keeps telling me. 'it gets harder and you'tr going to come off your high and crash!' of course its not easuy but i wasnt expecting it to be. i was't expecting this either—this feeling of sublime happiness and love for all people and things et al. i m genuinely happy. busy AND exhausted and a littre ovwerwhelmed but mostly just happu.

embracing my imperfetions. emcracing my chilfren. accepting myself. wandering arpond with an idiotic smile on my face all the livelonfg day and to hekll with the typos. ("BBLOGGING WITH ONEHAND," December 9, 2008, <http://www.girlsgonechild.net/2008/12/bblogging-with-onehand.html>).

She repeatedly blogs about happiness, from both the work of motherhood and the structure it has forced on her life, on her writing. Motherhood brings many women to the blogs—as readers, writers, commenters, “lurkers” (readers who don’t comment). The blogs provide a space of socialization, a necessary space since technological, cultural, and economic shifts have dismantled the socializing spaces of civil society (the home, school, etc.) (Clough 2012; see also Terranova and Parisi 2000).

Just as larger-scale shifts restructure locations of socialization, inner worlds appear to be shifting as well. We can read traces of the inner world shifts and locate the subject of affect

online. Returning to the psychoanalytic theories of sexual identity for women, asserting oneself is problematic because it requires a separation from the (m)other and writing is a form of assertion of self. In psychoanalytic thought, the feminine position is thought to rest on its bodily lack, its inability to assert itself because the woman is the figure of castration. Contemporary psychoanalytic scholars are questioning this assumption if only because the female body does assert itself quite profoundly, at least, in pregnancy and motherhood. Dianne Elise (2008:87) suggests that the “positive awe of the mother’s sexual body” provides “an accessible image of female potency” or a guard against female genital devaluation, as well as against feminine modesty, and provides a bodily ego to sustain autonomy. By going back to the mother, psychoanalysis finds a source for agency instead of the past figure of dependency and lack.

Rosemary Balsam (2003) maintains that the pregnant body itself has suffered an “erasure” in psychoanalytic theory due to its theoretical foundations rooted in male anatomy. She writes, “Using the growing boy as a basic model for females has failed, not just because it is incorrect, but also because an entire theory of body development over a life cycle cannot be centered on a sporadic childhood fantasy, no matter how important or intense” (2003:1154). The fantasy of which Balsam speaks is that of castration and building a theory of subjectivity from this fantasy is problematic, not to say far from parsimonious, because the girl has to have had two or three prior fantasies before she can get to anxiety about castration: Balsam (2003:1155) argues “it is a fantasy construction based upon another fantasy.” Why, then, she asks is there no accounting for the pregnant body, with “a belly of gigantic proportion” that is “at least as arresting as the storied erect phallus”? (Balsam 2003:1158). The pregnant body transmits fantasies, which, in the West, have been coded as monstrous, alien, and abject—or present us

with “an ontological awareness of the body’s alienation from itself and an emergent new relationship with an unfamiliar being” (Betterton 2006:81).]

As Elise (2008:87) notes, a consideration of the female body would pay attention to the “concrete anatomical reality[:] in the felt sense of sexual desire, the female body sticks out, stands out as does the male body.” This felt and imagined “standing out” can take form in and through writing. Elise (2008:90) makes the connection between a female bodily ego and writing here: “A sense of female potency that is expansive, enlarged, soaring, can support experiences of enthusiasm, excitement, and exhilaration that give essential momentum to sending any project forward.” The bloggers under study locate their writing desires as tangled up with their motherhood. As the bloggers write it, the enlargement of motherhood amplifies their need to write, which expands their online presence.

For example, in the beginning weeks of summer vacation, blogger Kim Foster finds herself having a difficult time adjusting to the presence of her children, though she says she loves them “to pieces, to bits. I could inhale them sometimes, just sniff them up like vapor and let them live inside me,” yet they are interfering with her writing. Foster connects expansion, writing, and motherhood in the following excerpt:

I’m in the bedroom, the dark bedroom, writing this, because I haven’t written anything of real merit in days, and that makes me crazy, makes me feel like I’m separating from myself, and I’m like Jack Torrance in my brain, slamming an axe over and over again into a door until it’s just splinters on the ground, typing “No work and all play makes Kim FREAKIN batty” over and over again. Oh yeah, Jack. I get you. Red Rum Red Rum.

And that’s why I’m in the dark bedroom cave, because I’m pretending that I didn’t just overhear Edie tell her father that she’s hungry, starving really, at 9pm. I can’t see her, but I know she’s opening her mouth like a bird and pointing into it, which is 6 year old speak for feed me or I will explode all over you. I had predicted this hours ago when she turned up her nose at dinner at 7pm. I hear David handling it. He is a good man. But it’s not this one thing, it’s not really about being hungry at 9pm. It’s a days worth of this stuff, all mounting and compounding on top of each other

Foster concludes the post with her expanded self, found through writing:

I've been alone for 15 minutes, laying on cool sheets, it's dark, nothing but computer light on my face, and it's good, it's really good, I feel myself fill up a bit as I type, like helium being blown into my balloon. Then Edie, sweet Edie, rolls into the cave and aims her little face at me and tell me she's sorry—she knows I was upset, needed my space. And I smile because I love that, love that she gives a damn. But it's also an invitation to come in, and roll around on me and play with my hair like a pony, and lay on my chest, and cuddle my boobs, my boobs are still her obsession, and she pets them like they are small adorable kittens. I give myself over. Her pull is the kind that aligns planets, pulls galaxies together. ("Red Rum," July 2, 2013, <http://www.kim-foster.com/blog/distracted-by-love/>).

Whether she inhales her children so they "live inside her" or fills herself up from writing, Foster finds an expanding self through blogging, motherhood, and the moment of her daughter attaching to her "boobs." Bloggers also key into this expanded self via the network when they write about how they love connecting to other mothers or finding a community through writing.

Foster again stresses the expanded, networked self on her blog:

I want you all to read. I do not want to write in a vacuum. I do want people to enjoy my writing and I love hearing from people when they do. I also don't mind shitty comments from time to time. That's all part of it. I want to be a part of a community and I want to be as avid a reader of your blogs as I am a writer. I want to be there for you, too. I just want to do it all with some kind of purity of purpose. I want to just be Winnie the Pooh. And be. Not for a purpose or a mission or a goal. ("Red Rum," July 2, 2013, <http://www.kim-foster.com/blog/distracted-by-love/>).

Foster wants to transform her readers as much as she seeks transformation from them; she does not have any concern with "purpose," "mission," or oedipal narrative. This is no scene of "pre-oedipal relationship with her mother" as put forth by Chodorow and critiqued by Clough (Clough 1992:115). There is no "unified feminine identity," no need for a reverse oedipal scene of the destruction of one of the figures, the mother/blogger or mother/commenter. Unification is not necessary: as Foster says, "I don't mind shitty comments from time to time." The

architecture of the blogs keep “subjectivity . . . divided against itself” (Clough 1992:116) as nothing adds up, and the blogger is always already “in bits and pieces” (Clough 1992:126).

## CONCLUSION

I started this chapter considering the desire of a second-wave feminism as written by Erica Jong. She, of course, worked with a different writing and distribution technology than do women bloggers today. Her scene of desire clustered around the promises of autonomy, freedom from sexual repression, and freedom to desire. She wrote of repressive forces that worked to keep women bound within the disciplining walls of the family, motherhood, and the private sphere. To a certain degree, the fantasies she articulated have been realized: women’s sexuality has seeped out beyond the family, increasing numbers of women have entered the work force, and more women choose (and many are forced) to live in nontraditional family structures. Motherhood, as a desire, however, is lost on Jong—why would all of these young women, the first to experience these hard-won freedoms, return to the scene of domesticity, maternity, the home?

Mothers today may desire motherhood in seemingly “retro” ways because they have benefited from the economic autonomy for which feminists like Jong fought. Or, maybe the promises of autonomy and an oedipalized subjectivity have finally been put to rest and no one can attach to the promises, as Berlant suggests, clustered around this phallic position. While, of course, women must keep fighting for the autonomy fought for by Jong and others, the scene of writing desire has shifted. With the shift to networked media, we have witnessed a shift in the object of desire and in the subject as well. Instead of desiring freedom and autonomy, writers and readers today are opening up the spaces of attunement to the ordinary, the fleeting moments of

self-ness found and just as quickly lost. The promise of transformation, of a future altered self, is now the object of desire. Motherhood and blogging both promise such transformation. As such technological structures have shifted, so have our articulations of desire and our sense of self, identity, and coherence. The pace of these blogs attunes us—we can touch, connect and move on.

Back to Jong and her daughter—perhaps the disconnect comes from two different political philosophies. Erica Jong speaks from a feminism formed out of a dialectic logic, the idea that the subject can seek freedom from the patriarchy oppressing it—this is a “freedom from.” Molly Jong-Fast, and De Marneffe and the mommy bloggers, on the other hand articulate a different freedom, a “freedom to”—“a positive understanding of freedom as the capacity for action” (Grosz 2010:140). The difference in a preposition is huge—“freedom from” requires oedipalized subjects while “freedom to” finds expression only through actions and transformations. Grosz (2010:147) explains here:

It is not that subjects are or are not free; rather, actions those undertaken by living beings may sometimes express such freedom. Freedom is a matter of degree and characterizes only those acts in which one acts with all of one’s being, and in the process those acts become capable of transforming that being.

Bloggers find this transformation in and through motherhood and convey this on their blogs, and in doing so attune us to a different register of self.

## CONCLUSION

### THE PRINCESS AND THE BLOG: ESCAPE FROM THE NEOLIBERAL

#### LABOR, CAPITAL

##### *Fantasy and Figure of the Mom Blogger*

I end this dissertation with a blog that pulled me in when I first encountered it three years ago and which I have quoted extensively throughout the previous chapters. The blog, *Her Bad Mother*, written by Catherine Connors, was the first mommy blog among those I studied to which I related as both a mother and scholar. I felt her “gestural economy” (i.e., her cultural reference points and configurations of self-management and care) or, at least, I aspired to be within her cultural and economic milieu (Berlant 2011:5). Connors has a PhD in philosophy and weaves academic theories, motherhood, and daily life together in her posts. As an example, next to her avatar (a small picture representing the blog’s author) is the following quote from Nietzsche, “What is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil” ([www.herbadmother.com](http://www.herbadmother.com)). While always keeping the feminist angle sharp, Connors writes about all that has been missing in discussions of motherhood, both academic and mainstream, including: the perspective of the mother, the revolution a baby brings to one’s subjective understanding of the world and the self, the hyper-intense love one feels as a mother, and a critique of the paucity of writings on motherhood that are not saccharine or constricted by conventional thinking. While I quickly realized that mommy blogging (publicly writing about

my experiences as a mother) was not for me, my continuing fantasies of blogging drew on *Her Bad Mother* as a template.

In 2011 Connors announced that she would be moving to New York City for a new job as an editor at the online parenting site, *Babble*. This move chipped away a piece of my fantasy of her as an average, blogging, academic mom, living in a modest bungalow in an average city—but I was also excited to hear her take on mothering in NYC. Here is how she broke the news:

I wasn't headed there directly, obviously. I had a ways to travel, down the road of mommy blogging, which was a road that I didn't even know existed until some weeks after Emilia was born. But when I discovered it, I knew immediately that it was my road. Part of that had to do with the fact that it was – crazy, this – in line with my academic work. I'd been writing about mothers and the family in the history of political thought. I'd been writing about how motherhood and family life had been defined as fundamentally private, and effectually closed off from public discourse, except insofar as that discourse – directed by men – occasionally considered the private life of the family relevant to the public life of the state. Mom blogs took that private world and made it public. My mind – my academic mind – was kind of blown. (“The Road, Taken,” September 8, 2011, <http://herbadmother.com/2011/09/the-road-taken/>)

After her move to NYC, disenchantment crept in to my reading of *Her Bad Mother*—I increasingly felt bad about how I would probably never have the fabulous career she has, the loft apartment in Williamsburg, or the stay-at-home-husband to tend to the kids. I fell out of her gestural economy. My reaction, “blogs-make-me-feel-bad,” was hardly unique: I hear it from mothers I come into contact with in person, rather than online when they ask, in careful ways, what it is I “do” besides, of course, mother. When I mention my research, mothers consistently roll their eyes, and mention how their lives look nothing like what they find online. Emily Matchar (2013:63) describes the “self-comparison” blogs inspire as one of the more “insidious effects of lifestyle-blog culture.” She explains: “bloggers are supposed to be our friends, our sisters, our neighbors. So when we see what looks like an organized, stylish picture of domestic bliss portrayed on their blogs, there’s a natural tendency to hold ourselves up against that; if our

lives don't measure up, well, we feel like crap." The mothers in my real-life world report, however, a masochistic pull to the very blogs that bring out the worst of self-comparisons.

Shortly after Connors moved to New York City, she dropped a major bomb: Disney bought *Babble*, a website dedicated to "honest, engaged, informed, intelligent, and open conversation about parenting" (<http://www.babble.com/>) and, in effect, also bought her. She did not break this news fully on her blog, but published a small post there and then linked to the full story of the Disney buyout on *Babble*. She carefully justified her working for Disney explaining how important stories are to the human experience and by asserting that Disney is, at heart, a storytelling company. Connors failed to acknowledge that Disney stories have been roundly critiqued for their heterosexist, racist, ableist, and classist plots and characters, an omission no one with her academic background could innocently make. In fact, she framed Disney's move as "radical," writing:

And now Disney – who, as you may have heard, has acquired Babble – is doing something that I think is really kind of awesomely radical: they're embracing Babble, and Babble's culture of parent-facing storytelling. They're embracing Babble's mission of pushing forward honest, authentic stories driven by and told by parents, about parenthood and about the vast and diverse range of things that parents are interested in and making it part of their own narrative mission. . . . Disney is saying that these stories matter, and that they want to empower the tellers of those stories to tell more of those stories, in louder voices, and to larger audiences. They want to be an engine for expanding that storytelling universe, for making those stories as much a part of the cultural discourse as the stories about princesses and pirates and talking mice.

That's exciting. That's huge. I'm kind of awed that I'm a part of that, because I think that this is an important cultural moment. This is a moment of recognition – recognition that our stories, all the tales and fables and confessions that we've been sharing around kitchen tables and on front porches and in the occasional memoir and (of course) on blogs, are a critically important and profoundly rich contribution to North American culture. We knew this already, of course. But now the biggest storytelling company in the world is loudly and actively proclaiming that they know it, and that they want the world to know it. ("A New Kind of Happily Ever After," November 14, 2011, <http://www.babble.com/babble-voices/catherine-connors-bad-mother-confidential/a-new-kind-of-happily-ever-after/>).

A less rosy reading would conclude, in contrast, that the “parent-facing storytelling” that Disney is “embracing” is another instance of capital accumulation and capture of free labor, further supporting the thesis that the architecture and “mission” of web 2.0 cleaves the accumulation of financial capital to the accumulation of social and affective capital (Pham 2013:252). By buying (note the use of the affective “embracing” as a metaphor for this transaction) a high traffic node of the online parenting space, Disney culled together a digital factory, where the “engine” runs on labor of the “tellers of ... stories,” a free and renewable source of energy. With this acquisition Disney can now “expand” the “storytelling universe.” Connors stands “awed,” not by the massive economic, technological, and cultural reorganization itself, which is awesome in its scale, but by the fact that she is playing a role in it, which is actually a rather astute commercial move on the part of Disney.

Connors here reiterates the idea that mommy blogging is “awesomely radical,” where “radical” refers to the increasing ability for consumers to be producers, mothers to be cultural creators, and accurate media representation to be a possibility for (some) women. All of these “radical” reversals create a mood of a sweeping, politically challenging, consciousness-raising cultural moment, which incites more participation, stories, and content. Yet, as I have shown here, even the most “radical” content is absorbed and domesticated online.

Robin James theorizes the absorption of radical aesthetic politics by conceptualizing neoliberalism as a new relationship to, and story about, the “damages” specific to modernity:

if modernist art invested aesthetic pleasure in the objectification of women, neoliberal art invests aesthetic pleasure in their incandescence. If we used to like doing damage to women, we now like to see women overcome that damage. (James, forthcoming).

Digital infrastructures are an ideal medium for witnessing this process of overcoming damage.

For example, online, the identity politics of modernity—race, class, gender, sexuality—get

endlessly recycled as enactments of resistance, difference, and damage. While the realities behind such politics have real effects, digital technology flattens identities into content, and those who utter such enactments into laboring subjects. Following James' logic, overcoming such discriminations becomes a performance that is subsumed into ideologies, representations, storylines, and culture. Through digital media, identity damage finds value; it is no longer waste or entropy.

Digital participants are quick to pick up and point out the exploitation of their networks and labor. Recently, two campaigns focused on user labor have spread virally throughout social media platforms, aiming to draw awareness to the inequities built in to sites like Facebook and Twitter. The “Wages for Facebook” campaign draws a clear parallel to the autonomist feminist “Wages for Housework” campaign in which feminists put a monetary value on their so-called labors of love. Wages for Facebook similarly points to the massive profits made off of the free labor of the users of the site. Laura Porterwood-Stacer argues that maintaining a social profile on Facebook is a gendered enterprise, and that such activity looks like “the caring and relational labor involved in holding communities together” (2014), or labor colloquially known as “women’s work.” Additionally, women of color have been digitally spreading the idea of “blocking” (setting their accounts to private, thereby hiding their tweets from the public) their twitter accounts for a day—a kind of “twitter black out”—to force an awareness of both the value they contribute and, especially, its constant misappropriation by both broadcast and network media. As Julia Carrie Wong for the online version of *The Nation* reports, “A Twitter blackout could be viewed as a form of labor action, with tweeting cast as a form of work. That work is obviously unwaged” (“Tweeters of the World, Unite!” March 21, 2014, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/178950/tweeters-world-unite>).

My dissertation has shown that the incorporation of the personal, emotional, and affective is less “an important, cultural moment . . . of recognition,” as Connors suggests, but more a moment of “radical” accumulation of labor, data, and subjectivity. Mommy blogs not only showcase free, digital labor and the investment of capital investment in affect, but the content therein speaks of specific class-, gender-, and race-based fantasies surrounding contemporary motherhood. The resonance and popularity of the blogs forces a consideration of subjectivity because capital strategies of accumulation alone cannot bring about such radical changes in patterns of production and consumption. They force us to ask: Who is incited to speak and perform the radicalness of blogging motherhood? What brings mothers and women by the millions to participate with blogs?

## FANTASY

### *The Princess and the Blog: Neoliberal Subjects*

Contemporary feminism has worked to challenge images and representations of women in mass media, such as found in music videos, pornography, or Disney storylines. With great success, feminism has diffused a cultural questioning of airbrushed images, “pink-washing,” and princess fantasies. The recent “GoldieBlox” (construction toys to inspire female engineers) and Dove soap (ads showing images of “real” women) campaigns speak to the popularity and profitability of mainstreaming feminist rhetoric. Such product-focused campaigns tap into underlying frustrations, depressions, and bodily anxieties connected to the stagnant economic progress of and the persistent violence against women—but they locate social change at the psychological dispositions of individual women. The logic is that if women are socialized into confident, STEM-seeking subjectivities, then gender inequality will vanish. The book

“Cinderella Ate My Daughter” captures the terror that the so-called princess phase strikes in the heart of parents. Online, parents ask—How long does it last? Where does it come from? How can I explain the unrealistic storyline of the princess? How can I impart psychological defenses? For many parents, princesses stand as a proxy for lowered expectations, a narrowed channel of opportunity, increased dependency, stifling gender roles, and other horrific obstacles to survival in neoliberal cultures and economies. Parents also worry about boys playing “guns” and other violent games and roleplaying activities, but are fewer corporations conspicuously marketing products to develop alternative male subjectivities.

To “Revive Ophelia<sup>1</sup>” (Pipher 1994) girls, instead, are taught they rock and rule as their parents enroll them in computer coding camps. Pixar, the animation studio and movie company, has, of course, tapped into this market for defiance and the clamoring for girl power with *Brave*, the tale of a young girl, Merida, who refuses marriage. *Brave* breaks with the standard Disney princess story, and it highlights how the new feminine script incorporates self-sufficiency, autonomy, skill, and strength. The male characters in *Brave* are complete buffoons and brutes who do little more than offer comic relief or muscle their way out of trouble while the females characters keep everything—the household and the nation—together, and, of course, save the day. *Brave* reanimates the princess figure but does so by sidestepping the heterosexual love plot

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<sup>1</sup> “Reviving Ophelia” (1994) is a best selling book by the psychotherapist Mary Pipher. She examines why and when young adolescent girls lose their self-esteem, turn to therapy, and lose self-confidence. She claims that unrealistic beauty standards and a cultural focus on sexuality contributes to depression among girls as they come of age and realize their lack of social power.

and replacing it with a storyline of feminine survival without a providing and protecting, heroic masculine figure. The storyline aligns with James's argument that audiences "enjoy women's spectacular subjectivization" because it uses "our identification with the resilient heroine as a way to dis-identify with and transgress the imperatives of modernist patriarchy" (2013). Through Merida, audiences get an opportunity to overcome patriarchy and tradition and to save the mother figure in the process.

Popular, well-compensated mommy bloggers occupy a similar position and logic as Merida. Connors, whether purposely or not, used her blog to find a lucrative alternative to a career to academia, thus becoming a new, neoliberal princess figure herself. Like Merida, she performs the suffering of one type of damage of modernity (the loss of a secure liberal profession, such as a philosophy professor) to then, by virtue of being a successful, erudite, self-employed mother, overcoming that damage. Connors embodies and captures the fantasy of mommy blogging: If I blog authentically (whether that's as a philosopher or a stay-at-home-mom), I can escape my humdrum conditions and the evil neoliberal economy that has me working like Cinderella with no time off, no health insurance, no job security, and no Prince Charming (and not even the fantasy of one) in sight.

This fairytale takes on a literal dimension on the blog written by Jenny Lawson, *The Bloggess*. In 2010 she published a story about an artist friend of hers who also designs "whimsical" dresses out of found objects, one of which was a red, strapless ball gown. Lawson writes about her enchantment with this particular dress and her desire to feel "incandescent" by wearing it:

I want, just once, to wear a bright red, strapless ball gown with no apologies. I want to be shocking, and vivid and wear a dress as intensely amazing as the person I so want to be. And the more I thought about it the more I realized how often we deny ourselves that red dress and all the other capricious, ridiculous, overindulgent and silly things that we

desperately want but never let ourselves have because they are simply “not sensible”. Things like flying lessons, and ballet shoes, and breaking into spontaneous song, and building a train set, and crawling onto the roof just to see the stars better. Things like cartwheels and learning how to box and painting encouraging words on your body to remind yourself that you’re worth it.

And I am worth it. (“The Traveling Red Dress”, May 25, 2010, <http://thebloggess.com/2010/05/the-traveling-red-dress/>).

From this epiphany, Lawson started “The Traveling Red Dress” project where the gown is sent around to anyone who needs reminding that they are “worth it” too. The post quoted above has accumulated 692 comments (as of March 21, 2014) over a three-year period. In 2012, Lawson revisited the issue of the dress with a follow-up post and more red dresses to send around the world. In this follow-up post, she shares photographs of her in the latest dress, made specifically for this project, and describes her psychological state at the time of the photo shoot:

Right now I’m 20 pounds overweight. I can practically see 40 from here. My boobs are too big and my hair is too mousey. My laugh lines grow deeper and worry lines are starting to show. I feel worse about myself than I have in a decade. But that dress reminded me of who I was. And who I’ve become. It reminded me that I’m not just who I see in the mirror, but also what I’ve overcome. I’m here. I’ve fought hard for these laugh lines and I’ve battled to survive the worry lines. I have scars that tell stories and marks that tell tales. I have hair that shows I survived the chemo drugs I took for my RA, and I have and soft, cushy, smothering arms like my grandmother. And that makes me beautiful. (“The Traveling Red Dress Revisited,” January 28, 2012, <http://thebloggess.com/2012/01/the-traveling-red-dress-revisited/>)

She instructs readers to leave a comment if they need or want an opportunity to wear a red ball gown. As of March 21, 2014 there are 982 comments on this second post. She explains the rules here:

The traveling red dress in these photos is ready for its next owner. As always, if you get a traveling red dress it’s up to you if you want to share the pictures or your story, but you can do so here if you like. Your only real responsibility is to enjoy it and then pass it on to the next stranger who needs it, with instructions to keep it going until the damn thing falls to shreds that even Cinderella’s mice couldn’t fix. And as a thank you I’ll be sending out five brand new red ball gowns myself next week. If you want a chance at one just leave a comment about what you’re celebrating, or fighting, or surviving. (“The

Traveling Red Dress Revisited,” January 28, 2012, <http://thebloggess.com/2012/01/the-traveling-red-dress-revisited/>)

Two days later she posted that she would be sending out nine women’s gowns and one child-sized gown around the world. The traveling dress project highlights the power of the princess narrative and its reiteration, and reworking, through digitally mediated, therapeutic stories of overcoming. Mothers, women, and parents disparage the princess storyline in broadcast media, yet rewrite it online.

### “How-to”

This neoliberal fantasy of blogging one’s self out of stagnant work or emotional conditions reverberates throughout the mommy blogs in popular “how-to” blog posts. These “how-to” imply a way out, via blogging, of either a work or life morass. Such posts warn, without fail, against harboring fantasies of becoming the next *dooce* because, as they always remind readers, blogging takes work and success does not come overnight. (In line with this discourse, *dooce* credits blogging as helping her out of severe depression.) Such warnings are usually and swiftly canceled out by the “ah shucks” tone of such posts—the blogger innocently, accidentally becomes famous by being authentic, honest, and true to herself.

Exemplifying the “how-to” subgenre, Julianna Miner, co-author of the *Rants from Mommyland* blog, wrote a four-part “how-to blog” series for *Babble*. The subgenre meets nicely with capital interests: it makes sense for Disney to encourage their readers to blog, as user content is what “expands” their “storytelling universe.” All four of Miner’s posts begin with the self-effacing disclaimer that she is no expert: “I’m not an expert. I’m a highly distractible, overwrought moron who has written a blog for a couples of years” (Miner 2013b) and “I have no idea what I’m doing. Take everything I say with a grain of salt.” (Miner 2013d). If the success of

*Rants from Mommyland* is any indicator, Miner does have an idea what she's doing because she is doing it well, and, in addition to her blog, she writes for prominent online news blogs such as the *Huffington Post* and *Babble*, and has a piece in an anthologized book. This “ah-shucks” rhetoric, however, serves an important purpose in the mommy blogging world—it downplays success, a move that both maintains constructs of feminine noncompetitiveness and reduces the distance between author and reader, which are critical to creating the frame of intimacy necessary for a wide readership and the appearance of authenticity.

Janelle Hanchette of *Renegade Mothering* recently rearticulated her entrée into blogging as a happy and yet humble accident. She used the announcement of the monetization of her blog as a chance to rearticulate her authenticity and reinterpret her blogging:

So, check it out. When I started this blog about 3 years ago I did it for one reason: Because I wanted to know if the rest of the parenting world was crazy or I was. I spent a year walking around writing blog posts in my head. I'd write a whole thing while driving to work, get to work and do nothing about it. This went on until I couldn't stand it anymore. (“Dear Readers, Expect Some Changes up in Here,” March 1, 2014, <http://www.renegademothering.com/2014/03/01/dear-readers-expect-some-changes-up-in-here/>).

Hanchette does not mark this moment of success—finding sponsors and advertisers—to claim expertise, instead she refers to writing as form of therapy and blogging as a place to express her feelings. She keeps it real, so to speak.

Circulating throughout the blogs and how-to posts are both declarations and insinuations of the following fantastic scenarios: The mommy blogger works from home, blogging, tweeting, and posting beautiful images and honest reflections and is able to pick her kids up from school (if not homeschool them herself). She has a community of real, online friends whom she meets up with at blogging conferences; the intimate, deep friendship touted on mommy blogs is an

important aspect of the fantasy. Miner utilizes a tone of friendship when describing the positive effects blogging has had on her life:

So I'm going to be very, very honest and offer some thoughts the way I would if we were friends in real life. Because blogging has been an amazing thing for me. It helped me feel better when I was really unhappy. It helped me build relationships, to rebuild my battered self esteem, and to slowly figure out who I was as a parent and an adult. It forced me to take an honest look at myself. It even gave me a really great part-time job here at Babble. ("Sort of Helpful Advice for Would-Be Bloggers," March 12, 2013, <http://www.babble.com/babble-voices/rants-in-my-pants-julie-miner/sort-of-helpful-advice-for-would-be-bloggers/>).

Not only does blogging remedy "battered self-esteem" and help "build relationships," it also can provide a "really great part-time job," which, for the majority of American mothers, is the ultimate coup de grâce to the work/life balance problem and is as common as a four-leaf clover. For example, on the blog *But I Do Have a Law Degree...*, a reader leaves the following comment after a post in which the blog's author gives her perspective on why only 4 percent of the top 200 US law firms have "female, firm-wide managing partners" ("Why Can't Law Firms Retain Women?" March 11, 2014, <http://www.butidohavealawdegree.com/2014/03/why-cant-law-firms-retain-women.html#more>). The commenter, Lesley Hobden, a former, successful attorney writes,

After 10 years in practice and a set of twins, I will be a full time mom. And for many of the reasons you discussed, I can't keep pulling myself in two trying to meet the needs of the firm and the needs of my family. And I was even working part time, telecommuting, so flexible work arrangements aren't always the answer (or at least they weren't for me). I wanted to be the poster girl for flexible work arrangements and how to make it work and have it all, but I think the culture, as you pointed out, makes it an uphill battle.

So I'm leaving. And doing what seems to be the trend, starting a blog to talk about why I left and what on earth I'm going to do now. ("Why Can't Law Firms Retain Women?" March 11, 2014, <http://www.butidohavealawdegree.com/2014/03/why-cant-law-firms-retain-women.html#more>).

This fantasy of blogging for a living, either as a psychologically or economically satisfying supplement to motherhood, is “highly compatible with the lifestyle politics of neoliberalism, which emphasizes privatized modes of self-care and self-management, and the optimization of individuals’ health, wealth, and happiness through the unregulated digital and global marketplace” (Pham 2011:16). Digital platforms promise control of labor, time, self-esteem, and the home, all vaunted forms of power and control in societies that, as Berlant (2011:261) suggests, have been forced “to adjust emotionally to the process of living with the political depression produced by brutal relations of ownership, control, security, and their fantasmatic justifications.” Part of the work visible on mommy blogs is the emotional adjustment necessitated by the confrontation between motherhood and the “brutal” economic realities it faces. Further, the domestic scenes and fantasies that are peddled by the blogs sound out a “cry against a society that’s not working. A society that doesn’t offer safe-enough food, accessible health care, a reasonable level of environmental protections, any sort of right for working parents” (Matcher 2013:248). And, I would add, viable career tracks for women who become mothers or care takers.

Mommy blogs channel this stark political reality through fantasies of an entrepreneurial, self-controlled life. Through digital labor, unhappiness and imbalance find their remedy. Describing her position in the blogging world, Miner captures the democratic hope within this fantasy: “I’m a medium blogger (if that). I’m really, really, lucky that I get paid to write. I am so grateful and astonished that anyone actually reads my stuff. I love blogging (even with all the negative stuff that sometimes comes with it)” (2013b).

Through a confluence of digital technology and neoliberal exigencies of self-help and entrepreneurship, millions of mothers log on to seek relief and exercise control. The mommy

blogger as a paradigmatic fantasy figure of success rests on the “invisible technology of neoliberalism,” (Pham 2013:247) which includes: the materiality of the Internet, the uneven distribution of education, technological skills, computer access, and childcare; the ideologies of the free market and gender equality; and the never-ending intensification of commercial markets (Pham 2013; James 2013). Mommy bloggers as figures of success highlight a false promise—or at most, an exceedingly rare possibility—of individual freedom and the so-called choice of maternity, the family, and self-esteem. Of course, as the “factory” changes form (from brick and mortar to websites and clicks) so does the ideal worker.

### *The Feminization of Digital Labor*

James (2013), Pham (2013), Porterwood-Stacer (2014), and others argue that the ideal neoliberal subject and ideal post-Fordist worker is feminine. The subject who succeeds in such a regime must be flexible, able to transition between identities, willing to work for free or very little, and, as the above-quoted lawyer-turned-blogger illustrates, able to engage in the process of reinvention (Pham 2013: 252). Mommy bloggers have a unique advantage in this economy of care, because motherhood, like biting a poisonous apple, forces most women to suddenly and dramatically change roles and identities. Perhaps girls’ play with princess storyline serves a purpose: Through feminine socialization the imaginative capacity to change the self through magical dresses, words, and reflections takes root. Or, at the very least, the skills of the “thank you economy” are acquired, creating a system where “success will come through outcaring everyone” (Pham 2013:252). In the form of hyperlinks, blog rolls, “like” buttons, tweets, “h/t” (hat tips), blogging motherhood is a digital network of thank you notes and care work. As I pointed out in chapter 2, mommy bloggers pride themselves on helping out one another online.

This recognition is as much a business strategy as it is an instrument effect of gender socialization. As James poignantly and rhetorically asks, in this economic climate “who radiates with potentiality more than the resilient entrepreneurial post-feminist woman?” (James, forthcoming).

Strategies and norms of femininity saturate Miner’s how-to posts. In her second installation, Miner tells readers that blogging is “your baby” (2013b) and throughout the series she weaves the theme of caring for others—both the people in real life and the real (and loyal) readers of one’s blog—into the work of blogging. Her first post focuses on adequately protecting one’s family and self from the publicity of writing online. She provides a twelve-question checklist of considerations for those wanting to start a blog, and of those, eight of the items deal with considering the feelings of others (2013a). Here is a sample of four:

--Are your family and friends on board with this?

--No, really. Are they OK with details about their lives being written down and shared on the Internet?

--Are you prepared for the reaction of the other important folks in your life?

--Are you prepared for people to treat you differently?

Only after encouraging readers to consider everyone else’s feelings does she then discuss strategies for successful blogging. The strategies, again, to a certain extent, reflect a feminine economy of care: “be generous and pass on all the help you get,” “find a tribe,” “don’t be aggressive or pushy,” and “don’t leave nasty comments” (2013c). While the most important pieces of advice are to “write good stuff” (2013c) and “tell the truth” (2013d), the four posts together read as a how-to guide on feminine social norms as much as they do on how to blog. Miner’s second post provides a chart titled “My Life as a ‘Successful’ Parenting Blogger” with

the self-deprecating subtitle “Keeping in mind that I’m not very successful and I stink at time management.” (b). The chart has three text boxes: “Bust hump doing PR, advertising, monetizing, networking, self-promotion, and all aspects of social media”; “write really good stuff”; and “actually parent my kids.” Under the three text boxes is the command “Now pick two” (2013b). The norms of mommy blogging discourage any evil stepsister antics for attention or spending too much time away from mothering. Like a benevolent princess, successful bloggers act with only honest intentions.

The gendered norms of care found on the mommy blogs extend to other forms of digital labor. However, such gendering of digital labor is often obscured, ignored, or unseen in larger discussions of social media participation. Commenting, “friending,” “sharing,” and “following” are forms of digital care and labor and, in common with feminized labor, are mostly unpaid though often pleasurable. Free digital care work produces vast content, value, and profits for technology companies almost exclusively run by young, white, economically privileged men. Melissa Gira Grant (2013) argues further that women’s presence on social media platforms confers legitimacy: “[I]t’s not just the promise of women and women to look at; it’s woman as hostess, woman as civilizer, woman not just as object of value, but through her presence, as producer.” And, to this list I would further add “woman as mother.” Christina Morini (2007:41) describes the feminization of immaterial labor, under which I include digital labor, as “pliable, hyper-flexible and in this sense it draws on the baggage of female experience.” Jarrett (2013:2) notes the unspoken gendered dimension to academic theories of immaterial labor, finding that “it often seems as if immaterial labor was only ‘invented’ when it moved out of the kitchen and onto the Internet.”

For example, recent discussions of “hyperemployment” acknowledge that digital technologies, by seamlessly folding into daily life, generate more work and less time, or greatly hinder our ability to be completely “off” (Bogost 2013). Ian Bogost describes hyperemployment:

For those of us lucky enough to be employed, we’re really hyperemployed—committed to our usual jobs and many other jobs as well. It goes without saying that we’re not being paid for all these jobs, but pay is almost beside the point, because the real cost of hyperemployment is time. We are doing all those things others aren’t doing instead of all the things we are competent at doing. And if we fail to do them, whether through active resistance or simple overwhelm, we alone suffer for it: the schedules don’t get made, the paperwork doesn’t get mailed, the proposals don’t get printed, and on and on. (Bogost, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/11/hyperemployment-or-the-exhausting-work-of-the-technology-user/281149/>).

Digital platforms have outsourced the daily, mundane administrative and bureaucratic duties and tasks to a class of people who are actually “competent at doing” such other “things.” Yet, now in order to do the things in which they are “competent,” they must do this additional, time-consuming labor for free. Bogost’s complaint reads like a page straight out of the Wages for Housework campaign, yet he makes no mention of gender or privilege, no acknowledgement of women’s work in relation to the topic of time consuming but socially necessary labor.

Working for free to keep social arrangements running smoothly is women’s work, as feminists have been pointing out for at least half a decade. Philosophy professor, Gordon Hull, writing for an academic, multi-authored blog, provides the following litmus test: “One way you know you’re doing women’s work is that you don’t register in the market as a producer and so you don’t get paid” (“Hyperemployment and Gender, December 11, 2013, <http://www.newappsblog.com/2013/12/hyperemployment-and-gender-guest-post.html>).

Sociologist Karen Gregory suggests that such digital work is “really a form of housework and maintenance of our daily lives” (“Hyperemployment or Feminized Labor? November 17, 2013,

<http://digitallabor.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2013/11/17/hyperemployed-or-feminized-labor/>). Yet, the term “hyperemployment” redefines unpaid, domestic labor as something more public, masculine.

Porterwood-Stacer (2014) contends that participation in and with social media is more akin to traditional care work. The ability to refuse to engage in digital labor, the converse of social media participation, rests on both an economic and a social privilege that together suggest security in both employment and social networks. This security, however, rests on the precarious, gendered, care-giving labor of others. Not to mention that eschewing social media participation, such as “breaking up” with Facebook, underestimates the “genuine expressions of care that are mediated through the platform” (Porterwood-Stacer, “The Stakes of Social Media Refusal,” March 18, 2014, <http://www.newcriticals.com/care-work-and-the-stakes-of-social-media-refusal/print>).

Squaring mommy blogs within neoliberal infrastructures and fantasies raises, again, Berlant’s theory of the promise of love that animates women’s mediated culture. The blogs deal with and delve into this promise through photos of a home-cooked meal, a post on the trials of marriage, or reflections on the surprising joys of motherhood. In imagining how-to blog oneself out of a job or career, the “opt-out”<sup>6</sup> story becomes the updated, neoliberal version of the female

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<sup>6</sup> The phrase “opt out” refers to women leaving careers to stay home and care for children full time. The phrase first appeared in a New York Times article in 2003 (“The Opt Out Revolution,” October 26, 2003, Lisa Belkin). Pamela Stone (2008) found that women leave careers less because of a choice and more often because of workplace policies and practices that discriminate against care takers.

complaint of modernity. The inflexible, under-appreciative workplace gets in the way of the intimacy of the home, self-love, and the ability to follow one's heart and "do what you love" (Tokumitsu 2014). "Doing what you love," when incited, overlooks unequal working conditions and the social problems inherent in neoliberal economies. Tokumitsu writes:

labor is not something one does for compensation, but an act of self-love. If profit doesn't happen to follow, it is because the worker's passion and determination were insufficient. Its real achievement is making workers believe their labor serves the self and not the marketplace (January, 2014, "In the Name of Love," <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/in-the-name-of-love/>).

Mommy blogs combine fantasies of paid and meaningful work, feminine friendship, and intimacy with motherhood—blogging is described and encouraged as an act of self-love, a way to "do what you love."

## THE COUNTER-SENTIMENTAL NARRATIVES OF MOTHERHOOD

### *The Mommy Blogger Complaint*

Yet, humming underneath the neoliberal ideologies and the free labor of the Internet, are expressions of motherhood and labor, which potentially counter such sentimental narratives. Jarrett (2013:5) notes that while free labor reproduces the household, "freely given labor" adds something extra: "the gifts of affect, and personal and domestic maintenance that reflect, reproduce, and/or transgress the social order." I turn now to examples of this freely given digital labor, which transgresses neoliberalism, corporate feminism, postmaternalism, and sentimental politics. The radicality of mommy blogging lies in an ability to, however briefly, counter or self-consciously distort the sentimental, where the sentimental refers to universalizing feelings of love and empathy based on a presumed social identity (Berlant 2008).

In the case of fashion bloggers, Pham (2011:17) finds instances of a “radical politics of sentimentality” that counters Berlant’s (2008) “universal rhetoric of sentimentality” that she argues structures women’s mass media culture. Pham (2011:17) writes that the “radical politics of feeling of the countersentimental creates new subject formations, reveals hidden histories, and redefines public culture in the context of digital media and consumer culture.” Fashion blogs and, I would add, even more so, mommy blogs both “reveal hidden histories.” As my discussions of maternal desire and the maternal body illustrate, mommy blogs articulate aspects of motherhood that were previously sanitized by medical discourse and the mainstream media. Blogging motherhood in such a way takes apart the sentimental, showcasing the labor required of such a genre and politics.

The blog *Artist Residency: In Motherhood* by Lenka Clayton provides an example of such a radical countersentimentality. Her artist statement, a typewriter-produced document embedded on her website, explains the rationale of her project (quoted at length and found here: <http://residencyinmotherhood.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/artist-statement1.jpg>):

In common with all new parents, the birth of my first child in April 2011 changed many things in my life. One of those changes has been the way I and others think about my career as an artist. I find now that many aspects of the professional art world are closed to artists with families. Most prestigious artist residencies for example specifically exclude families from attending. Despite a legacy of public artist/parents it still seems to be a commonly held belief that being an engaged mother and serious artist are mutually exclusive endeavors. I don’t believe or want to perpetuate this. I like to imagine th two roles not as competing directions but to view them, force them gently if necessary, to inform one another.

I will undergo this self-imposed artist residency in order to fully experiene and explore the fragmented focus, nap-length studio time, limited movement and resources and general upheaval that parenthood brings and allow it to shape the direction of my work, rather that try to work “despite it”/

This website will document my attempts.

Let's see.

L.C. September 2012

The artist's statement directly engages the devalued work of care by framing "motherhood as a valuable site, rather than an invisible labor, for exploration and artistic production." Clayton displays three business cards, in descending order and size beginning with hers (largest), then her son's (medium sized), and then her newborn daughter's (smallest), acknowledging her residency "partners" and situating motherhood as an identity that is made not only through the labor and agency of the woman but also through the agency (and labor) of her children. This obvious fact is often overlooked, even on some of the most political mommy blogs, as the focus remains squarely on the mother's experience and identity. Bringing the children into this production as equal partners, as Clayton does throughout her project, realigns discussions of motherhood to consider it as a relationship before and beyond an identity or role to fill. By elevating her children to co-producers and artists, she diffuses the threat to autonomy that children's dependency represents.

Clayton unhinges the sentimental politics of women's culture through her projects that focus on baby-proofing, safety, and the intractable autonomy and extreme vulnerability of infants. For example, her project titled "Objects Taken out of My Son's Mouth, 2011–2012" features a plinth displaying all of the objects taken out of his mouth, including:

corn, bolt, bubblegum, buttons, carbon paper, chalk, Christmas decoration, cigarette butt, coins (GBP, USD, EURO), cotton reel, holly leaf, little wooden man, sharp metal pieces, metro ticket, nuts, plastic "O", polystyrene, rat poison (missing), seeds, slide, small rocks, specimen vial, sponge animal, sticks, teabag, wire caps, wooden block.

The objects are arranged as if they were pieces on a game board, reflecting the back-and-forth dynamic between mother and child. She elevates her son to an equal player, with motivations and pleasures all his own. Her motivations, of course, are to keep poison and choking hazards, of which all the items could be, out of his mouth.

A similar project titled “Dangerous Objects Made Safer” is a collection of everyday objects that take on new dimensions of terror when caring for an infant. She wraps such objects—a butcher’s knife, a screwdriver, a hammer—in felt to baby-proof them. After wrapping, the objects could easily fit into the urban, educated, middle-class, and upward gestural economies, as they look like the in-vogue, high-end, artisanal, handmade, simple baby toys inspired by the Waldorf or Montessori educational philosophies.

Both of these projects point out how being a mother includes the agency and autonomy of another human being. The differences in the subjectivities of mothers and children hinge, in part, on relationships to everyday objects. For the mother, the flotsam of the house morphs into dangerous, terrifying threats. For the child (and the artistic mother) the house is filled with endless possibilities for exploration. Clayton’s art is not gruesome or horrifying; the straightforward presentation she adopts is part of the way she countersentimentalizes motherhood and mother love. The labor of making a space safe, and the implied thoughts (thoughts that occur before she can move on to considerations of identity, toil, love, or loss) that occupy a mother’s mind, take center stage.

Phyllis Grant, author of the blog *dash and bella*, conveys similar ideas about the agency of her children and the unsentimental mother work of keeping them alive in her post “Mama, Why Do You Always Lose Your Keys?” She answers her son’s question:

because i worry about the important things like keeping you alive and there’s no more room in my brain thank you dash i do know that my sunglasses are on top of my head yes

i'll turn up the music i love that you feel bach in your legs and next to your heart but i think i feel bach right smack in the middle of my heart and a bit going up the back of my neck dash did you know these aren't songs they are pieces called the goldberg variations dude you must chill i'll define the word a variation is a version of something that stays fundamentally the same with a bit of a change a shift a modification like me this morning when I used that tinted eyebrow gel no not tintin's eyebrow gel it's tinted as in expresso-colored [*sic*] no i'm not laughing at you wow you think the makeup makes me look younger i'm still mama but i'm a little different see now that's a kick ass variation ("Mama Why Do You Always Lose Your Keys?" April 19, 2012, <http://dashandbella.blogspot.com/2012/04/mama-why-do-you-always-lose-your-keys.html>).

The agency of her child and the variations and vacillations of her identities (mother, teacher, friend) are strung together without privileging one over the other in the post. Together they "feel" Bach and meditate on "variations" of things, including her. Her mothering comes out of her concern with "keeping [dash] alive"—this is the only nonreciprocal labor between them. Yet, readers know that even this labor, the keeping alive of loved one, changes across the lifespan and Dash may someday be using his energies to keep her alive. After the above stream-of-conscious writing, Grant blogs her two favorite recipes she has memorized (to save "brain space"), which she can endlessly vary.

Keeping with the motherly work required to "keep alive" loved ones, two of Clayton's multimedia projects explore the physical proximity of mother and child and how closeness is shaped by social policies and technologies. In "Maternity Leave," a baby monitor was placed in the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. From June to September 2011, the monitor was turned on and connected to her home; for each week the exhibition ran, she writes, "the Carnegie Museum paid me a maternity benefit, exactly equivalent to the 'maternity Allowance' I am eligible for were I living in England where I am from" (2014e). Clayton explains that the exhibit "reveals and considers overlapping cycles of responsibility," of "government to citizen, institution to artist, artist to audience, parent to child, and audience to artwork" (2014e). The

project also highlights the overlap of technological surveillance with parenthood. Museumgoers are invited to listen in on the Clayton's lives, while such eavesdropping also forces an expanded socialization of care labor. Everyone who listens is implicated in "watching the baby."

Further, the baby monitor publicizes maternity much like the mommy blogs do—by bringing the private sphere and its labors to the public eye. Clayton's "maternity leave" differs by registering this experience, however, through unedited sound and unending work. Unlike a blog post, there is no measure to it, no beginning or end, and nothing like a discrete blog post or comment to be time stamped. The baby must always be monitored. This artwork raises questions for further exploration: What are the class and race dimensions of monitoring children? Which children require monitoring, and for how long? Who does the monitoring: the parents, the state, the police? What are the different ways we monitor children as a society: the smartphone, computer-chip tracking, GPS, the juvenile detention, the prison system?

Moreover, Clayton's project attempts to answer the question mothers who stay home reportedly are asked: What do you do all day? The monitor allows the public, the state, and the institution of the museum to check and make sure maternity leave is happening correctly: time well spent, productive, and economically justified. Yet, as anyone who listens to the monitor or as anyone who "stays at home" knows, mothering a new baby does not sound like much. What does the work of maternity sound like and look like? And what, if anything, captures the experience enough to justify maternity leave?

Such constant baby/mother surveillance references and aligns with the ongoing and ubiquitous surveillance brought into being with and through digital technologies. In fact, Amelia Abreu (2014) suggests that motherhood is the original work of data collection and surveillance. Keeping an eye, paying attention, counting each sleep cycle and diaper change are the labors of

motherhood, and care work in general, involving the collection and computation of multiple sources of data throughout the day. Abreu explains:

After all, as a caregiver you have a responsibility to perform as a human data tracker. Whether you are taking care of a child, an elderly or sick or disabled person, or just a professionally busy person, you track their movements, their diet, their routines and schedules, their needs and wants.

And:

How often is what gets branded “nagging”, either maternal or spousal, just a ritual in data gathering?

“Are you hungry?”

“Do you need to go to the bathroom?” (“Quantify Everything: A Dream of a Feminist Data Future, February 24. 2104, <http://modelviewculture.com/pieces/quantify-everything-a-dream-of-a-feminist-data-future>).

This is not sentimental work; it is the necessary computation that keeps the motherhood enterprise afloat.

Clayton takes up such data and measurements in her project “The distance I can be from my son,” an experiment in four settings—the park, a back alley, a supermarket, and in the fog—where she puts her toddler son down and records him running off. The videos stop when she drops the camera to run after him. Again, in all videos, her son acts with complete independence, taking off immediately after being put down. The videos test the viewers as much as Clayton. How far will he go? How long can Clayton take it? Can she catch him? Is this a good idea? And, how far would I let my children run before dropping everything (where everything is a handheld, video recorder)? Distance stands as a proxy, a unit of measure, for care.

Clayton’s work pushes discussions of motherhood past wage inequality and lost identity; such issues figure in, but only because they are built out of the infinitesimal, unending

realizations that attend motherhood: the scissors are within reach, the child runs off in the grocery store, what was that sound, why is it so quiet? Instead of writing about the guilt at missing both sacred and mundane moments of her child's life, or the profound love or dramatic changes to her subjectivity, Clayton focuses on the basic work of keeping objects out of her baby's mouth (and giving those objects their own exploration), covering sharp objects, and measuring how far her son can wander before panic overwhelms. Motherhood in all of these instances is beyond the logic of loss, sentimentality, or complaint; it is the literal work of life support. Motherhood is a hard science of data collection and interpretation.

Clayton, Grant, and Abreu offer what Joon Oluchi Lee (aka "Joony Schecter") refers to as a "maternal pedagogy [that] doesn't have anything to do with nurture, kindness, or warm milk" ("maternamorphosis," August 7, 2009, <http://lipstickeater.blogspot.com/2009/08/maternamorphosis.html>). Schecter describes maternal pedagogy as the passed-on methods for making what's hard, soft. It is a pedagogy about getting the rigidities of the world to soften to you and you to them, the methods for breaking in what's too tight. Clayton does this work by granting her son his identity and keeping her artist identity intact as long as possible, until she has to drop the camera and run after him, as a mother. Together they learn about how to live, when to be defiant and run away and when to soften and run after. In Clayton's case, this pedagogy includes lessons on responsibility and terror, lessons that caring for an infant brings. Her work focuses on which objects need to be made soft and which can stay, or be made, hard.

## *Hard Mother*

While the now defunct blog, *lipstickeater*, is not a mommy blog, the author takes on motherhood from a perspective devoid of biological abilities and social roles. Joony Schecter describes herself as:

I'm a girl who loves red lipstick... oh, sorry...I sometimes forget... I'm a boy who loves red lipstick, a boy who also loves to love boys. But I'm also a Korea-born, Midwest-bred, Virginia-groomed, Bay Area-harvested faggotte who is above all a black feminist. ([www.lipstickeater.blogspot.com](http://www.lipstickeater.blogspot.com)).

This arrangement of identities by Schecter highlights the possibility of opening up a maternal perspective to identities formerly consider antithetical. Her perspective is political, feminist, and attuned to the labor of identity and care. In her post titled “maternamorphosis” she writes about her mother’s fashion sense and artistic struggles. She begins by noting, “Lately, I’ve been thinking without fear about becoming my mother, and not for the usual boring Oedipal reason. But I like this idea that becoming your mother (no matter your gender) occurs way before you become a parent” (August 7, 2009, <http://lipstickeater.blogspot.com/2009/08/maternamorphosis.html>). The way Schecter opens up motherhood beyond biological capacity and social identity provides a window into a subjectivity of, what she terms, “hard femininity.”

Schecter posts a picture of herself dressed almost exactly like her mother: jeans and a tucked-in flannel shirt, sleeves rolled up, striking the same pose—“arms crossed in defiance, hard eyes, jeaned legs in battle position.” Accessing this hard femininity is explained through “mom jeans,” which she deconstructs and refashions:

In this age in which elastine has invaded the jeans world, gals hardly need to go through a particular process in order to get the tight femininity they want from their jeans. But if this anachronism is what makes these particular jeans maternal, they are hardly “Mom.” “Mom” implies familiarity, ease, mundane comfort. These jeans are not actually that.

These jeans are a process of becoming intimate with an unyielding and unfamiliar object, to make it get to know your body, to get your body to get to know the breathing pattern of a textile. So let's give due dignity back to these kind of jeans, which were not always soft and comfy, but only became that way because their original identity is hard and unyielding: "MOTHER JEANS."

Mother jeans should produce hard femininity. ("maternamorphosis," August 7, 2009, <http://lipstickeater.blogspot.com/2009/08/maternamorphosis.html>).

Unlike the technological fix that "elastine" provides today, getting all-cotton jeans to conform to one's body, to fit with one's femininity takes work. Motherhood also takes the same "hard and unyielding" work of "becoming intimate with an unyielding and unfamiliar object, to make it get to know your body, to get your body to get to know the breathing pattern" of a child. The softness of motherhood is not a given or natural but instead is achieved through wearing, washing, struggling against, and tuning into the form itself. Blogging assists mothers in breaking in and softening their identities to motherhood.

Schechter's post answers Andie Fox's question: "What is the terrifying softness of motherhood and why are we so afraid of it?" The softness of motherhood comes out of the hard labor of care, and the accompanying fear that comes from the dependency of children, or the state of dependency children represent. Clayton, Grant, Abreu, and Schechter together provide an unsentimental take on motherhood. They focus on something before the conventional narrative of toil and motherhood and reach beyond the labor of identity, looking instead at the labor and practice required to soften hard objects—jeans, knives, a Bach variation, or oneself. Like the "how-to" blog posts that stress the importance of thank yous and care, softening is hard work.

## BRAINSPACE, BANDWIDTH, AND CARE

The labor of motherhood is hard—data collection, vital statistics, life support—and such time-consuming labor at home interferes with participating in the hard labor of the paid work

force. While the labor of motherhood is hard, the genre of motherhood, as told on the blogs, is surprisingly soft—sentimental, feminine, and hovering below political. The discrepancy between the hardness of the labor and the softness of the genre has motivated this project. I argue that the gap results, at least in part, from the invisibility of the labor of care, both caring for in-the-flesh bodies and digitally caring for friends and followers online. The gap is widened by the weight of the genre of femininity—the demand and desire for coherent identity as a woman or mother usually references, and often gets stuck in, tropes of complaint.

Perhaps mothers are not in a position to do hard political and radical work, maybe structural change is not the right measure of mommy blogs. As the poet Rachel Zucker states:

I think that many women, me included for sure, became radicalized at the same time that we became mothers. That is a huge inherent issue that we have as women, that it is biologically and sociologically very compelling to stay home, protect your child, and not care in the same exact way about the rest of the world, when you have a new baby.

I don't expect a woman with a new baby to be changing the university structure. God, you have something more important to do. But then the problem is that those voices are not really heard. . . . It's hard, though, because [the] people that are the best to advocate for women with very young children are women with very young children, but it's not [the] right time for them to advocate. ("A. Bradstreet Interview with Rachel Zucker and Arielle Greenberg," May 1, 2013, <http://www.abradstreet.com/post/49376302488/a-bradstreet-interview-with-rachel-zucker-arielle>)

Zucker forces a reconsideration of what a radical politics means for mothers and it is not necessarily the work of changing structural conditions and economic inequalities. Rather, acknowledging the work of interembodiment may be the radical politics needed to reframe motherhood. Anne Boyer (2011) unsentimentalizes the hard work of motherhood here:

Looking cannot always help a mother distinguish between a sleeping child and a dead one, and no watch, no matter how passionate, can keep the dying alive. For a person who is a mother to an infant, the watch is the work. Rather, it is a work that is a kind of extension of the mother herself, her own body in the state of attention as she scrutinizes the child's body, inspects it for health, keeps watch at its side if it suffers, takes notice of when it requires comfort. The maternal gaze encompasses both an almost erotic desire for

possession and a simultaneous desire for that which might, in this context, be at odds with possession: the child's survival. A photograph of a sleeping baby can be a photograph of many things. To keep is not the same thing as to keep alive.

“No matter how passionate,” the work of motherhood is, at first, the unending work of watching, surveying, and collecting vital statistics. Beyond the baby monitor in the museum, the hard labor of motherhood has not been digitized nor socialized. What would a politics look like that started with this relationship of care, digital or otherwise?

Motherhood trembles with fear, terror, love, and productivity; it trembles in both sentimental ways—longing for what it cannot have (economic power) or be (at home at 3 pm). And it trembles with the unsentimental work of keeping babies, infants, children, and the family alive. The unsentimental data collection of motherhood takes up “brain space” while the sentimental data, once blogged, takes up bandwidth. While mommy blogging as a genre sticks closely to the script of women's culture, motherhood continues its sophisticated data collecting. This dissertation shows the similarities between digital labor and motherhood: both are trembling labors of love.

## APPENDIX: LIST OF BLOGS

<b>Title of Blog</b>	<b>Blog URL:</b>
The Artful Parent	<a href="http://artfulparent.com/">http://artfulparent.com/</a>
Artist Residency in Motherhood	<a href="http://residencyinmotherhood.com/">http://residencyinmotherhood.com/</a>
Amalah	<a href="http://www.amalah.com/">http://www.amalah.com/</a>
Bedtimes are for suckers	<a href="http://bedtimesareforsuckers.com/">http://bedtimesareforsuckers.com/</a>
The Bloggess	<a href="http://thebloggess.com/">http://thebloggess.com/</a>
birthing beautiful ideas	<a href="http://birthingbeautifulideas.com/">http://birthingbeautifulideas.com/</a>
Bleubird	<a href="http://bleubirdblog.com/">http://bleubirdblog.com/</a>
blue milk	<a href="http://bluemilk.wordpress.com/">http://bluemilk.wordpress.com/</a>
Cindafuckingrella	<a href="http://www.cindafuckingrella.com/">http://www.cindafuckingrella.com/</a>
Cup of Jo	<a href="http://joannagoddard.blogspot.com/">http://joannagoddard.blogspot.com/</a>
Dash and Bella	<a href="http://dashandbella.blogspot.com/">http://dashandbella.blogspot.com/</a>
Dooce	<a href="http://dooce.com/">http://dooce.com/</a>
Feminist Pigs	<a href="http://feministpigs.blogspot.com/">http://feministpigs.blogspot.com/</a>
Finslippy	<a href="http://finslippy.squarespace.com/">http://finslippy.squarespace.com/</a>
Girls Gone Child	<a href="http://www.girlsgonechild.net/">http://www.girlsgonechild.net/</a>
Her Bad Mother	<a href="http://herbadmother.com/">http://herbadmother.com/</a>
I should be folding Laundry	<a href="http://www.ishouldbefoldinglaundry.com/">http://www.ishouldbefoldinglaundry.com/</a>
Kim Foster NYC	<a href="http://www.kim-foster.com/blog/">http://www.kim-foster.com/blog/</a>
MFAMB	<a href="http://www.myfavoriteandmybest.com/">http://www.myfavoriteandmybest.com/</a>

Mom-101	<a href="http://mom-101.com/">http://mom-101.com/</a>
Mommy Wants Vodka	<a href="http://www.mommywantsvodka.com/">http://www.mommywantsvodka.com/</a>
Mommyologist	<a href="http://www.mommyologist.com/">http://www.mommyologist.com/</a>
Motherhood Uncensored	<a href="http://www.motherhooduncensored.net/">http://www.motherhooduncensored.net/</a>
Motherload	<a href="http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/">http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/</a>
Nat the Fat Rat	<a href="http://www.heynataliejean.com/">http://www.heynataliejean.com/</a>
Nerdy Apple	<a href="http://nerdyapple.com/">http://nerdyapple.com/</a>
PhD in Parenting	<a href="http://www.phdinparenting.com/">http://www.phdinparenting.com/</a>
Pioneer Woman	<a href="http://thepioneerwoman.com/">http://thepioneerwoman.com/</a>
pistols and popcorn	<a href="http://pistolsandpopcorn.com/">http://pistolsandpopcorn.com/</a>
Postpartum Progress	<a href="http://postpartumprogress.com/">http://postpartumprogress.com/</a>
Raising my boychick	<a href="http://www.raisingmyboychick.com/">http://www.raisingmyboychick.com/</a>
Rants from Mommyland	<a href="http://www.rantsfrommommyland.com/">http://www.rantsfrommommyland.com/</a>
Renegade Mothering	<a href="http://renegademothering.com/">http://renegademothering.com/</a>
Scary Mommy	<a href="http://scarymommy.com/">http://scarymommy.com/</a>
Sellabit Mum	<a href="http://sellabitmum.com/">http://sellabitmum.com/</a>
Simple Lovely	<a href="http://simplelovelyblog.com/">http://simplelovelyblog.com/</a>
Single Mom Survives	<a href="http://singlemomsurvives.com/">http://singlemomsurvives.com/</a>
The SITS girls	<a href="http://www.thesitsgirls.com/">http://www.thesitsgirls.com/</a>
spilled milk (& other atrocities)	<a href="http://law-momma.com/">http://law-momma.com/</a>
(stop, drop, and blog)	<a href="http://stopdropandblog.com/">http://stopdropandblog.com/</a>
Snarky Mommy	<a href="http://snarkymommy.com/">http://snarkymommy.com/</a>
Stay at home pundit (aka mom-in-a-million)	<a href="http://stayathomepundit.com/">http://stayathomepundit.com/</a>

Theta Mom

<http://thetamom.com>

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